

Lev Parikian: Tangled Bank and Disappearing Birds

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James Nash: My name is James Nash and I'm a poet and a writer and an occasional literary host or chair. And it's my enormous pleasure and privilege this afternoon, as part of Ilkley Literature Festival's Digital Weekend 2021, to be talking to Lev Parikian who is the author of *Why Do Birds Suddenly Disappear?*, *Waving Not Drowning*, *Music To Eat Cake By*, that's a wonderful title, essays on birds, words and everything in between, and his marvelous latest book *Into The Tangled Bank*. Lev, it's really good to see you and meet you having been completely enchanted by the two books *Why Do Birds Suddenly Disappear?* and *Into The Tangled Bank*.

Why Do Birds Suddenly Disappear? is written in diary form. There were a couple of entries from 2012 and 2013. And then, 2016 becomes the centre and the focus of this book. How did this book come to you? Where did it come from?

Lev Parikian: Thank you, James. It's lovely to talk to you as well. So *Why Do Birds Suddenly Disappear?* it came at a time, I think you mentioned my other books, *Waving Not Drowning* was the first, which I'd written about my... it's really about my day job as a conductor. It's not really a day job, but it is, you know, it's been my living for a couple of decades. And I was kind of casting around for things to write about after that.

And I had many ideas. But I wasn't quite certain that any of them were very good. And at the same time, I was aware that my interest in, my childhood obsession with birdwatching was beginning to creep back into my life after three or so decades, very much in the background. And, so it occurred to me that it might be an interesting thing to write about it, not just birds, but you know, the reburgeoning of that interest and hobby, which I think does come to a few people in their middle age. Or later in life, that they find they've got a little bit more time, maybe for things that they were once interested in or, just their attitudes and their interests might just evolve and change to certain things maybe a slightly quieter lifestyle. So, there was that story to tell and I decided to make it a tale of nostalgia, really. So looking back to my childhood as a very keen birdwatcher, but also to give it a little bit of impetus and also really to give myself a bit of impetus, with the telling of the story, to give it a kind of target. So, I spent a year going around the country trying to see 200 species of British bird.

Which incidentally, I think nowadays for five years or so later, I wouldn't take that approach. But at the time it felt like something I needed to keep me on track because I've got a track record of just, you know, picking up hobbies and then throwing them away and just letting them lapse after the first couple of months.

But I was also inspired because part of the genesis of it was that I started going through my old bird books and field guides and so on. And I found some of the notes that I'd made in particular, in the Reader's Digest Book of British Birds, which is a fantastic volume published in the late sixties.

And which I was obsessed with as a 11-year-old. And I looked at some of these, the ticks I'd put against some of the birds just, you know, that I'd seen them. And I realised that, at least two dozen of them were absolutely falsehoods and that I never had a chance of seeing these birds. So in my childhood, I was obviously a magnificent liar.

And I think that was, for me, an interesting thing to explore as well, you know, what we do and why we do it and, and what is the truth and that kind of thing. So I was determined to make sure that this midlife quest was soaked through with honesty and not, no lies, in sight.

James Nash: When I first saw the title, it kind of filled me with kind of slight worry. Cause I was thinking about, Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* from 1962. And I just thought, is this a book about ecology and environment? But it kind of has some of that in it, but it's much more about discovering what we have rather than mourning what we've lost. I would have said.

Lev Parikian: Yes, I think you're absolutely right. And that's interesting, that you think of that because generally, when people see the title, I get one or one of two reactions, the first one is the one that you had, which is, you know, the answer, people answer the question by saying insecticides or pesticides or whatever it is, you know?

And the second, I think, slightly more common reaction is that people start singing the carpenter song, *Close To You*, which the title is based on the lyrics. "Why do birds suddenly appear every time you are near" so it's nice to have a title that actually gets that reaction.

And actually, funnily enough, when you read the titles of both books, in quick succession, I didn't realise how well they go together. *Why Do Birds Suddenly Disappear?*, *Into The Tangled Bank?* It's quite a nice little, got a little double bill. So yes, there is an ecological side to it. I think one of the things I discovered.

And you wouldn't notice this, especially if you, or you might notice it less, if you'd been birding all your life from the seventies, sixties and seventies onwards. Is how much had gone since I was a child. So birds that, I was used to seeing in my Oxfordshire garden when I was growing up, things like house sparrows, for example, and starlings have been enormously denuded.

And I think this is something that, I probably wasn't aware of because I wasn't especially engaged with nature through my twenties, thirties, and forties. So there's that aspect of it, but I was very keen for the book not to be a kind of lecture on, you know, what we've lost and oh woe and how grim it is. Even though as we're all aware, it is pretty grim. I think there are ways to get people on board and my preferred way is to try and enthuse about something to make the reader or whoever I'm talking to become enthusiastic about it as well, which means that they'll care about it a little bit more.

And also there are lots of people who are doing a magnificent and rather better informed job of telling us exactly the parlous state that the world of nature is in, So, I felt that maybe that was, better left to other people who are better at doing it. And I think that also my style of writing is generally quite lighthearted.

So it's quite a difficult thing to marry that style, that sort of Douglas Adams-ey light kind of funny style with, Oh my God. It's all going to hell in a handcart. So, it's a tricky one.

James Nash: I mean, I love the conversational style of it because it did feel when I was reading it that you are talking to me as your reader. And I was struck while I was reading it, you were talking about going to find, to see as many birds as you could. And I was struck by the birds that I see often, but I still am thrilled to see, like barn owls early in the morning in East Riding of Yorkshire lanes. Like peregrine falcons, like the red kites we saw this

morning, which seem to be expanding in terms of numbers. Are there birds that you spotted in that year that gave you an enormous thrill to spot?

Lev Parikian: Pretty much all of them I think. I'm still, five years later, I'm still at the very excited to see anything stage and I hope, and I'd like to think that I'll remain at that stage for a good long time to come. One of the things I did notice and got a little bit miffed by, I suppose, is the word, people being blahzay about it.

I think when you've done, done something for a very long time, then it's quite easy to get a door, to get a little bit blasé or at least to appear blasé. So if you see a bird every single day, then you're not going to jump up and down in excitement at every single sighting because it's not appropriate and you don't have the energy for it.

But so I think there's just a worry that, you know, people might've lost that excitement people who've been doing it for a long time. I think they're probably feeling it inside and don't want to show it, but, yeah, so I got excited at most things in that year. I'm trying to think if there were particular highlights.

Well, certainly seeing, going to the RSPB flagship preserve in Suffolk Minsmere. And seeing some of the birds that I had wanted to see as a child, particularly avocets which are those fantastic waders with the black and white waders with the upturned bill they use to sift through the mud for little inverts.

James Nash: They were very endangered in the sixties, I remember that. And they sort of made a little resurgence.

Lev Parikian: Yeah, absolutely. And certainly, they were basically extinct in this country as a breeding bird for a century and a half I think it was. And then when the Minsmere got up and running as a RSPB reserve after the war, they adopted the avocet as their symbol, as their logo.

And that's what I grew up with it being this very delicate dainty bird with that fantastic upturned bill, which is a feature that you remember because there are so few birds that have that kind of shaped bill. So that was one, I think there was another one that early, quite early on, because part of the game as it were, was that I realised quite early on that you're more likely to hear a bird than see it, or certainly that'll be the first sign you get of a bird, to hear it singing or calling.

So I thought it would be a good idea to learn some birdsong, an undertaking that seemed a lot easier in my head than it actually turned out to be. And so a few weeks into this endeavour, I did come across and it's a very common bird, but it was the triumph of recognizing a dunno's song all by myself from having listened to tapes and going and just hearing it in real life, because usually what happens was I listened to all these recordings and go, okay, now I know it. And then I'd go outside and that'd be just cacophony of other stuff. And I would not, you know, it didn't sound like anything I was used to, but on this occasion, I did go "I know that, that's a dunno!". And then it came out and perched in the tree above my head. And I was like, yes, I got it. Boom. That's a moment of trial. So I think it's a lot of it is about, something I've explored a little bit more anyway, which is the taking joy in the everyday and the things that are local and close to you.

Cause it's quite easy to be excited by a golden eagle. Because they are obviously, they're magnificent birds. But if you can take joy in the blue tit hanging upside down from the feeder, then that's a different trick entirely.

James Nash: You, like me, are a city dweller. I live in, mostly, in Leeds, in West Yorkshire and you live in South London. What can a city dweller hope to see in terms of birds and how do we get them into our garden?

Lev Parikian: Well, funnily enough, I've just been writing about this recently. So where I live in South London is a pretty standard, you know, very urban patch with some green areas. London's good for green areas.

If you're lucky enough to have a garden, then keeping out, you know, the bird feeders, keeping them well-stocked and cleaned and putting them in a good position, I think is very important. Cause birds do like to have, obviously there's the danger of cats, which can predate birds very easily if you're not careful and there's also birds of prey, a lot of urban areas will have sparrowhawks knocking about the place to get them off the feeders. So to place, to situate the bird feeders in a fairly open place, but with recourse to some cover. Our next-door neighbors have got a nice holly bush and we've got a little maple that they like to perch in.

It's about five yards from the feeder. They can get a good view of it. Nip down, get the food, nip back, nip down and get the food and nip back. So those are the kinds of things that you'd bear in mind. A good variety of different bird food. And a bit of patience, I think is also important because they don't necessarily come immediately.

It'll take awhile. So that's, you know, if you're in a garden. If you're lucky enough to have a garden, then that's great. I would reckon that wherever you live, you're not going to be that far from some sort of green space. So just frequenting it, going there regularly. You'd be amazed at what you see. This morning I went to see somebody who's got a bit of a problem with some spare ground, but they live between... I'll start that again. This morning, I went to see somebody who lives near a railway, and there's a bit of an area between their flats and the railway. And that is, you know, a fantastic habitat for birds, we saw probably 15 species in half an hour, including jays and parakeets and magpies and all the usual garden birds. But they were you know, they were right there and they came and said hello.

And even, you know, we have, we're lucky enough in South London, we've got peregrines, urban peregrines very near, so that's a thrilling site when you see it. On my very local patch in the last three months, I've seen a buzzard, sparrow hawks, kestrels, you know, you just have to, I think tune into it.

And, just make sure that you're switched on as much as possible. Rather than walking around as I have many times with my head in my phone, you know, not taking any note of what's going on up there, but if you walk around like that, rather than like that then you're equally likely to run into lampposts, but at least you might see a peregrine before you bash yourself.

James Nash: I wonder if you could share a little bit of *Why Do Birds Suddenly Disappear?* before we go onto the next question?

Lev Parikian: Absolutely. So I've got the, so this I think is a passage. As you said, it's a sort of diary format. Each chapter is one month of the year 2016. And it's charting my progress through the year with my quest to see 200. So we're in, I think it's May, and I've gone to a nature reserve in North Kent with well, you know, just to see things, but in a quest of one particular bird. It'll become clear what bird that is by the end of the reading.

If I've learnt anything about the birding game, it's a modicum of patience. My first glance at the large area of bushes to my left yields no more than an unending vista of hawthorne and bramble, but rather than assuming there's nothing there, I stop, consider my options and head up the narrow path into denser undergrowth.

I force myself to walk slowly, senses on full alert. I'm alive to every twitch and rustle, a scurrying at knee level, my head jerks round, but it's gone. A flurry to my right, flickering leaves, a trembling of branches, a shadow dives into the impenetrable depths, a chirp from where exactly? No idea, another chirp and answering chirp.

Activity everywhere, but none of it doing what I want it to, which is a sit down in front of me in order of height and bloody well, shut up while I work out what they are. Seriously, how do people do it? It's next to impossible. I read reports of a day's birding, all certainty and no question marks, whinchat four, wheatear six, linnet 35.346, goldfinch 1,398.

No mention of unidentified little brown jobs overhead 76 or nearly identical cheeps from the middle of a bush, your guess is as good as mine, 137. I stop and take a few seconds to drink it all in. One obliging bird seems to sense my frustration and pops up onto the bush in front of me showing its bloodied nose and holding still. It has earned my gratitude. You my friend may be just a goldfinch, but you are most welcome. And I thank you for your generosity. It returns to its bush without reply, my soul brother for a second. I stay for a bit willing the birds to come out and play. But it's as if they've sensed my volatility and are keeping clear, I can't blame them.

I'm about to move on when it begins. One sound at first, a preparatory cluck. Once heard, never forgotten. So they say, they're right. And now I'm treated to an outpouring of fluid, liquid music of astonishing richness and depth as if the shrubbery has been turned into a Marshall stack and turned up to 11.

It's no more than five yards away, somewhere in the bush in front of me. It's one of those low scrubby bushes variety unknown, but the bird is well hidden. I inch forward, desperate to lay eyes on it. But equally desperate not to interrupt the music that seems to suspend me a foot above the ground, worldly burdens momentarily shed. I'm two feet from the bush. The song is all around, the bird still nowhere. I lift my eyes and there in the bush, behind the one, I was looking in, five yards away and with a glint in its eye that says, what took you so long? is my bird. We make eye contact. It knows I'm there, seems to be singing solely for me.

It isn't of course, it's singing to find a mate, my wishful thinking can't change the laws of nature, but at that moment, and that maelstrom of miraculous sounds swirling around me, there's no way on earth, you can tell me that this nightingale, this anonymous looking bundle of life, isn't directing its love directly towards me through my ears and into my heart.

And then too soon, with a flick of its rufous tail it's gone. But it carries me away, out of the reserve and all the way back to the station and home. Recommended, would encounter again.

James Nash: Lovely, as a fan of the small brown bird that you can never identify, but often turns out to be a dunno, I absolutely related to that.

Lev Parikian: It's an enormous part of the birding experience. I think we have to get used to it at a very early stage.

James Nash: In your second book, which I would like to move onto now with the most beautiful cover *Into The Tangled Bank*, it comes as a quote from Charles Darwin, a quote from which you take the title would any writer writing about nature always have Darwin in the background, do you think?

Lev Parikian: I would, you'd hope so I think. I suppose, there are certain people that one goes to, people I've learnt all about while writing *Into The Tangled Bank* actually, in many cases. For some people it would be Darwin, because of the shadow he cast over, not just nature writing, but everything we understand about where we come from and our place on the planet. I think for a lot of nature writers, a similar figure might be Gilbert White, who was the first parson-naturalist and the greatest, you know, the great patch watcher and diarist and recorder and observer of things. But certainly for when I was looking into writing *Into The Tangled Bank*, Darwin loomed large.

Partly because his house isn't far from where I live, so it was quite easy to visit, but also because of his place in the grand scheme of things.

James Nash: Now music and nature have clearly been very important in your life as great consolations. And what was fascinating when I was reading *Into The Tangled Bank* was your book was written, pre-lockdown, pre-COVID, but many of us have rediscovered, on our daily walks on our walks into the woods, on our kind of walks to the shops, the natural world that we seem to have not really noticed. You talked earlier about keeping your head up and looking around you.

You seem to have been doing that two or three years ago, but your book absolutely speaks to our time I think. I mean, are music and nature great consolations and props to you?

Lev Parikian: Yes, they have been, well music, particularly all my life, because I've been a musician all my life and my father was a violinist.

And so it was always there for me. Although interestingly, in the last year or so during the pandemic, I've found it personally quite difficult to listen to some of the music that affects me the most. So maybe I've been listening to things that just, I can keep a distance from, that are more entertaining and maybe an escape rather than something to get myself immersed in and overwrought.

But with nature, certainly in the last, since I kind of rediscovered it, it's been something that I go to as sometimes a distraction, sometimes a comfort, a solace. Going back to *Why Do Birds Suddenly Disappear?*, that was written during 2016, which was a fairly momentous year. And at the time it felt like the momentous year to end all momentous years.

And since then we've had a succession of ever more traumatic ones. So with, you know, with the Brexit vote and with the election of Donald Trump, then that were things, and certainly, birdwatching was something I wanted to do just to get away from it all. And in the last year with the pandemic, it's been a godsend and certainly I remember, particularly at the beginning of the pandemic, it was March and April last year I had messages from friends who I think had no interest, particularly in nature, saying, "Oh, have you noticed the bird song is louder? And I've really, I can hear this bird. What is it?" And all that sort of stuff.

And no doubt that was to do with less traffic around and then being at home rather than at work and maybe having less to do. And so just being, you know, eyes opened to the joys of it. And also because it was Spring at the time. So that was literally the beginning of the pandemic here in Britain, coincided with the burgeoning of bird song and the mating activities and Spring in general. So there was just, it was almost impossible to ignore.

James Nash: Lev, when, you wrote, *Why Do Birds Suddenly Disappear?* you wrote it in a kind of diary format. The format and the growth and the journey if you like of *Into The Tangled Bank* is a very different one.

And you moved from gardens to trees to parks to the stars. How did you decide which, and you also met with lots of people who kind of had interesting things to say, how did this book develop? Was it planned or was it just...?

Lev Parikian: It was, it was very carefully planned, like a military operation. It started from a very broad idea, which was, after *Why Do Birds Suddenly Disappear?*, which was focused on birds and my own journey for want of a better word. It came that I became, I think, interested in other aspects of nature. So I got back into birds and I was an avid bird watcher. This is kind of 2017 and so on. And I think I started to notice not just that the birds had flown into a tree, but that I actually wanted to know what that tree was.

Not least because the birder had said "Oh, it's flown into the hawthorne." I'm going, "I don't know where the, which is the hawthorne?". So, and also there's that period in the middle of the year, it's July and August, when birds go quiet, the breeding season's done, migration season's kind of in a lull.

So if you want to go birding, you're probably not going to see as much, but it happens to coincide with butterfly season. So you're seeing a lot of butterflies and that sort of good. A lot of birders will take a couple of months in July and August when they're actually more interested in butterflies, because they're more obvious and, you can go about it that way.

So I wanted to write about that gradual broadening of my own interest. But I also wanted to explore because while I was writing *Why Do Birds Suddenly Disappear?* I'd noticed that some of the most interesting things that happened were, not just seeing the birds, but seeing the people watching the birds and observing their behaviour.

And it occurred to me and it's a very obvious thought. but it occurred to me, like a flash, that obviously we are part of nature. We're all on the, you know, we're all in the same boat with all these other creatures that we share a planet with. But by the same token, I think we often forget that.

And we think of it, there's a barrier between us, there's us and then oh I'm gonna go and look at some nature and we're not part of that because we're humans, you know, usually we think we're above it which is partly where Darwin comes in of course because he was saying, no, we're not really above it, we've come from the same thing.

So that was the main, the broad thrust of it, which was to observe people in nature and how we are in it and how we engage with it, whether it's in a shallow way or a deep way or a committed way or casual or whatever, all the different ways we do it. And when I was thinking about how best to write first about such a broad subject, it felt like it needed some honing.

So I kind of came up with this idea of three strands of it: my own journey through a particular period of time looking at things, the lives of some of the great people who had devoted their lives to the study of nature and the ways that manifested in their work. So obviously Darwin was one Gilbert White was another, John Clare the poet was another, Thomas Bewick the great illustrator and engraver, Peter Scott, Etta Lemon, who is the founder of the RSPB way back when, in the 1800s and so on.

And each of these people is associated with a particular place. So usually, it's their home and some of them are open to the public. So you can go to Darwin's house and go to Gilbert White's house. And so I constructed this kind of spiraling journey around the British Isles dropping in these places.

Looking to see who I met there and what I saw and trying to cover as broad a range of, not just nature, but also the ways in which we engage with it, whether it's, you know, in real life and immersive, like the week I spent on a Welsh island with a hundred thousand manx shearwaters and six humans or you know, that kind of thing going on boat trips, just walking around a very muddy Northhamptonshire and to try and retrace John Clare's steps and that kind of thing. So that was trying to give it some sort of impetus rather than, you know, just going, "Oh, look nature".

James Nash: I think, I mean, you mentioned John Clare and I immediately kind of think of a man who observed nature very, very closely.

His poetry are miracles of detail and observation. In the bird book, you talked about keeping our eyes up, in this book, you talk about looking at things very carefully, whether it's a tree or drawing a heron, does the act of drawing something make you look at something more closely?

Lev Parikian: I think it has to doesn't it because, I mean, I'm not an, as I make clear in the book, I'm not an artist at all, but I did, you know, underwent it and decided I'd spend a month basically drawing something natural every day.

And the heron was the first one cause it was just there and also, they're quite easy to draw cause they sit mostly quite still. And if I'm doing, you know, you could do it from a photograph or you can do it from the real thing that's there. And yes, from what little I know about it, obviously, in order to put the marks on the paper, you have to know what the marks are doing and it makes you look at something that is, it's a monochrome bird the heron, it's grey, black and white, a bit of silver, maybe.

So you then have to look at, okay, so where are the greys and where are the blacks? And sometimes the blacks and greys aren't where you expect them to be. And how do I draw the white? Oh, I draw the white by not drawing it, by drawing around it and so on. So all basic drawing stuff that any artists will be going, you know, obviously, it was really the process of doing it that made me examine it properly, or begin to anyway, So that was quite fun, actually, the drawing thing.

And I've always been a great admirer of anybody who can do anything artistic, in the visual arts. And I came out of that little experiment with even more, even more respect, I think.

James Nash: Sure. I mean, I grew up in the fifties with a whole series of books called The Observer Book of...

Lev Parikian: Oh yes, I've got some of them here.

James Nash: I mean, they were absolutely staples and a small boy collector thing, whatever you were collecting, whether it was aeroplanes or birds or butterflies. And it does seem to me that in both books you are asking us to take some time out and observe. What have been the gains for you in that, you mentioned a little bit about how it enabled you to escape from the political world a little bit, are there other gains for you in observing?

Lev Parikian: I think it's just, I mean, it's an easy thing to, it's an easy correlation to make and I'm by no means an expert at it, but it certainly has felt like it's been good for my mental wellbeing, put it that way. I know people who are much more, have gone into a much more deeply than I have, so I don't want to make any pronouncements, but I do know that my instinct now is to, if things are getting too much, turn everything off, go for a walk and look at things and you can get yourself immersed, in looking at even the most mundane things in your local area, that just occupy the mind a little bit. And certainly I know that the, for drawing that that repetitive process or the immersion into just concentrating on one thing can, it does good things for the mind, I think. And it can be therapeutic.

James Nash: In these difficult times is that kind of close observation, a kind of way of getting away from it all? I mean, we can't stride out into the countryside quite in the way that we did 18 months or a year ago, we have to kind of look to more local ways of doing this.

Lev Parikian: Yeah, well, I'm certainly a great advocate of the local and no matter how mundane and everyday it might seem.

So, I certainly think that that's an important part of it. And yeah, it's also just to do with the idea of slowing down a bit and actually observing things in more detail rather than going, "Oh, look...". There's an example, the other day I went for my daily permitted walk, walking briskly obviously and barely stopping for birdwatching. But I did see a starling relatively common bird, not as common as it used to be, but a starling and it was sitting on a brick chimney at a house around the corner here. So I stopped and I looked it through the binoculars and I took some photographs of it.

And it sat there very obligingly for a few minutes while I did that. And then, that was satisfying and it was nice and it was doing its whistling song and all that. And then I got home and I saw, I looked at the photographs and I realized that the colouring of the starling with its yellow bill going to black there with sort of metallic, dark green plumage with these

creamy white speckles and brown on the wing. That completely by accident, that those colors were exactly matched in the brick of the chimney that it was sitting on with various lichens and mosses and bits of mortar and bits of brick.

And I could see there's a patch of yellow lichen there, which is exactly the yellow on the bill, the dark green moss was the same as its plumage. And it just was one of those things that if I'd looked and gone "It's a starling. That's fine." And then moved on. I wouldn't have noticed, but having taken five, ten minutes just to spend some time with it and then looking at it very closely going "oh, well, that's good. Isn't it?". And it just makes it a little bit more, you know, a little bit deeper and richer, I suppose.

James Nash: I wonder whether you could share a little bit from your latest book. It would be a lovely place to kind of come to the end of our conversation. So something from *Into The Tangled Bank* please.

Lev Parikian: Absolutely. So *Into The Tangled Bank*, this is page 874 or so, and I've gone to the WWT reserve in Barnes in London, in West London. Which Sir Peter Scott had had a vision to create and it only came into being after his, after he had died, but it is now, really one of the finest nature reserves in a city that you could imagine. Built on old reservoirs. and they do have, during the winter they have visiting bitterns, which are like herons. Those are sort of extraordinary. Well, there's a description of them in here. So I've gone there in general just to do some birding, but in particular, to see if I can catch a glimpse of this bittern. How to see a bittern: find a place where there has been a recent sighting.

Sit, wait. It's not easy. Their streaked plumage looks like a reed bed and that's exactly the kind of habitat they like to skulk in. It is possible to sit 20 yards from one and not know it's there. And sometimes they refuse to come out. A good way of ensuring against disappointment is to set low expectations.

So I go into the hide resolutely prepared not to see a bittern. The hide is empty, which without wishing to throw shade at my fellow humans is how I prefer it. I've had many pleasant encounters in wildlife hides. Temporary friendships have been forged, information shared. I've learned a lot, but sometimes all you want is solitude.

And in that solitude, when all the elements are in alignment, a fine thing can happen. I don't have a single word for it, but in my head, it is this. The particular calmness engendered by sitting alone in a bird hide, looking out on an expansive water on which nothing particular is happening, but everything is happening.

The fossicking of a snipe, the dabbling of a shoveler, the flitting of a loose group of starlings, the serene floating of a pin tail, whatever it happens to be on that occasion. And not focusing on one element in particular but letting the entirety of the scene wash over you and seep into your consciousness until the mind, at first so active and distracted, is becalmed and your breathing slows and soon the nothing of it becomes everything. And you slough off the cares and worries of everyday life. And just for a bit all is well. Sometimes you focus on the activity of a single bird. That little grebe say, floating insouciantly, then diving with a little jump and coming up 30 seconds later, 20 yards to the left of where you thought it would. Or you regard it as a game of where's Wally, scouring the mud flats for the jack snipe someone saw earlier that morning. Or you just sit and allow the whole scene to wash over you bathing in its peaceful glow. And sometimes just occasionally and only if you're in the right place, you

might catch a glimpse of an otter, an actual wild otter, not the tame ones that come out at feeding time, because they know which side their bread is buttered, but a wild one that has writhed and wriggled its way to the water's edge just to be with you.

Or that's what it feels like anyway. Water is I think an important component to this particular piece of mind resting. Everything is 10% better by water. We can theorise as to why exactly this is whether it taps into our own composition or whether it's to do with the calming influence of waters, myriad rhythms, and shapes, or any one of another thousand reasons or the combination of them all.

But whatever the reasons I regard it as fact. No doubt there's a word in German for this feeling engendered by this particular situation, you might call it mindfulness if you're so inclined. A specific kind of mindfulness. Birdfulness maybe. It doesn't always work. It's all very well wafting around the countryside saying, hello, birds, hello sky.

But we can't expect nature to make everything right, just like that. And nor should we imagine it's a failsafe. That places too much responsibility on it, too much pressure. Sometimes your mind isn't in that place. But today it is. 10 minutes into this visit I've reached a state of 38% birdfulness. I wonder idly, if the reported bittern is around and now as if conjured by the thought it's there morphed from the reads themselves, treading gingerly on the ice, head forward, thick neck slung low and most unbird-like bird in many ways, an awkward streaky tube of strangeness, the product of a margin doodle.

It gives me just five minutes before sloping back into the depths. Five minutes with the deepest satisfaction during which I imagine Peter Scott's delight that his fantasy project has yielded such riches. Birdfulness level 100%.

James Nash: Brilliant what a wonderful place to end and can I thank you Lev for two beautiful readings.

But that last reading particularly a bittern and did it boom? I want to ask, did it boom?

Lev Parikian: It didn't, it wasn't the time of year for booming. It was in December, but a booming bittern is the most wonderful sound, I urge anybody to get when you can, when you're allowed to get yourselves in spring, early summer to a nature reserve, where there are, I mean, again, when I was a child, the booming bittern was an almost unheard-of thing. The people who manage these nature reserves for this kind of thing, manage the reed beds, have managed to engender good growth of the population in this country so it's not a fantasy thing at all to hear. And it is the most extraordinary evocative sound.

James Nash: But I think in that last reading, you gave us a wonderful flavour of the book and the consolations and the magic to be found just by sitting and absorbing. And I know that people will want to avail themselves of these two gorgeous books. Can I suggest that you, if you are in West Yorkshire or North Yorkshire or East Yorkshire, or pretty well anywhere, you could avail yourself of the jewel in the crown of independent bookshops, which is the Grove bookshop in Ilkley, who've been a major sponsor for Ilkley Literature Festival for many years, and we'll happily post books out to you, but otherwise all the usual booksellers will apply. But can I end by saying thank you Lev, it's been the most fascinating, rewarding and fun interview. Thank you.

Lev Parikian: Excellent. Thank you very much. I'd just like to say before we, I was so glad you held up the two books. I just want to say the covers make such a difference to the, that's the first thing you see. So the *Why Do Birds?* paperback, is the cover is by the fantastic Mark Ecob and the *Into The Tangled Bank* by the equally fantastic Clover Robin.

And I'm so grateful to the designers of these covers because as I say for readers often, it's the cover that, that draws you in and us writers would be barely anywhere without them. So thanks to them and thanks to you very much for steering us along this very enjoyable chat. Thank you.

James Nash: Thank you.

Please be aware that we use a captioning program to transcribe the audio from our talks. Although we check them, there are occasionally mistakes made.