

# *Contents*

Introduction	13
The World of Little Things	13
Look and Look Again	14
Part 1: Remembering How to Look	19
Remembering How to Look	20
Extraordinarily Ordinary	28
The Lay of the Land	44
The Pool: a lesson in looking	63
Part 2: Shifting Perspectives	69
Shifting Perspectives	70
A Bumblebee's Eye View	77
The World Afloat	92
Middle Ground?	100
Part 3: Common Ground	109
Common Ground	110
Human Needs	125
Part 4: The Meaning of Things	145
Simple Nature	146
The Meaning of Things	147
Different Folks...	169
Acknowledgements	172
Bibliography	173
Species mentioned in text	177



# *Introduction*

## *The World of Little Things*

The world of little things is vast indeed.  
So big we mostly never see it, as  
It slithers and threads, and scurries, and crawls.  
Creeps lightly, springs swift, and wanders its weave.

Its noise never stops – a murmur beyond  
Our listening, so often gone unheard,  
While it whispers and wings, sustains and sings.  
Treads deftly, swims stealth, and layers its throng.

It lives between things and underneath things.  
There are those that grow on others – others  
That grow on them, and there are the strands that  
Bind together the others in between.

It moves on legs by the dozen, or none  
Whatsoever, or by a leap of faith,  
Or with the gift of blissful ignorance,  
Or satisfaction of a job well done.

It feeds on everything and nothing:  
Things unspeakable and nature's purest.  
Thrives on labour, the essence of being.  
Vast indeed, is this world of little things.

(Poem by author)

## Look and Look Again

With nature, as with so many other facets of our engagement with the world, first impressions are important. They are borne from the subconscious, from the instinctive self. Even though the importance of nature in our lives may be difficult to express, there is that deep-seated, unspoken and indeed instinctive sense of its value and worth. We go on to be shaped by our experiences and it is they that continue to resonate and ring true. But conversely and somewhat contradictorily, they are also insufficient. It can safely be said and without the slightest delusion towards any sort of profundity, that nature is big, much bigger than the spaces we would normally expect it to occupy. While those initial impressions of it are powerful and significant, they could never reveal all that might feasibly be revealed. Besides those simple pleasures that can be enjoyed without effort, this too is one of the greatest wonders of the natural world.

If indeed we are fortunate enough to find ourselves in such circumstances that allow us the time and opportunity to reflect on the externalities of our relationship with nature and the many and various benefits that this can bring, it is a similar contradiction that comes into play. That of achieving a balance between not crowding out those ‘simple pleasures’ with the unnecessary complication that would make them unattainable, and applying the sufficient scrutiny of those things that inspire and enthrall. It is this that I hope this book achieves in appropriate measure.

A second impression is required – a third, a fourth, and more. Through my work in environmental education, I have been able to impart with many young people some of the knowledge that I have gleaned from my passion for nature that has been with me for most of my years. The importance for increasing the awareness of nature to anybody, young or old,

cannot be stated too highly. Open the eyes of even just a couple of people, and they might do the same with two more each. Those four could become eight, then sixteen... and so begins a quiet revolution.

From a personal point of view, I have also been given ample opportunity to see things that have become so very familiar to me, with something of that thrill of newness and wonder that I have been able to see in young eyes genuinely amazed at witnessing remarkable things for the first time; vicariously revisiting the same, fresh fascination that I experienced in my own childhood. I may look more purposefully at the little wolf spider scurrying to safety with her bundle of eggs attached to the tip of her abdomen. I might take the time to admire the cheerful beauty of the Ox-eye Daisy flower among the grasses and I am freshly impressed by the wonderfully gaudy and unmoth-like burnet moths with their dazzling red spots on dark metallic green. It is easy to forget sometimes just how exquisite a Small White butterfly is, rather than just another 'cabbage white', how truly outlandish a bush-cricket can look, or how deep the intrigue of the weedy depths of some unassuming looking pool. And how do they all share the spaces of the places in which they live? What other tiny legs tread, along with those of the wolf spider, among the towering mass of the grasses; what else vies for space alongside the sun-smiling daisies; what other wings are over-looked, beyond the shining colours of the unlikely looking moths? How, indeed, does each and every one of these living things combine to paint a perfect picture? I have gathered what some might regard as a considerable amount of natural history knowledge over the years, but I am delighted to admit that I have missed more than I have acquired.

The reasons for such intrigue, such fascination and admiration, such deeply felt significance may therefore present us with matters for a great deal of consideration. They are questions that can be difficult to grasp and yet at the same time

might require only a bit more looking – really looking – to trigger the necessary chain of thought. It may provide a challenge of the imagination and the notions of our own place within it all. For those who refute the idea of the separateness of the human race from the rest of life and seek in some way to redress our remoteness from it, we ourselves might be regarded as yet another of its contradictions. Assuming that we are secure in our lives, we will always tend towards a view of nature from our own anthropocentric perspective and yet yearn to consciously be an integral part of it. Our powers of reflection and highly developed sense of ‘self’ will always make our reconciling of these notions a challenge, but one to be met and cherished and which would further a sense of value for nature, beyond even the realms of our direct contact with it.

To leave aside for a moment such philosophising and hopefully dispel any esoteric pretensions, it has become increasingly evident to me, as already mentioned, that such inquiry should just as much be directed towards the familiar things as to our more obviously remarkable experiences. As detailed in her *Ecology of a Garden*, Dr Jennifer Owen recorded more than 2,000 species of plant and animal in her normal, suburban Leicester garden, persuading her to conclude that it (along with, she supposed, other gardens in general) included “*an astonishingly large proportion of the species recorded in the British Isles.*” This is a notion that few would give credit to, myself included, until the detail of the facts are explained. Even if we don’t have at our disposal the expertise to identify 550 species of parasitic wasp (and let’s face it, there are very few around who would!), 340 species of moth, or the means to identify 60-plus kinds of spider, the message is a clear one and applicable to anywhere that we have come to think we know very well.

It is within such things and their domestic environs where the first inklings of wildness are to be found, yet so often ignored and unnoticed. It is an understated but true wildness that begins to further unfold as soon as we set foot outside the

front gate in renewed search of the woods and fields, seashores and marshes that we thought we knew well, and could know better, a wildness that might seem improbable to some. Maybe it is something I look too hard for. It is possible that a wistful longing allows me to see what I hope to find rather than what is really there. But perhaps I...we do need to be more attentive to it – so much has changed. I think of my own home ground. There are more car parks and buildings sprawled across some of those little corners where nature found its niches, amid what I remember as a kind of ambling suburbia, when Sundays were proper Sundays, quieter and more pensive. Even the open spaces that remain (of which, I am pleased to say, many still do) must bear the increasing weight of the growing pressures of changing times. Such places where nature may still express itself more completely must be experienced to their fullest and those experiences explored more deeply. It is this that offers hope for the future.

There follows then a consideration, or should I say a reconsideration, of the things, the places and ideas that might bring us closer to that big world of little things. Of thoughts pertaining to something of re-evaluation of the big things in the eye and mind of the individual and of the small things as part of the bigger picture. A contemplation of the frivolous and the fundamental; the apparently obvious and seemingly unremarkable; of places and perspective. A collection, I suppose, of essays that I think would stand alone in their own right, but also strung, however loosely, about that common theme. As for setting such ideas into words, it is another challenge. I guess I could at times be accused of taking something of a romantic stance in my efforts to do so. The experiences herein are genuine and attainable and hopefully, during the more philosophical moments, the reasoning sound. The words are sincere and, in my own mind at least, I have attempted to place these thoughts into the context of the stern challenges that face the world of nature and us with it.

Romantic perhaps, but not idealised. Surely I'm not the only one to sometimes feel, when enthralled by the wild and windswept landscapes or equally when enveloped by the defiant layers of life thriving within some embattled bastion of urban greenery, that a small part of me is somewhere else. The same physical location, of course, but somehow more distant, embroiled more deeply within the ageless layers of nature's persistence. A construct of the mind no doubt, but enough to wonder, to look and imagine.

# Part 1

*Remembering How to Look*

## Remembering How to Look

One of the ever expanding joys of observing nature and something that has become increasingly significant to me over the years is the constant surprise, the perpetuation of interest, the sheer wonder of life's variety that may be present in nearly any situation, in spite of the continued degradation and human pressures put upon it. It is something that may be as relevant in those places where nature's riches are very evident, as much as it is in circumstances where the presence of wild things is a genuine surprise. For every Raven that tumbles above the lower mountain slopes, millions of tiny feet tread near soundlessly among the heather and moorland grass below, and for each set of gliding wings of butterflies skimming across the woodland glade thousands more fly in their wake barely noticed. And for every probing beak along the winter coast there will be countless quantities of mud-dwelling snails and shrimps, while among the scattered riches of the herb-rich downland slopes, the buzz, the scurry, the flit all emanate prolifically from flowery acres.

As for those more surprising circumstances, their intrigue is no less considerable. There is a spot by a railway line in Essex where I have had cause, on occasion, to stop and look. A gate beside a lay-by along a lane, where railway workers park and gain access to the line for maintenance work. In most respects, such could be encountered along many a lane, in many a county. It is probably, however, not a spot where one might normally pause and observe. If it wasn't for the fact that it provided a convenient place to meet some of the local school children who walked cross-country from their school to the nature study centre where I worked recently, I doubt I would ever have done so. Yet it is here in early spring that I have stood and listened to the first – to me – Chiffchaff of the year calling from the Ash trees beside the railway line or

enjoyed the first of those late-March, vernal rays warming this unlikely heat trap. A Great-spotted Woodpecker might bounce, chirping loudly over head towards a nearby group of oak trees, and butterflies can be seen in the summer skipping along this sunny, undisturbed (by people if not by trains) ribbon of land. These, though, are the more obvious natural attributes of this stretch of railway line. I have long appreciated the ‘green corridor’ qualities of railway lines, especially in built-up areas or where, as often the case, areas of wildlife habitat are effectively islands cast adrift amid an arable sea. These things are important but do not provide the crux of what is being considered here.

It is one of those situations that perhaps reminds us ‘how to look’. Not always is it necessary to focus down into the nooks and crannies to absorb the essence of a place. The ambience of a foaming upland river should wash over our senses as its water does the boulders in its course. There are times when one can only stand in awe and wonder at the outrageous mountain country of northern Scotland. But there are those instances when the fine detail does indeed unfold a world of breadth and wonder of a different kind.

When watching over the comings and goings of life beside the railway, there was another observer that I would often call to mind. With an uncanny ability to see – to sense – the smallest facet of place and time, Richard Jefferies’ (1848-87) keenly honed faculty of observation could, with seemingly uneventful instances, enliven within the imagination a world brocaded with layers of fresh detail. Not necessarily just in terms of simple details but also by way of considering what we already see, hear and feel in a different way. In an essay entitled *Hedge Miners*, written in 1881 (see Jefferies, 1948), he casts such an alternative light as this upon an ordinary country hedgerow. The mound of his hedge-bank is excavated and shaped by “*the least of creatures.*” From the sprinkling of a thimbleful of soil that rustles through the foliage, something we all will have heard