Ardnamurchan Spring

Polly Pullar on the haunting wildness she finds so inspirational

I AM sitting high above the shore beneath an ancient wind-sculpted oak wood that sprawls its way up the side of Ben Hiant, overlooking the Sound of Mull. Ravens are calling nearby; they are usually the first birds to nest and are already sitting on eggs.

They have been using the same site for as long as I can remember. It's a tower block of sticks beneath a cliff ledge laced with a cornucopia of coloured detritus, garish blue rope, a yellow rubber glove, some black polythene and copious amounts of sheep's wool. The rocks are spattered white, an assortment of bones strewn beneath. They have been feasting on a winter sheep casualty and their pellets are woolly or filled with grain husks. Ravens are not fussy and will happily eat anything from a worm to a whale!

Springtime for Polly

I have been watching a pair of golden eagles displaying now for some weeks. They too nest early in the season. Like the ravens they intermittently use a site I have known since I was a child, alternating it with a couple of other secret eyries close by.

Their displays are breathtaking, particularly when set against a backdrop of gathering storm clouds or a sky of azure. They soar and descend effortlessly on the thermals without a beat from broad wings, and then tumble and somersault in mid-air, at breakneck pace.

If I am really lucky I may see them talon grappling, cascading through the atmosphere with their massive strong feet locked in embrace – and still no sign of a

wing beat. A passing hooded crow joins in the mêlée, rudely shouting obscenities as it mobs the oblivious duo.

A kestrel hovers over the wood but takes no notice, keeping its eyes on a tiny movement below before dropping like a stone. I see it re-emerge, clutching a vole, before it vanishes over the distant horizon.

Early spring can be a hard time for the deer, weakened after a drawn-out winter of incessant rain and gales. There is seldom much to eat until later into the season, and though new life bursts forth everywhere, there is intense competition for the painfully slow grass and crofts will be regularly raided.

The stags look scruffy as they venture down low in search of food. The best ones cast their antlers earliest. Some seem lopsided with just one for a day or two before it, too, is rubbed off. For the pregnant hinds in particular, these are a valuable source of calcium, helping with the growing foetus, and they chew on them whenever the opportunity arises.

Away from the grazers, the steep dells and little woods running down the burnsides are awakening, their banks smiling with yellow primroses, colt's foot and celandines. Soon there will be marsh marigolds amid the green emerging points of flag iris. I love to visit a rushie glade where the Caim burn begins its tumble over brilliant emerald weed and on to the sea.

Here, not only do I often see an otter, but this is also where the beautiful early purple orchid grows. Ferns and leaves are gently unfurling; the ash and oak are slow but the birches are coming into leaf, and the larch with its stunning perfect pink buds is already wearing a soft green dress. ››

Pied elder ducks are nicknamed "Frankie Howard ducks"

The frogs adapt their colour to their habitat

Pictures: ALAMY, POLLY PULLAR, DARBY SAWCHUK

The cuckoo has arrived and is terrorising the meadow pipits. It perches on a pockmarked stump where spotted woodpeckers have been drilling, and ensures everyone knows it is here. The sound echoes back and forth and soon is answered by another male cuckoo also proclaiming his patch. The duet continues for some time.

Though the sound of the cuckoo is one of nature's finest, it is the noise of drumming snipe that I love more than any other. Near the shore at Achateny, the bogs and fields provide perfect habitat for snipe.

This tiny brown wader, dapper in mottled plumage the colour of earthy Harris tweed, rises high into the sky until it is just a speck before descending a little, and with specially stiffened, extended tail feathers, makes a perfect winnowing sound, and rises again almost in a loop, up and down with the same magical result. Its bid to attract a mate often continues far into the night when the moon lights up land and seascape, or it displays against a sun falling into its bed behind the rugged silhouettes of nearby islands. It seems so beautiful that it has the power to move me to tears.

Soon the Atlantic oakwoods for which Ardnamurchan is famous come truly alive. Every day a different voice is added to the dawn chorus as newly arrived migrants return once more to breed. The chiff-chaff is an early bird. Then there is the sweet repetitive song of the lovely little greeny-yellow willow warbler; the whitethroat, reed and sedge warbler, as well as redstart, and perhaps pied flycatcher. Deeper into the woods amid a tangle of coconut scented gorse, brambles, and lichen-cloaked branches, wren and robin are searching for nest sites.

Then I hear it, a sound likened to a coin spinning on marble, followed by a rhythmic descending trill – the wood warbler is back too. Now woodland everywhere is a smoky haze of bluebells speckled with white stitchwort. Spring's heavy downpours seem to make the bluebells all the bluer, and bracken is fast on the move. Softly rotting logs and crevices in wizened trunks transform into sylvan window boxes overflowing with wood sorrel and wood anemones.

It was during my childhood in Ardnamurchan that I found my lifelong fascination for amphibians. From school we visited a small pond close to Kilchoan, and there collected frogspawn to take back to the classroom. Sometimes we filled our wellies with it and walked back to school in our stocking soles.

Our teacher was always delighted and sought out a large tank she used each year. Looking back to the days prior to health and safety issues that now seem to make outdoor nature study almost impossible, we were lucky. We watched the magical metamorphosis as the spawn turned to tadpoles, and then each one sprouted back legs

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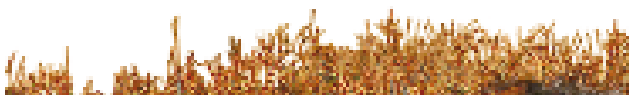

Sunset over Ardnamurchan lighthouse

and eventually transformed into a perfect little froglet.

I have found frogs high on the hillside on Ben Hiant's slopes, as well as in the rich ruby bogs near the shore. They adapt their colour to suit their habitat. In spring, traditional pond and lochan sites become a boiling broth of amorous amphibians, and otters and herons quickly take advantage, feasting on the short-lived glut.

Spring is as much about sound as sight. On still days, sheltered bays reveal flotillas of smart pied eider drakes, oohing and ahhing to their mates. It's a call filled with humour and in some areas a bird that the Shetlanders nickname Dunter, is referred to as the Frankie Howerd duck, due to the cheeky resonance of its breeding vocalisation.

Hidden away on Ardnamurchan's remote hill lochans, red-throated divers return. They rely on being undisturbed in order to rear their young, and are vulnerable to flash floods and predation, particularly by otters, mink and foxes.

In the water they are supreme, but on land they are thoroughly ungainly with legs seemingly set in the wrong place to allow them to do much more than waddle.

Their calls have a haunting melancholy, a beautiful low moaning wail. When the rain is horizontal or land and sea are drowned in a smir of cloud, it carries on the air as if to proclaim their sadness. Wonderfully eerie and symbolic, it was once believed to signify rain. Nicknamed rain goose, their call epitomises the wildness that is what I adore most about Ardnamurchan.