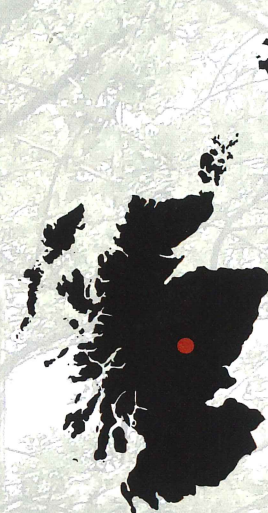




CULTURE

# A Highland Perthshire Spring



The season arrives in a burst of yellow blooms and leaping lambs

by POLLY PULLAR

**A**S EARLY as mid-February, there are signs that nature is truly astir. On the track that runs above the farm, colt's-foot flowers emerge. Nicknamed "son before father", this is one of the few plants that has its flowers before its leaves, hence its old country name. Colt's-foot leaves are large and fleshy with a similar shape to a foal's hoof but the flower, a brilliant celestial sun, kick-starts spring – its inauguration dominated by yellow. Soon primroses, celandines and dandelions paint bank and verge, perfect violets add contrasting purple splashes and the air is filled with the coconut scent of golden gorse.

By the end of February it seems so much easier to get out of bed; the resident birds are singing and through the open window, the glorious sound fills the dawn as light shines into the room. The blackbird has long been my favourite; so welcome is his fluting, liquid song that I cannot bear to put the radio on to risk drowning it out with the minutiae of the day's events.

Last spring's birdsong built up slowly and tentatively, almost as if the birds felt as low-key as we did following a savage blast of winter spilling into spring and making nature cower. >>





Colt's foot, a celestial sun

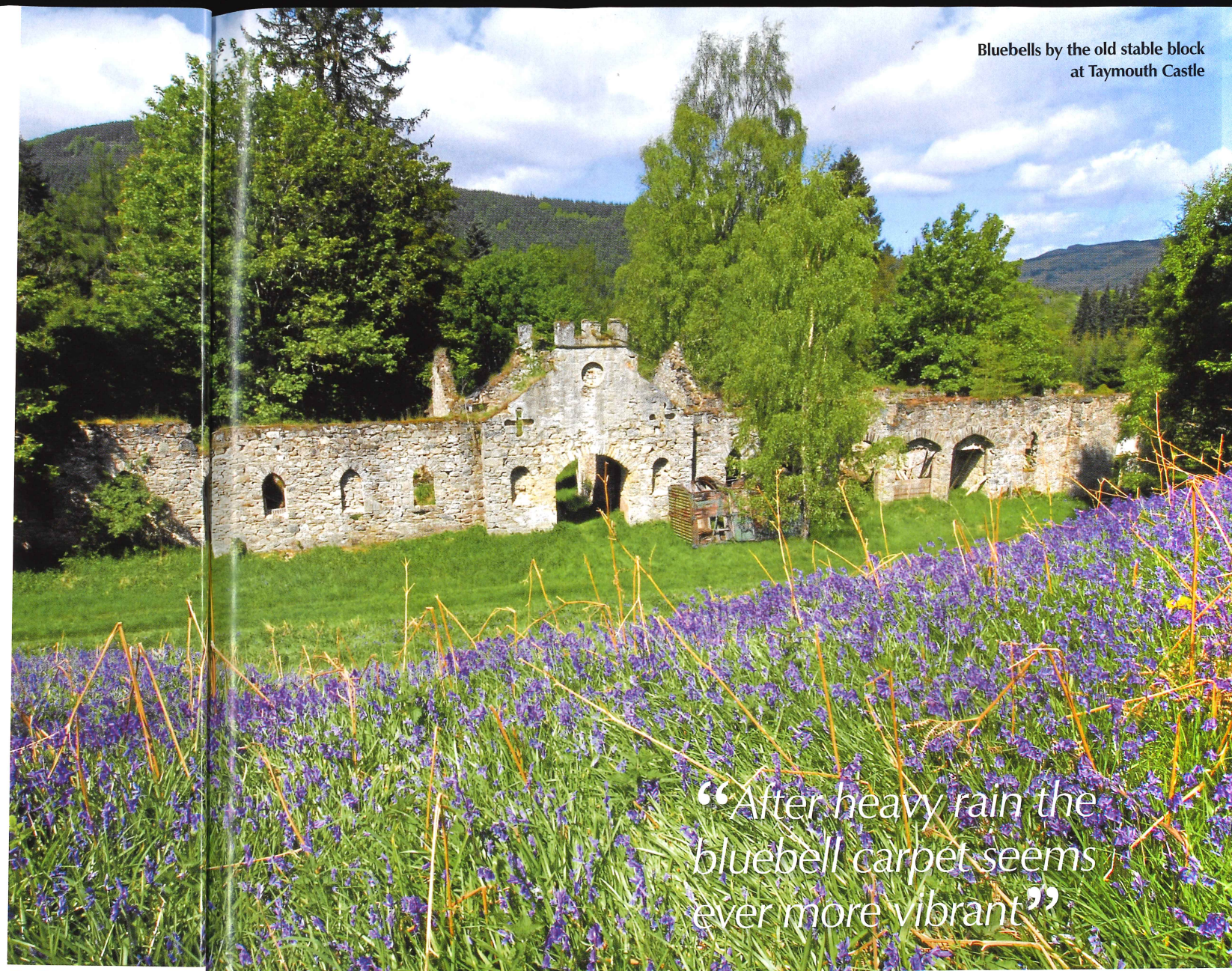
Together with the first glimpses of colt's foot flowers, the emergence of pinky-red larch flowers is another early sign that I look out for. Over the coming months, these delicate female flowers slowly develop transforming to a soft green cone, then a fully formed brittle brown one. Many birds enjoy larch flowers, particularly black grouse, a bird that has a stronghold in Highland Perthshire. Forays to nearby woods reveal their rounded plum-pudding silhouettes high in the larches, feasting on the tender new buds.

At dawn I take to the hills above Loch Tay to watch their extraordinary lekking display. Backing and advancing and making a curious range of bubbling and hissing sounds, the males gather on sites they have used for generations. Magnificent in their breeding finery with blue-black plumage like shot silk, their brilliant white lyre-shaped tails and soft feathered pantaloons add to the action as flashes of engorged blood-red wattles, and little leaps into the air make them appear almost like erratic clockwork toys. Their threats may end with a few ruffled feathers and the hasty beating of a retreat as the older cocks take charge.

The moorland orchestrations include the wistful cries of curlew and those of lapwing and oystercatcher, while high in the sky, snipe rise and fall extending specially stiffened tail feathers to create an ethereal winnowing sound known as drumming.

My earliest diaries from the 1970s record my glee in finding the season's first frogspawn, and my passion for the annual spectacle as hundreds of frogs, and then approximately a week later, toads, appear at their traditional breeding ponds as if by magic. In our immediate area this auspicious date alters from the last week of February to the second week of March. However in 2013 the amphibians' nuptials, like the dawn chorus, were almost a month behind schedule due to the severity of the weather, and I anxiously wondered if they would take place at all. Eventually the frog march began with toads harder on their heels than usual. The event seemed to end hardly before it began.

It is an important part of my calendar; I visit the pond daily to record the scene. These are wonderful overlooked creatures with a mass of subtle colours ranging from the bright and almost garish, to the subtle and well-camouflaged dependent on the habitat where they have been living. Though frogs are an integral part of their watery world, the more ponderous toads only come to water to breed, preferring to hide away in dank >>

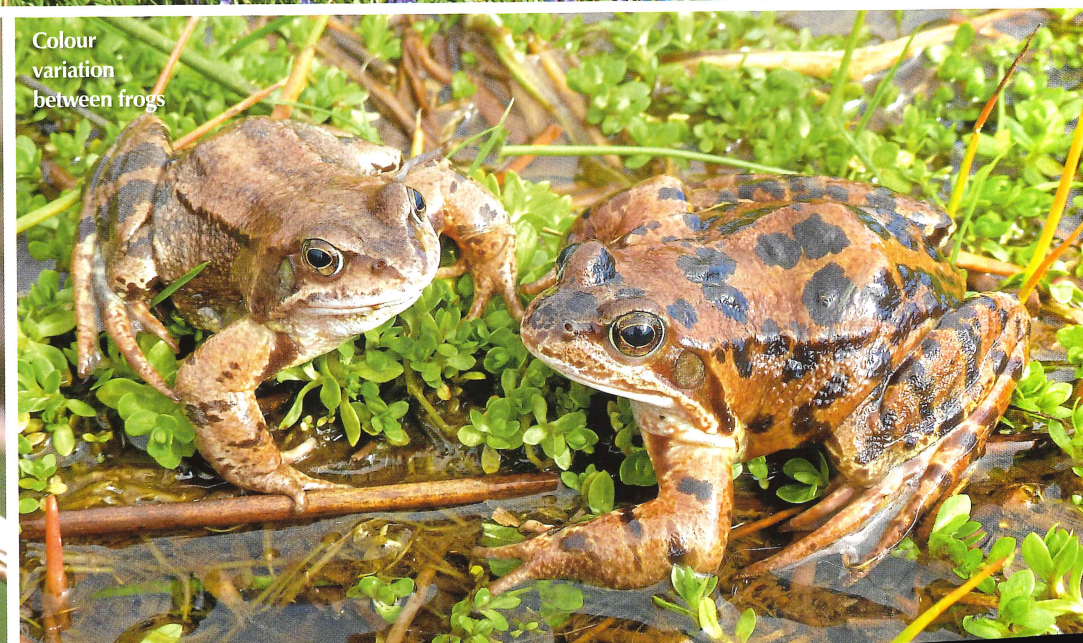


Bluebells by the old stable block at Taymouth Castle

*"After heavy rain the bluebell carpet seems ever more vibrant"*



Larch flowers, a delicacy for black grouse

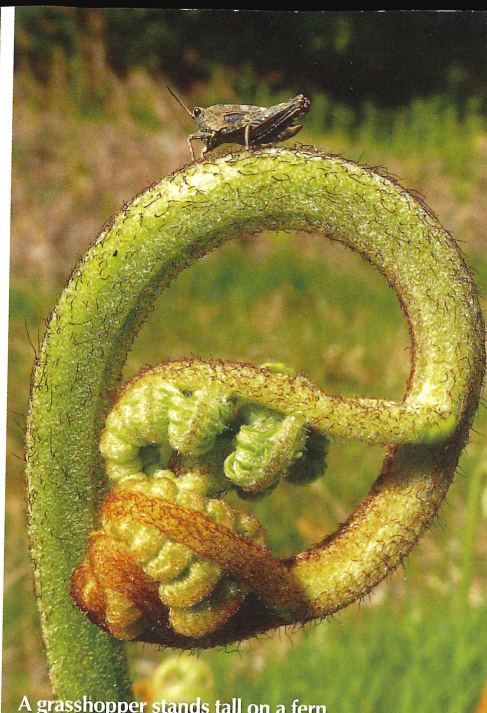


Colour variation between frogs





New sycamore leaves greet the sun



A grasshopper stands tall on a fern



The lambs line up on their favourite rock

places for the rest of the year. I rush to the pond between heavy showers and sometimes find myself scooping up armfuls of latecomers, bloated with spawn and risking death crossing over the farm road. I hope that by transporting them those last few yards they stay safe from traffic at least.

My file of amphibian images grows annually. I am addicted to these fragile little creatures. I sit on the bank listening to the high-pitched croaking as dozens of frogs in a broth of spawn like bubbles in a blister pack stick their heads proud of the water. Sudden noises and shadows cast over the water frighten them, and they all momentarily submerge. Herons and otters take advantage of this seasonal bonanza, and there are fresh signs of their visits. Once I watched a weasel sallying back and forth frenetically from a hole in a tumble of lichen-encrusted stones close by. It too was taking advantage of the frog-fest. Toads seem less popular, the protective toxins they emit clearly making them less palatable.

There are few livestock farmers who lie abed late in spring for there is always important work to be done. Lambing time with its trials and tribulations has always been one of my favourite yearly events, though now we only keep a few sheep for a hobby. I love rising at dawn and if the morning is fair, take a mug of tea out to the field to sit overlooking the Tay valley. So often sheep will lamb early and late in the day. I may find a favourite ewe has produced twins and all three animals are happily

occupied, the new lambs already suckling. There may be problems to sort out and all too often my pampered sheep have triplets. Though they usually rear them without difficulties, there are times when they may need initially topped-up with a bottle.

Despite burgeoning woodland growth, the grass in the fields is painfully slow to appear; as soon as it does the sheep, desperate for greenery after a long winter on dry fodder, nip it. We seldom have grass before mid-May and hill farmers seldom lamb before the end of April for this reason.

There is a huge rock on the farm that becomes a favourite place for the lambs. Having raced madly around the field, they often climb up on it and stand in a line. Lamb racing is a joyous sight everywhere. Tiny hooves sculpt racetracks as old farm machinery, rocks or fallen trees are used like springboards as the lambs take leaps of faith flying after one another with the speed of the wind.

In the scrub woodland above the farm the scent of mixed blossom mingles with the earthy smell of warming brown leaf litter, and the pungent aroma of sheep.

As April continues the dawn chorus is swelled by the daily arrival of new migrants. The chaff chaff is one of the earliest to return and soon the calls of the first willow warbler, blackcap, and whitethroat accompany its distinctive song. As dawn breaks pinkly to the east, a woodcock may pass low over the fields emitting its grunting call, "roding" in breeding display.

*"I love rising at dawn and taking a mug of tea to the field overlooking the Tay valley"*

CULTURE

*"Taking leaps of faith  
lambs fly after each  
other like the wind"*

Tawny owls have been nesting in the chimney of the old bothy adjacent to the house for many years now. There are few signs that it is occupied until later in the season. However, if I am working in the vegetable patch close by I may hear a low hoot coming from within. The owls are rightly secretive and fiercely protective of their nests and young, and it is best to wait until eventually a pineapple-shaped creature dressed up in a grey feather duster emerges awkwardly on the chimney top, narrowing its huge eyes to mere slits. By this time the swallows and house martins have returned and are busy rebuilding in the bothy and under the eaves. They swoop low and close over the bewildered new owlet, clearly concerned by its presence.

The sheep are losing wisps of fleece and in a torrential shower, I watch jackdaws collecting it and taking it to a large hollow tree in the wood. Perched on the fence with it in their beaks, they resemble Chinese wise men with long moustaches. Though the tawnies nest early, there is often a battle for the chimney. The cheeky jackdaws post sticks and nest material on top of the irate owls; this has led to occasional failure of their brood.

The crescendo of spring comes when the hazel woods surrounding the farm transform to a smoke-hazed blue dense with bluebells. At nearby Taymouth Castle, until

plans for development there saw a mass of excavators and building work altering the scene, the bluebell woods were amongst the finest anywhere. The crumbling stable block deep in the brooding woods was a wild paradise returned to nature. Softly collapsing logs filled with wood sorrel and wood anemone, emerging nautilus-shaped ferns, and curtains of ivy provided perfect privacy for all would-be nesters, as the cuckoo called from a primrose bank above. After heavy rain, the blue carpet seems ever more vibrant. Raindrops cling to blade and backlit leaf, and the immaculate plumage of a mallard duck sitting tight on her down-lined nest. And then I spy an unfurling bracken frond where a grasshopper, like the lambs, is about to embark on a leap of faith. S



The colourful sight of Cherry Blossom