

Dispatches from the Cheviot hills

Below we republish extracts from a blog by a recent guest at [Homildon Cottage](#) inspired by the Cheviots and North Northumberland in Spring.

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Low, red-roofed Homildon Cottage forms the gatepost to Northumberland National Park and St Cuthbert's Way all the way to Lindisfarne. It nestles below historic Humbleton Hill (the cottage keeps the older name) and its garden gives way to bilberry, heather and the unfurling fiddleheads of bracken. There are lapwings nesting beyond the back gate and curlew calling from the hill. All the luxurious lie-ins we've promised ourselves are irrelevant in an instant.

We are out first thing on the high, domed Cheviots, mountain biking, walking, birding. The dry stone walls are limed and whitened with lichen, punched through with oak and sycamore roots, haunted by wrens and redstart and threaded through with hunting stoats. The hills are alive with meadow pipits, skylarks, bright-billed oystercatchers, wheatear, whin and stonechat. And an evocative soundtrack to die for.

Red grouse display and call 'like a duck falling downstairs' according to my son, and follow with their famous, ventriloquistic 'go back, go back'. But we won't, not yet. Snipe 'sing' with the sound of someone sawing through wet wood and when one goes up drumming above me, my heart catches at the sound: atmospheric and all but lost at home.

We are here at such an exciting time. The migratory spring

birds are coming in off the East Coast, the numbers of willow warblers doubling daily, their song a lilting laugh. Harthope valley is full of golden gorse and its scent of coconut ice cream. We walk alongside the beautiful Carey Burn as it tumbles round rocks marked by otters. I scan warm shale slopes for ring ouzels and get left behind as I try to take it all in.

But of course: Northumberland was wilder, more remote, more rugged. The house was bigger, nicer and there was a brilliant chef (in the form of my lovely Father-in-law). And the dark night skies were infinitely darker.

[On the Farne Islands,] puffins ran down turf burrows and razorbills with white ribbon bridles jostled with chocolate-brown guillemots. We spotted cormorant and shag nests and the blue enamel pears of guillemot eggs. On the boat home, soaked to our underwear, a pod of six dolphins broke the surface, rolling like the smooth submerged cogs of something working below the surface we couldn't fathom.

On our last evening, we climbed Humbleton hill again, huddling in strong winds in the 17thC summit cairn and looked out to Scotland, the oxbow of the ottery River Till and Wooler Water below us, with views towards Yeavinger Bell and its ancient herd of wild goats. Squared plantations and garrisoned woods darkened into ranks, bristling with pike-pines as we thought of the 800 Scots who died here fighting Hotspur in 1402.

The dark night sky darkened. There are stars in our hair and on the shoulder of the hill. The lights from a distant car sideswipe the hill like a searchlight, we shy away from it instinctively, fugitives from the light and the rest of the world. The last bird I hear is a grey partridge calling me home and the 'go back, go back' cries of red grouse. We take an emotional leaving ...

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Thanks to Nicola Chester for permission to reproduce extracts of her writing. She stayed as a guest at Homildon Cottage in Spring 2017. These extracts are from her Nature Writing blog and can be read in full in the articles [Eastwards: the Cheviots in Spring](#), and [Hill forts, islands & leavings](#). She also runs [Wild Writing Workshops](#) and contributed to the [Seasons](#) anthologies, among The Guardian's & The Telegraph's 2016 Books of the Year.

Picture: Nicola Chester