

## Chapter Fourteen

# The Accidental Kingfisher and Other Stories – A Diary of Summer

THE SUMMER OF 2019 turned out to be a furtive creature, the summer that mostly hid its fair face behind mountains of rainclouds, or just stayed away altogether. One of the results was a summer of demented rivers and overflowing lochs. When summer did show up it was as short-lived as snowflakes and I clutched at it as a drowning man clutches at straws, with much the same outcomes. Yet for a couple of weeks it bore down with tormenting heat, and just when we were all lamenting the unprecedented lack of butterflies they all arrived at once and flooded the land, and hung around until November.

And it was the summer when the swifts stayed away, at least they did here. I found them eventually, but in the last place I would ever have thought of looking for them. In fact, I wasn't looking for them at all when I found them, and now that I think about it, I didn't find them. They found me. So one way and another, it was an out-of-sorts summer. And at the very end, it was the summer of the accidental kingfisher.

It was also the summer I bought a new bike. Cycling and I go back to the age of ten. I had a guru, my uncle Stuart

Illingworth, with whom I once cycled along by Hadrian's Wall. My memory of it is hazy now, because it rained so heavily and constantly that it felt as if much of it was underwater. And it was he who introduced me to Lindisfarne when we cycled there in my late teens (see *The Nature of Spring*). He was strictly a touring cyclist, and therefore, so was I. In time I cycled round Mull, I cycled the length of Skye and back, and every yard of its Sleat peninsula again and again. When I lived in Glen Dochart for a few years either side of the millennium, I made a habit of cycling round Loch Tay, or through Glen Orchy and back. But by 2019, I was bikeless, having tried and failed to get on with a mountain bike. In the end I gave it away to one of those organisations that does up old bikes and promotes the many virtues of cycling. It was a long time since I had been completely bikeless and I was occasionally visited by pangs of regret, not about the mountain bike, but about the absence of cycling from my life. Those pangs usually sneaked up on me whenever I saw someone travelling alone through a nice landscape on a nice bike. Then I discovered adventure bikes, a kind of cross between a touring road bike and an off-road bike. It was that simple, and it proved to be an inspired choice. I took the plunge and fell in love with cycling again.

A week of rain relented into a sunny June morning. I pointed the bike north from Callander, a track through the oakwoods beyond Kilmahog and up the west side of Loch Lubnaig, the epicentre of my nature-writing life for more than thirty years. The out-of-sorts summer smiled down on me for all of fifteen minutes then comprehensively soaked me inside one of the blackest clouds I have seen since the

## THE NATURE OF SUMMER

eruption of Eyjafjallajökull cast its giant shadow over Iceland and grounded every aircraft in Europe, thereby achieving its own carbon neutrality at a stroke. The rain cloud thrashed up the loch, contriving a bit of a gale out of a flat calm as it came and went. After fifteen minutes more it was gone, the air was calm and smelled of bog myrtle and wild hyacinths. Behind it was summer on a mission. Having soaked me, it set about drying me, and that too was accomplished within about fifteen minutes. It was as if the passing cloud was a cork in the neck of a huge bottle of sunlit heat, and the cork having been popped, the heat poured forth and the land basked. What followed was that summer's finest hour. Suddenly I felt lucky cycling easily along the shore of the loch, and the land wore its most seductive summer sheen, that ultimate, glossy, vivid, summer green of a Highland forest before July-into-August dulls it all and it fails of its own too-much. The light and the rain had rinsed the air clear and clean and supercharged it; nothing was hidden and everything and anything felt possible on such a day.

A wondrous old holly tree stands in a rough and piece-meal and quite possibly accidental hedge by the side of the track. I have a peculiar fascination for hollies that I don't quite understand, or at least I don't understand where it stemmed from because they are never shapely and you could never call one beautiful, and they are dark and shiny and waxy and sharp-edged, but metaphorically speaking at least, they get under my skin in a good way.

There is something "other" about them, and I like that. I can only imagine that this particular holly is old, but I have not the slightest idea how old. I have never seen a tree

quite like it, for it appears to have grown round itself and inside itself and into itself, so that branches weave in every direction and the tree wraps itself in hoops and crosses over itself like saltires, and where the branches rub up against each other, which is often, they grow into each other and form bizarre junctions. If Rubik ever designed a tree puzzle to unravel, it would be like this.

The combination of the aftermath of the storm (it had drenched the holly as thoroughly as it had drenched me) and the strong sunlight electrified the sheen on the leaves so that they acquired a hallucinatory edge, rippling surprising shades through that vibrant green. I thought I was investing it with more than was actually there, but I found a surprising ally in Hugh Johnson, whose book *Trees* (Mitchell Beazley, 1973) is my most dependable source whenever I have tree problems:

*The best-looking ones are in hedgerows where the wind has a pruning effect: shorter shoots keep the foliage dense and stress the contrast of glitter and darkness that is half the pleasure. For this reason, holly is best in summer when the new shoots emerge so soft and shiny that they look (and even feel) wet. The new leaves glow with pink, brown and purple tones as well as green.*

It was such a word-perfect portrait of that trackside holly that I wondered idly if perhaps Hugh Johnson had ever strayed that way and marvelled at that very same tree.

Alistair Scott, a former senior executive in the Forestry Commission, wrote and privately published a remarkable little book in his retirement called *A Pleasure in Scottish Trees*.