

Cottongrass

I first found out why cottongrass is special when I went to live near Loch Garten in the Scottish Highlands in April 1960. *Eriophorum angustifolium* is known locally as moss-crop or bog cotton, and of course I'd seen its showy white heads growing in wet areas long before I understood its importance to country life in northern Scotland. It was a friend who told me about it first, because his flock of hogs – young female blackface sheep – had suddenly started to wander far into the wettest parts of his common grazing in a quest to find it and eat the first signs of spring growth, poking through the ground.

Each spring brought with it the worry that his young sheep would get stuck in boggy patches and drown while on their eager search. It was tough work to pull a sodden sheep safely from a pool full of sphagnum moss. It was worse, of course, if the sheep was already dead.

Appearances deceive. Just as the bog may look safe to walk on yet is treacherous underfoot, moss-crop itself first appears as a tiny, greyish spike but, if pulled gently, reveals three or four inches of bright green, grassy stem. This is what the sheep are after: their first bite of freshness. They are desperate to eat it, even though I was told by old shepherds that it was not, in fact, particularly nutritious. After a cold, hard winter, though, it must taste good.

When I first lived in the Highlands, thousands of hogs were traditionally taken by lorry from the big sheep farms of the West Highlands to spend their winters on small farms and crofts with common grazings in the central Highlands. It was a way for those farmers to send their future breeding sheep to better grazing for their first winter and to keep them away from the rams at home.

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Every late afternoon the flock was let out onto the common grazings and then, every morning, the sheep were brought back to the crofts, each of them counted as they dashed through the field gate. The monetary arrangements between the owner of the sheep and the wintering shepherd were often many decades old, and this movement of flocks was a real feature of sheep husbandry in the uplands. Nowadays, it's all but gone.

Interestingly, a few days before my lesson on the importance of cottongrass, I had walked out across the local moor to a blackcock lek. It was daytime, at a spot where the male black grouse were already strutting their stuff at dawn and dusk on the traditional display grounds. I had noted large, fluffy droppings, softer and quite unlike the usual droppings of the grouse family, a mixture of grey and yellow and a bit like dried mousse. Now I understood that the black grouse had been feeding on the shoots of cottongrass, resulting in the distinctive droppings. Over the following days I noted, using the same observation, that capercaillie and red grouse were also very partial to eating this plant in the early spring, when the frost was leaving the ground.

It is also irresistible to other grazing animals. Suddenly the red deer, which have been grazing in the valley bottoms through the long winter, seem to vanish overnight as they disappear up onto the moors to eat the moss-crop. They have it firmly in their calendar of seasonal foods and there's no doubt that the older hinds teach their calves the importance of heading to the hills and bogs to eat the first green spikes of early spring.

Later in the summer, the downy heads of the plant – like fluffy balls of cotton – blow gently in the wind across the wetter moors and bogs, and sometimes catch the sunlight in a most delightful way. I've often stood at the edge of the forest, looking out over the wet peat mosses, and admired the early morning or a low evening sun highlighting this beautiful sedge. I remember a pair

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of curlews nesting in my favourite moss-crop bog, adding their evocative sound to an already beautiful scene.

I later realised that the snow-white bloom of summer could be an indicator of how many animals were grazing on the land. Early one summer, I was driving along the road over the Struie to Sutherland when my eye caught what I thought were patches of snow on a hill overlooking Edderton. I knew it was too late for snow, but it was enough to make me stop and look with my binoculars across the valley, seeing an amazingly dense hillside of cottongrass heads. Clearly the Forestry Commission stalkers had reduced the deer pressure on that particular part of the forest, and the cottongrass spikes had been allowed to bloom.

Now that there are real efforts – and an urgent need – to encourage natural regeneration by reducing deer numbers, the areas showing a strong growth of cottongrass in the spring are increasing. Too many deer or sheep mean that flowering plants are scarce, so an abundance of cottongrass in bloom in boggy areas is a real marker of successful ecological recovery. For me, it's the perfect mix of beauty and utility, showing us what we're doing right in the simplest and prettiest way.

All in a name

One spring, we were in a remote mountain valley in the Swiss Alps, the snowy track just opened for the summer. A golden eagle had drifted over the highest belt of trees and we watched a stalking fox pounce on a rodent. Then I saw a great arrow-shaped raptor glide across the lower slopes, soon joined by its mate, their pale heads bright against the dark spruces. ‘*Lammergeiers!*’ I shouted to my Swiss friends. ‘Bearded vultures!’ came back their reply. They soared back over the great crags of ice and rock and I was reminded that ‘*lammergeier*’ was an old name and in German meant ‘lamb killer’, a complete misnomer for this great vulture, with its amazing ability to harness marrow from animal bones by dropping them on rocks, the final act in the business of scavenging dead mammals. Miscalling it a lamb killer would not help the recovery of this rare bird in the Alps. Clearly it matters to get the name right.

Older ornithologists like me have seen bird names change – sensibly, hedge sparrow to dunnock, for example – and have had to weather the politically correct renaming of the 1990s, when robins and blackbirds became Eurasian robins and common blackbirds, despite perfectly good scientific names common to birders in every country.

Yet there are times when names are clearly a hindrance to a species, or simply inappropriate. Killer whales enjoy a much better image when called orcas, although the name means much the same thing. And personally, I object to the name ‘Minke whale’. When I see one of these wonderful mammals in the seas around the Scottish coasts, I prefer to use ‘lesser rorqual’ than commemorate the name of a long-gone Norwegian whaler. I’d love to see

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'Minke' excised from our books and references. Of course, others might question whether or not it really matters, but consider the public attitude to rats, and then think of another common rodent, the red squirrel. As someone once said, the red squirrel is just a rodent with great PR!

Here in Scotland, though, there is one species that, in my opinion, definitely needs a name change. It is our rarest mammal and in serious trouble: the wildcat. Or is it wild cat (with the space between the two words)? What does wildcat – or wild cat – mean? Does it live in wild places? Not always. Is it wild in the dangerous way? No, never. Is it wild in the untameable sense, as opposed to the tame domestic cat? It is, in fact, a complete misnomer that causes problems for its conservation when one tries to explain to ordinary folk the differences between domestic cats, feral cats (domestic cats living away from houses) or wildcats.

In French, this cat is sometimes called *le chat du bois*, and its scientific species name, *sylvestris*, refers to woods. There's an old English name of 'wood cat' in the history books and scientifically our subspecies is in one of three types, the forest wildcat. It's no help calling it the Scottish wildcat because the species used to live throughout mainland Britain, and could do again in many places. Personally, I also like the sound of a name to commemorate the beautiful diagnostic black rings on its bushy tail – such as 'ring-tailed cat' or 'bar-tailed cat' – but ring-tailed cat is used in North America for a species of raccoon.

Should we have a debate and choose a much more appropriate name? At the time of change, some will say it's nonsense, but give it ten years and the 'new' name would become standard and could be so much better for the future conservation of Britain's 'rarest mammal', *Felis sylvestris*. I think we should reclaim and use the evocative and correct name, the wood cat.

The optimism of spring

It was one of those gorgeous, early spring-like days of late February in the Scottish Highlands. After early morning frost, the land was sparkling under a bright blue sky and the patches of lying snow gave Strathspey the look of Lapland. With a temperature of 10°C and a fresh westerly wind scudding cotton-wool clouds across the sky, it was a joy to be in the field.

My route took me near a traditional but long-deserted peregrine eyrie where suddenly I saw a shadow high in the sky to the south. A male peregrine falcon was throwing himself up and down in the strong winds, maybe 150 metres above the ancestral nesting cliff. His forebears would have returned here on good days in February every year back through more than five millennia, freshly returned from their lowland wintering quarters to join their mates.

He plunged to the north behind the heather hill and then flashed across the front of the crag. He braked and I thought he was going to land on the ledge where they used to nest. But no, a slight hesitation, and he threw himself upwards, gained height rapidly and, without a backward glance, headed west high over my head. His brief visit had shown him there was no waiting female, no empty scrape nor any distinctive white roosting ledges. The crag was abandoned.

I first visited this nest site in 1960 and soon after reported to a Nature Conservancy scientist that the clutch of eggs had cracked and were leaking. Later, I collected them for him to carry out chemical analysis. This was the lowest point in the peregrine's fortunes, when pesticides destroyed so many eggs and birds. But it was the peregrines of the Highlands of Scotland, living in the

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most unpolluted part of our islands, which were the bedrock of the recolonisation once the worst chemicals had been banned.

Nowadays, the species is doing incredibly well in towns and cities but is faring disastrously in the once-safe areas that I remember so well in the central and eastern Highlands of Scotland. Most of the eyries on heather moors are empty as a result of continuing illegal persecution on grouse moors. To add insult to injury, many of the peregrine eyries I knew when I was younger, in the north and west of the Highlands, are also abandoned, due to a lack of wild prey: the result of long-term overgrazing and degradation of the land by sheep and red deer.

Today's male peregrine, dancing in the spring skies, was a joy to see. But, alas, it does not yet know that it will have to visit many empty eyries to find a mate, and its chances of being killed before doing so are alarmingly high. In the last ten years I satellite-tagged seven young peregrines in and around the Cairngorms National Park; all of them finally settled in grouse moor areas. In spring, some made day-trip circuits of well over a hundred miles visiting many empty eyries; in the end, none of them survived to breed. Another statistic to add to the appalling illegal onslaught meted out these days to peregrines, golden eagles and hen harriers. Not the sort of pessimism one should feel on such a gorgeous February day in one of the most beautiful parts of our planet, but it's a pessimism that's impossible to ignore.