

heard on the wind

I've returned to my favourite glen in mid-May for the third year running; my microphones are placed at a distance, connected, beneath a line of wooded crags, where I know *she* is loitering with intent. And I'm waiting, listening with intent: as minutes lengthen to hours through the early morning, the sun draws the shadow of the high peak above across and down the western slopes on the far side of the glen - my sundial. It will be almost 9am before the sun itself crests the towering eastern ridge to warm up my little patch.

I'm connected to a meshwork of distant birdsong, rolling on in waves that rise and fall through the neighbourhoods of robin, willow warbler, song thrush, mistle thrush and meadow pipit, all barely discernible as individual identities woven into the soundscape horizon. Not the dense bird chorus of southern hedgerows and suburbia, but the sparser, more expansive sound field of the northern uplands, a mix of native birchwoods, heather, bracken, peat bog and plenty of bare rock.

Time goes slow in this mode; it induces a trance of aural, meditative, but maintaining a grasp on the whole, if that's possible. Suspended in this dynamic equilibrium, I need to be aware of any development, the hint of a new event as it arises - alert for the moment *she* gives voice. It could be the male that calls; but from previous experience it's more likely to be her and, being appreciably larger than her mate, she has a more powerful and impressive voice.

I'm here ostensibly to record the display call of a wild golden eagle. The location is carefully chosen as workable for a mix of reasons: its acoustic topography, the distance from the glen's river, this eagle pair's tolerance of people in their area and their relative propensity to give voice (though still only very, very occasionally). Golden eagles are notoriously silent birds, as all the guides will tell you. So this is not far off trying to record the sound of one-hand clapping.

But it's May, the month of bird song, where spring throws off its inhibitions and dances. And this is May in a northern birchwood, scattered with violets, primroses and garlands of lichen and willow warbler song. Though up here, even in May, winter can sometimes kick back, as I discovered the second year of this escapade, when I arrived to find the birches with barely a covering of foliage, and a dusting of snow fallen through the first night. That year my eagles weren't breeding, whether discouraged by the poor spring or for other reasons - I don't know.

The glen works well as a field of study, encompassing, as it does, a perceptible arena of activity for both the ear and the eye. A contained space in which to study how life flows in connection and community, its rhythms, concerns and celebrations; to make myself aware of what happens, in big space with a slow emptiness, within which events are easily missed. But I've been visiting this glen to listen and record for over 20 years and I had already walked here well before that; so there's the benefit of building up layers of experience into an intuition of the place.

There's nothing particularly rare in the songbird assemblage of these woodlands and riverine flats, but there is a very particular character that comes partly from the isolation of the glen and partly from the listening potential offered by the spatial context - the quiet emptiness within which you can hear into the distance. So, not just a song thrush, but him and the responses of his neighbours, farther off. I enjoy making audio sketches of these spacious bird song soundscapes, where nearest-neighbour distance is just perceptible.

The way the drama plays here hinges on sudden shifts: long periods of equilibrium, from the perspective of any particular listening point, can suddenly shift at any moment, apparently by

chance occurrence though usually linked to events further off. A small party of redpolls arrives in your clump of birches singing and displaying for a few minutes, then moves on.

Once, the female eagle returned from one of her ranging flights to the west, when another eagle approached from south in the glen, beating hard. They met in an abrupt diving twist two thousand feet above, and just as quickly parted on their separate trajectories. A moment later a powerful, deep woosh fell from the sky, like the roar of a jet with its throat taken out. Sound delivers distance and deeper space, when disconnected from the visual moment.

Then it settles again to that rippling lacework of birdsong woven into the distance. The breeze plays, drops, and flows again, brushing the sparse ground cover of the glen floor, raising a soft breath from the myriad of birch leaves higher up, and drifting the murmur of the river across the flats of this spacious arena. The wind as conductor of a living symphony, dropping a bird phrase here, emphasising a distant waterfall there. Sometimes there seems to be a tonality to this shifting sonic kaleidoscope of air and water: is it in my mind or is it part of the consonance?

I have this stretch of the glen to myself all the early mornings and evenings; during the day, between about 10am and 6pm, a trickle of tourists passes through, mainly admiring the scenery from their cars or heading to the start of the climb of the nearby munro. Occasionally someone camps at my loch-shore base, usually on a weekend, or parks up near my forward observation point, to head out on a walk into the hills or over the big bog. So, morning and evening are focussed on the eagles and in between is up for grabs; often the day's breeze builds and maybe some showers pass through, coming in straight off the nearby Atlantic, but at times, even during the day, there's an idyllic calm settles on the scattered birchwoods, where just listening to the biophony becomes a simple, unadulterated pleasure.

So the days go. Friday has the magical quality I came for: a calm, cool dawn that evolves into a sunny day of light breezes and drifting, fluffy clouds playing across the sky and the patchwork of hills. Several times in the afternoon the female returns from ranging flights to glide slowly past the steep birchwood at no great height and no great distance from me. Stunning, in silence.

Saturday it rains all day and my world is enclosed in the soft percussive rhythms of raindrops on a car roof, hypnotic and absolute. But the cuckoos keep going in the smirr and clock the slow passage of time. Sunday the burns and waterfalls are roaring, but it's clear and I watch what passes. Monday the breeze plays from dawn, light to moderate, but enough to dominate my soundscape and make recording difficult. And that was the one time I heard her call during my five day session. Unrecorded.

So what is it - an exercise in abstraction? From the anthropic world, from my usual domestic-work-social life; from my comfort zone? I'm replacing my usual routines with a different set, that is totally focused on listening, hearing, and what it brings as an understanding of place in terms of its ecology. It happens to be remote; or is that a core quality essential to the undertaking and my interests.

Maybe I'm guilty of something similar to author Steven Poole's criticism of nature writing: 'Much of the pastoral literary genre has long been a solidly bourgeois form of escapism'. However I'm not denying the human within me, but seeking to extend it well out there, into the more-than-human; though I'd maybe rather conceive of it as extending my human compass.

There's plenty of time to wonder what the point is. Of sitting still for long periods just listening. To what? Not even walking, with its semblance of narrative progress. Writer Charles Bennett considers it *the music of what happens*. Absolutely subjective in its personal narrative or an object lesson? Of itself it's enough for me, here, particularly in May: musing on the soliloquy of landscape in this quiet corner of the country. Though this is slightly unhinged by having a specific, but elusive objective.

And there's plenty of time to question the sanity of this too - spending so much unpaid time on an attempt to record something that is unlikely to grab the imagination of most people: a golden eagle's voice doesn't quite match its impressive visual demeanour. The dismissive have described it as feeble. Sound is not even generally associated with the bird: according to great golden eagle enthusiast of the twentieth century Seton Gordon, 'the eagle is essentially a bird of silence.'

I can't really provide a logical answer. It's something to do with love of landscape; and even more so, a love of this particular landscape. What I do know, because I've heard it, is that when she calls out on her home crags, if the breeze is light and the burns not too full, it can be something thrilling, full of significance for me. And I want to be able to sketch that into my narratives of this place. In the meantime I'll continue to listen and record in the silence of eagles.

Geoff Sample 2017
geoff@wildsong.co.uk