

The Bar-tailed Godwit

The Bar-tailed Godwit's only claim
to anything approaching fame
is having such a curious name.
I often see them on the shore
with Oystercatchers by the score,
Curlew, Redshank and plenty more,
all waders probing in the mud
to find the food that warms their blood,
fresh from the tide's receding flood.
There flocks of thousands take their fill
of nature's bounteous overflow,
reached with that super-efficient bill.
It's strange that single Yellowshanks,
or Dowitchers, will earn the thanks
of twitcher-types, while serried ranks
of Bar-tailed godwits, Dunlin, Knot,
far more spectacular, do not,
because they are not rare. So what?
They may be numerous, but I
would rather feast my watcher's eye
where birds like Godwits occupy
the rocks and sandbanks at high tide.
They always look so dignified.
And yet I heard of one that died
an ignominious death: when found
it had a clam still clasped around
its beak; the wretched bird had drowned.
Rough justice, when you think of it,
yet what could be more apposite?
A clear case of "the biter bit".

I have for many years been seeking,
etymologically speaking,
the origins of that name. A week in
London, where I learnt to forage
through endless books as dull as porridge,
and "16th Cent. of unknown orig."
was all I found (Oxford Concise),
which is a little imprecise
but garnered at a Scotsman's price!
Perhaps they called the bird 'God-Wit'
to mean it was the perfect fit
for the niche that God had made for it:
long legs to stop it getting wet
when walking in the tide, and yet
a beak that's long enough to get
the food that other birds can't reach.

If ever you should want to teach
Biology, go to the beach
and watch the waders on the shore,
all perfectly adapted for
their food supply, no less, no more,
than each kind needs. They seem to fit
into a perfect pattern. It
must surely be just what God wit.