

Corncrakes

If ever you should chance to pass
through meadows lush with growing grass
and hear a rasping sound, “Crex, crex”,
don’t waste your time and crane your necks
or try to spot him for your list,
for he’s a known ventriloquist.
The corncrake’s master of the art
of calling from some other part
than that from which the sound appears
to emanate. Perhaps he fears
his croaking call will give away
his hiding place. By night or day
he throws his voice with practised skill,
especially further up the hill!
And many a time I’ve followed after,
only to hear his raucous laughter
echo behind as I go on
to where the call last sounded from.

Quite close to my Midlothian home
we used to trick one with a comb
pulled halfway from its leather sheath,
a finger nail across the teeth
with rapid strokes conveyed “Crex, crex”.
The simulated sound effects
were realistic, quite enough
to make the corncrake do his stuff
and answer back his double call.
You couldn’t do it now at all
in those same fields where once they shouted,
for in the ’30s they were routed,
when farmers started cutting hay
in their preferred, new-fangled way,
with rows of shiny metal teeth
which sliced the stems from underneath,
and laid the grass in swathes of green,
which may have made a pretty scene
(and for the farmer, every acre
a labour-saving profit-maker)
but left the corncrake in a fix.
It crushed his eggs. It chopped his chicks.
It showed no mercy either way
to birds which nest in growing hay.
It sliced through everything like butter,
the new mechanical hay-cutter.

So man as usual won the day
and all the corncrakes went away.
On farms where budgets were too small,

or where grass was not cut at all,
like Irish crofts beside the sea
or one or other Hebridee,
there this ventriloquistic bird
can even nowadays be heard.

In Ulster once, as day was breaking
I heard the old familiar craking,
but later noted with alarm
the cutter from the nearby farm
had mown the standing grass, which lay
in tidy swathes of new-mown hay.
But look: a movement caught my eye
and there beneath the bright blue sky,
and openly for all to see,
a Corncrake stood and looked at me
and ran, and stopped, and ran again,
its plumage features plain as plain,
A lovely bird, and there by choice,
not just a disembodied voice.

By choice? The horror struck me why
a corncrake, normally so shy,
should run about on open ground.
I walked across and quickly found
the cause of her distress. All six
of her delightful downy chicks
were there beneath the lying hay,
one dead, and two, so sad to see,
their legs chopped off below the knee.
The little stumps were twitching still:
those were the two I had to kill.

Three were alive and running fast
when once I’d freed them from the grass,
black animated balls of fluff.
I clapped; they froze just long enough
for me to catch them one by one,
before they thought to jump and run.
I popped them in my haversack
and set off quickly down the track
towards a field of standing grain,
where they could safely hide again.

And then it happened, suddenly:
the mother corncrake flew at me,
up from the grass along the edge,
beneath the sheltering hawthorn hedge,
she launched herself in mock attack,

and landing near, came running back,
right in the open, parallel
to where I walked. I saw her well,
her soft brown plumage, slender build,
as though she knew not all were killed.

And then I heard what brought her back:
the chicks were cheeping in the pack,
and as I carried them along
her instinct to protect was strong,
keeping her tied in our direction
by this invisible connection.
We reached the field. I let them go.
She ran to greet them, one last show
of courage from the corncrake hen.
One moment they were there, and then
into the corn, just as I feared,
the family simply disappeared.

So just remember when you next
hear the continuous “crex, crex, crex”
of corncrakes, there is so much more,
than meets the ear, of corncrake lore;
and they, like other birds we see,
are miracles of complexity.

Their Latin name, as you’d expect
of old Linnaeus, is “*Crex crex*”.
And when you hear them rasp their name
all night, don’t give the birds the blame.
It is their means, when out of sight
of keeping contact through the night,
or singing to their mates or young
the only song they’ve ever sung.
It’s just their way of trying to be a
skulking onomatopoeia.