

The Water Rail

A favourite bird of mine is one
that's seldom seen, in rain or sun,
yet lives in just the sort of place
frequented by the twitching race,
who add up species on a list
and hate to feel there's one they've missed.
Identification's not so hard
if you can see its flanks: they're barred.
Yet even when it's there, most fail
to spot the skulking water-rail.

It 'comes from haunts of coot and hern',
like Tennyson's poetic burn,
but seldom 'makes a sudden sally'
(its style is not exactly pally)
or 'sparkles' anywhere. Its aim?
To play a sort of hiding game.
And so its most enduring quirk
is finding somewhere damp to lurk.
Has any creature ever been
so often heard, so seldom seen?

I've seen seasoned birders pale
at mention of a water-rail,
that most elusive skulking bird
so seldom seen, so often heard.
The bird itself is hardly big
but sounds enormous, like a pig
in agony, with groans and squeals.
Could bagpipes playing Highland reels
make a more caterwauling noise
than fenland's disembodied voice?

Amongst the growing stems they go,
so slim of body, long of toe,
that they can slip through close-packed reeds,
or walk on floating water-weeds
where other birds would stick or sink.
It really makes you stop and think
how well adapted some birds are
to marsh or fen or willow carr.
Their furtive mode of life makes sense
where cover is so thick and dense.

So how can birds with skulking habits
ever be watched? Have you got rabbits
that take advantage of your lawn ?
The time to pick them off is dawn.
(The mid-day grass may be as green
but never a rabbit to be seen.)

So get established in a hide,
when all is dim and still outside.
With no one there at all but you.
That's your most likely chance to view
the long-toed creeper of the reed-bed.
Look! Over there, below that seed-head
just where the water laps the bank,
look at that pattern on his flank,
elaborate bars of black and white,
so strange in early morning light.
And now can you see it, stranger still
his diagnostic long red bill?

A fleeting view, with luck through glasses;
a glimpse, that's all. The moment passes
and once again you're looking at
some reeds, some water, and that's that.
Such transient moments in our minds
are all that's left of precious finds.
Yet, oh what pleasure to have seen
that damned elusive bird. That scene
provides you with a tale to tell,
the birder's Scarlet Pimpernel.

It's been one of my twitcher's gripes
that there are conscientious types
who will not tick off any bird
they have not seen, but only heard.
This is ridiculous, and fails
to make much sense with water rails.
Suppose you're sitting in that hide
and no bird shows? And then outside
all Hell breaks loose with grunts and groans,
miaows and harsh mind-boggling moans,
and deafening squeals and piercing yells,
'Repeated monosyllables'
as Collins Field Guide says. What then?
D'you put aside your list and pen,
and leave the water-rail unticked?
That seems ridiculously strict.
What other bird could it have been?
Yet how much better to have seen
That fleeting glimpse, which gave you too
The conscientious twitcher's view.
You could go home with such a tale.
What a triumph! What a rail!