

# Spring Again

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*The clocks leapt forward yesterday. We are in Melrose for a few days to mark our anniversary.*

*I am sitting in our hotel bedroom, in near darkness, tapping on my iPad, a cafetiere of coffee to hand.*

*Bliss.*

*I let my mind range free.*

It is spring in the Scottish Borders, two hours before dawn.

The creatures of the night are still busy. Hunting. Feeding. Hiding.

Lambs are asleep beside their mothers, hefted in nooks and crannies. Those sprayed with woad blue are like somnambulant Pictish Warriors. Later, after a morning feed from mum, they will gambol, full of the joys of life while their mothers stick to the endless round of cropping vegetation, building themselves up for feeding times ahead.

The first rays of sunrise creep into the sky.

The owls are making their final rounds. Mice and shrews beware.

On the treetops, bold and strident shiny blackbirds sing out competing love songs to their duller brown-feathered mates sitting on nests of newly hatched chicks. The dawn chorus is building. Great Tits are sawing out their repeated one-note song alongside the long quieter churr of their Blue Tit cousins.

Colonies of moles on the golf course have already heaved upwards their brown turrets of soft crumbly earth, debris excavated during the quest to extend their network of underground tunnels, long dark miner's galleries where blind and unsuspecting worms and beetles drop in to provide food for these tiny but voracious carnivores.

Booming in the distance is a marauding cuckoo newly arrived from Africa.

Still distant in the north of Spain but moving nearer every day, individual swallows and swifts are feeding high in the morning skies. In an hour or so, oriented by the sun and sensing gravitational guidelines from the Earth below, these tiny powerhouses will set out in loose flocks on the next leg of their journey north to nest and rear this year's Border broods.

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Also from Africa, our ospreys are already here. They have progressed in a more erratic, desultory manner. Each bird travels alone, visiting favourite feeding lakes and lochs and loughs, using their own individual memory maps, less driven than other visitors from the south, coming north to enjoy the extended hunting hours and cool, dampness many of us humans fly south to avoid.

As the sun climbs higher with each passing day, the Earth warms.

Fully formed insects dormant during winter months wriggle back to life.

Billions of tiny midges and their kin dance in the speckled shade of trees.

Tiny creatures wiggle and gyrate mindlessly in ponds, providing food for larger creatures like fishes and full grown insects and their larvae, part of an intricate subsurface food chain. Some of these lurking creatures may break free and fly away while others linger on the surface waiting to mate, tiny prey to be sipped in hundreds of thousands by hungry trout, brown, rainbow and blue.

As the day progresses from dawn, some fish become more active while others, now replete, lurk in deeper waters, heads tipped downwards, half asleep, easy prey for otters.

Last year's spawn is now a grouped in shoals of fingerlings such as perch fry which twitch, dart and explode to the surface before scattering into the reeds, chased by larger fish. Yet another food chain dependent, ultimately, on the smallest aquatic creatures.

In the afternoon, the clouds gather and the rain begins, warm, soft and gentle at first then building gradually to an icy cold downpour, clearing the skies of dust and insects, sending this heavenly bounty back to the land, rivers and water catchments, refreshing them, stimulating new life.

Near the lambs, the rabbit kits are scampering, stopping, feeding on favourite flowers and the leaves from the carpet of new growth shooting upwards. A buzzard swoops, scattering them in a blind panic. Kits who miss their home tunnels become interlopers to be fended off, rejected, driven back to quiver near entrances, watching, waiting for the all clear to allow them to find their family group.

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The first of the skylarks arrive at their breeding grounds quietly, males first, seeking to establish their breeding and nesting territories. Later, after the females arrive, both males and females start to sing their ground-based songs. It might be a surprise to learn that skylarks are often the first to initiate the dawn chorus and that these seemingly gentle choristers will ferociously defend their territories with strident songs, sometimes physically attacking rivals.

Only later when they have an established nest scrape with eggs or chicks will the males soar up, sometimes as high as 300 metres, to pour out their long and complicated arias. Each individual bird has its own repertoire with most songs lasting two or three minutes and some as long as thirty.

In the hedgerows, chaffinches, thrushes, robins, sparrows and linnets bicker and shout defiantly or sit hidden, singing quietly. In dense shrubby field corners, there are tribes of wrens, flitting busily from one hiding place to another all the while scolding each other noisily. Later, resting quietly they will tweetle their sad, high-pitched dirges.

On the kerbside near the loop road the kestrel, a predominantly daytime hunter, perches and hovers using its sharp eyes to spot beetles from as far away as fifty metres, viewing the terrain below in ultraviolet to spot the urine trails of mammals before dropping like a stone to grasp their prey with sharp tiny talons and a razor beak.

And there across the hedge, the farmer's son drives his high-tech tractor with its GPS guided mission while he listens to *Spotify*-ed K-Pop music on Bluetooth headphones and dreams of escaping to live in Glasgow or Edinburgh - '*where it's at*'.

In the evening gloom, when the roar of the tractor is gone and the shadows fall, the rhythms of the bright day meld into those of a short dusk, the tawny owls begin their first rounds, working their territories, following long established hunting trails, often perching to listen, then swooping to kill.

As darkness descends, sitting quietly beside their naturalist guide, a small group of adults and older children wait by the badgers' sett. They are not disappointed. Supervised by the sows, the new-born cubs stick close to home, some play fighting and chasing while some practice their foraging skills, scraping and digging for worms, beetles and slugs.

Using their acute sense of smell to guide them, older boars and sows move off alone to search out pastures new. Although badgers live mainly on earthworms, grubs and beetles they are omnivores and will eat most things, including tubers, nuts and fruit, often competing with hedgehogs at garden feeding stations.

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On the far side of the wide burbling river, the short eared owl is flapping lazily, quartering the rough ground, using acute asymmetrical hearing to pinpoint prey. Later, replete, she will return to her nest high in an ancient beech and rest until dawn when she will repeat her round, quartering, listening, swooping then plunging down to garner food for her chicks.

*The night hours pass into the dawn of a new day and the cycle of this resurgent Spring will begin again as nature moves relentlessly forward in renewal - providing a reminder for humans that we too should strive to live optimistically, making the most of each day.*