

## A thousand acres of sky by Andy Roberts

A thin line in the distant winter sky catches my eye, like a simple pen stroke, but one which sets my pulse racing and forces me to look again. I watch intently as the line wavers, breaks, reforms and slowly edges forward, following the meandering course of the river below. Closer now, close enough to see that the line is not actually whole at all but formed from individual dots, undulating in successive order like the tail of child's kite in a lazy breeze. More come into view following the same course, drawn by the same inclination and to the same place.

I count myself fortunate as I've enjoyed watching this scene play out on many a morning and I know exactly what they are: I'm witnessing the unmistakable signature of flighting geese. I say exactly, but that's not quite true because as yet I do not know what species of geese they are. Probably Greylag, more likely Pinkfeet, possibly the rare Greenland White-fronted geese which have a foothold in this part of southern Scotland. Then a familiar sound, initially so faint that I am forced to listen closely, impatiently waiting for another outburst of chattering before I can know for sure. There it is again, like music in the sky, the wonderfully evocative calling of wild geese. They are indeed Pinkfeet and now my heart is racing a little quicker too!

The sight and sound of geese flighting overhead, en-masse, against the first blush of sunrise is simply awe-inspiring. Their numbers can be vast, their calling so fantastically boisterous that the observer is left overwhelmed yet enriched by the encounter. I would question anyone who is not moved by the experience. Perhaps my enthusiasm is greater than most, particularly city folk entangled in their busy lives. Surrounded by so many man-made distractions, their tendency is to look down rather than up, consequently they miss so much! But it remains one of nature's greatest spectacles; evocative and primitive, with the power to stir one's soul.

My interest in wild geese and wildfowling - the pursuit of wildfowl with a shotgun - has been a blessed gift passed down from my father in my teenage years. My diaries are full of wildfowling recollections, which even now 35 years on, continue to flood their pages and show no sign of ebbing away. Strangely, my earliest recollections of wildfowling don't include any wildfowl at all. As a child I became aware that every winter my father would disappear, generally for a week each January. Perhaps I was told where and why he'd gone, perhaps I took no notice and carried on with more serious matters, such as playing tiddly winks. But I would wake the following Sunday morning, excitedly look out of my bedroom window and see his car parked on the drive, invariably covered from bonnet to boot in mud. This perhaps doesn't sound much, but in our urban world where everything was neat, tidy and clean, it caused my young mind to race with questions... what sort of adventure had this been and more importantly, when could I go too?

As my interest in wildfowling grew, so did my thirst for knowledge and I began to avidly read and learn from the books by esteemed countrymen and naturalists such as Denys Watkins Pitchford, Peter Scott, Arthur Cadman, Ian Niall and Douglas McDougall. Their stories of days and nights in remote wild places, lying in wait for the toing and froing of wild ducks and

geese, became all absorbing. The thrill of the chase sparked my imagination to the point where I thought of little else. Paintings helped fuel the blazing fire and my bedroom wall was soon decorated with scenes captured on canvas of lonely landscapes; desolate estuaries and flooded marshes beneath broad wind-swept skies, all adorned with the patterns of flighting wildfowl.

My first wildfowling foray eventually unfolded on our local estuary at Crabley Creek on the north shore of the Humber. This marsh had featured regularly in my father's own diary which I had read many times and I can still draw on deeply ingrained memories of that morning. Hares bounding along frost dusted verges, caught in searching headlights; hushed talk in the dim orange glow of the level crossing where we parked; a long slippery walk in the half-light along the sea wall; the sharp cold smell of salt water; packs of chattering mallard flighting back to the river under the stars; and the heart thumping sight of a low skein of geese heading towards us and which sent us scrambling for cover.

I had entered an unfamiliar world, one dominated by marsh grass, reeds, asters, thick gloopy mud, brown brackish water, a myriad of waders, wildfowl and a thousand acres of sky. To most folk the scene would be desolate, uninspiring, uncomfortable and a place to avoid. I though the complete opposite; this was a place for adventure and drama, a place which contrasted beautifully from the safeness of everyday life and put me in touch with nature, but on nature's terms. More importantly, it gave me the opportunity to be part of her story, one which is still being written today.