



Easter Birds Eggs Information



Barn Owl

Today the barn owl, with heart shaped face, is a much loved bird. This is no doubt partly because it is now so rare. There are just over 5000 pairs in Britain, less than half the number in England and Wales alone during the 1930s.

The decline in numbers over the past fifty years is a result of the degradation of once prey-rich habitats in the face of intensive agricultural practices. But owls in general have also suffered in the past from persecution because they were viewed as ominous birds. They were solitary creatures of the darkness and this made them frightening in many people's eyes.

This attitude is reflected in the Bible. Psalm 102, for example, is the passionate prayer of a man who feels utterly cut off from both humanity and God:

I am like a desert owl,
like an owl among the ruins.

I lie awake; I have become
like a bird alone on a roof.'
(vv.6-7)

People have overcome their prejudice and learned to love owls. They turn out to be hauntingly beautiful after all! A glimpse at night of a barn owl taking off from a fence post is more likely to be thought of as a blessing than a threat. Recognising the beauty of owls may also mark the beginning of a recovery of owl numbers. It is unclear at the moment how things will turn out, but the provision of nest boxes in some areas may be reflected in a slight increase in numbers. Maybe, in the future, owls may not be as solitary as they are at present.



IMAGE: The picture shows a drawing of a barn owl and a barn owl's egg. The size of the egg is shown compared to a 20 pence piece but the drawing of the bird is not to scale.



Easter Birds Eggs Information



Blackbird

Male blackbirds live up to their name but, females are brown. The bright yellow beak and eye make a dramatic contrast with the black feathers of the adult male bird. The beautiful song of the blackbird is often heard in urban areas and transforms places that would otherwise be dull and dreary. The blackbird is one of the commonest UK birds, with a recent estimate of 4,700,000 pairs. However, there may have been about a 33 per cent decline over the last 25 years.

The story of St Kevin and blackbird has become well known in recent years, partly because Seamus Heaney has written a poem about the incident in which a blackbird landed on one of the saint's hands while he was praying and built a nest – it even laid a clutch of eggs. Being kind and thoughtful St Kevin kept his arm outstretched until the eggs had hatched and the birds had flown the nest. The story is very similar to that of St Malo and wren which is retold elsewhere in this calendar

The saints and monks of the early Irish church seem to have been fond of this bird. One monk, as he was laboriously copying out a grammar book, broke off to write a poem of his own:

A hedge of trees surrounds me,
A blackbird sings to me –
Praise which I will not hide!
Above my book, lined parchment,
The trilling of the birds sings to me!



IMAGE: The picture shows a drawing of a blackbird and a blackbird's egg. The size of the egg is shown compared to a 20 pence piece but the drawing of the bird is not to scale.



Easter Birds Eggs Information



Blue Tit

Blue tits must be one of the most popular birds in Britain. They can be found in most gardens, flock around bird tables and regularly nest in bird-boxes. Their mix of blue, yellow, white and green feathers and their perky behaviour endear them to us.

Yet there is a nervousness to them. They are wary of unseen threats. As they feed they are constantly looking behind their backs and will take to the air at any sudden movement. At times there is a desperation to their feeding and they can be aggressive towards others who try to join them on the bird-feeder. There's a reason why two old country names for the blue tit were 'Billy Biter' and 'Tom Bite-thumb'!

If hawks are beautiful killers, then the blue tit is a beautiful victim. They have to be constantly on the alert, because if they don't then they won't last long. It's ease to sentimentalise pretty animals and one reason for the popularity of neo-paganism may be a desire to find a source of harmony where it doesn't exist. In many ways Charles Darwin's steely-eyed vision of nature complements the traditional Christian conception – fascinating, beautiful, but no paradise.



IMAGE: The picture shows a drawing of a blue tit and a blue tit's egg. The size of the egg is shown compared to a 20 pence piece but the drawing of the bird is not to scale.



Easter Birds Eggs Information



Bullfinch

Both sexes have a stout black bill, black wings, nape, crown and chin, and a white rump. The male, however, is unmistakable with his bright pinkish-red breast, belly and cheeks, and bright white rump. The female, by way of contrast, has a duller brown back and pinkish-fawn underparts. The scientific name of this bird, *Pyrrhula*, comes from the Greek 'purros' or flame-coloured. Bullfinch numbers have dropped dramatically in recent years.

The engravings that are used on each page of this calendar are by Thomas Bewick (1753-1828). Bewick's love of birds is evident in his work and his book from which they are taken - *The History of British Birds* (1797-1804) - is considered a key text of British ornithology. His importance to the study of birds is reflected in the fact that shortly after his death he was commemorated by the naming of a species of swan, Bewick's Swan. Bewick's Wren also took his name. His love for birds was kindled by an encounter with a bullfinch. He recalled the incident in his memoirs, which he wrote shortly before his death. He begins by describing how, as a child, he used to try and catch birds:

I had no doubt knocked many down with stones before, but they had escaped being taken – This time however, the little victim dropped from the tree and I picked it up, - struck with its beauty, I instantly ran into the House with it – it was alive & looked me so piteously in the face, and as I thought (could it have spoken) it would have asked me, why I had taken away its life. – I felt greatly hurt, at what I had done & did not quit it all the afternoon – I turned it over & over, admiring its plumage – its feet its Bill & every part of it – It was a Bullfinch – I did not know its name but was told it was a 'Little Matthew Martin' – this was the last bird I killed, but many indeed have been killed since on my Account.

The last sentence refers to the fact that every bird he engraved was drawn from specimens that had been deliberately shot and then sent to him. In those days there were no cameras and binoculars – killing the bird was the only way to be able to get a good look at it. Bewick recognised the terrible irony that his curiosity – his love – for birds was bound up with their destruction. An emblem, perhaps, of the way so much human curiosity – and its child, science – has ambiguous consequences.



IMAGE: The picture shows a drawing of a bullfinch and a bullfinch egg. The size of the egg is shown compared to a 20 pence piece but the drawing of the bird is not to scale.



Easter Birds Eggs Information



Bustard

The Great Bustard (*Otis tarda*) lays huge eggs. An adult male can reach 1.1 metres tall! Great Bustards live in open grasslands. Most of the time they spend on the ground, but they can fly and some migrate hundreds of miles. In fact, the great bustard is the largest flying bird in the world - some males weigh over 20 kilograms.

Unfortunately, you are not likely to see one in the British Isles. The last native bird was killed in about 1840. It is thought that the destruction of its habitat was the main cause of the extinction of the British race. However, towards the end, when the birds were scarce, egg collectors and other naturalists who wanted their own stuffed specimen, contributed to its destruction.

The memory of this spectacular bird lived on. For example, the birds feature on the coats-of-arms of both Wiltshire and Cambridgeshire.

But is it all over for the great bustard in Britain? Good news! The UK is obliged under EU legislation (Habitats Directive 1992) to reintroduce species where it is considered feasible. In 2004, 27 young great bustards arrived from Saratov in Russia and were released at a prepared site on Salisbury Plain, followed by a further 32 in 2005. So far things seem to be going well.

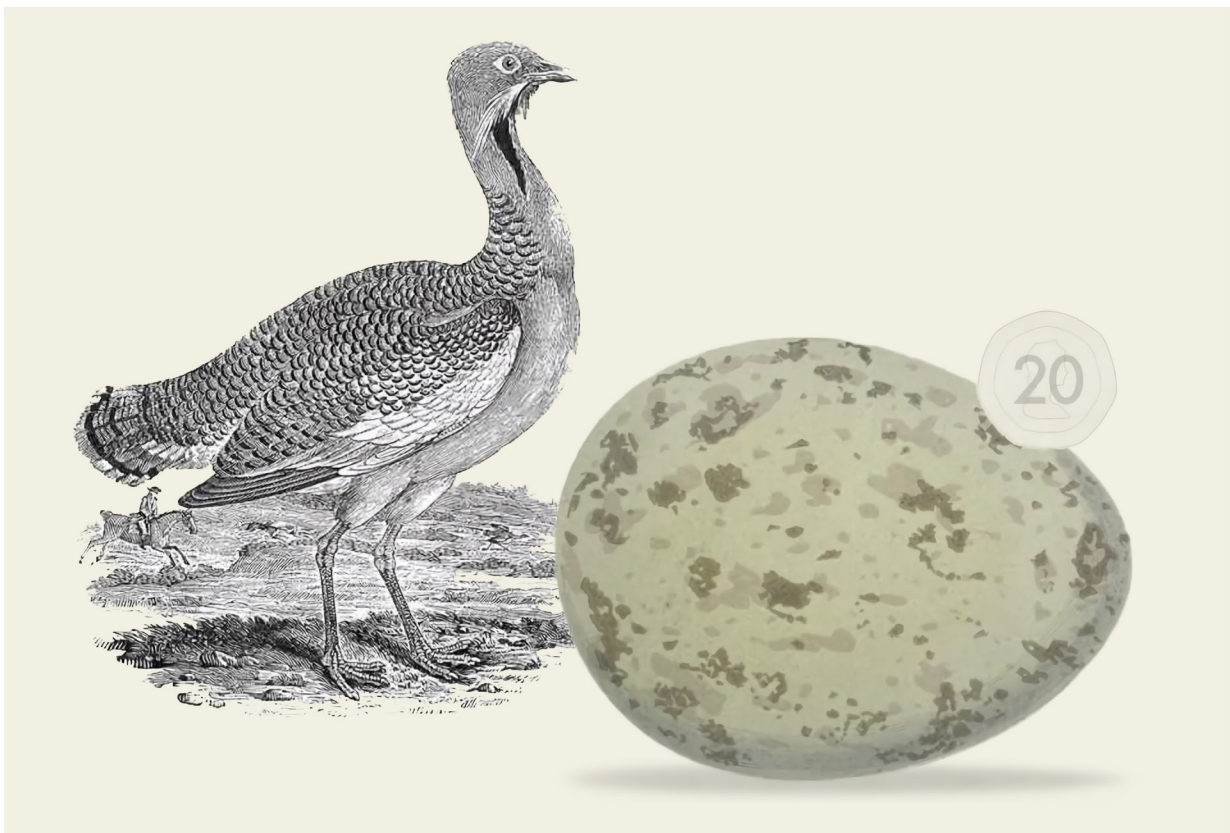


IMAGE: The picture shows a drawing of a great bustard and a great bustard's egg. The size of the egg is shown compared to a 20 pence piece but the drawing of the bird is not to scale.



Easter Birds Eggs Information



Chaffinch

For many people this is a familiar and attractive garden bird. The male with his smart blue-grey and rusty-pink plumage is easily identified. The chaffinch is the UK's second commonest breeding bird (the wren is the commonest).

You'll usually hear chaffinches before you see them. Males typically sing two or three different song types, and there are regional dialects too. Up until the nineteenth century chaffinch singing contests were a regular feature of working class life in Britain. Birds with names like 'Kingsland Roarer' and 'Shoreditch Bobby' were pitted against each other in the back room of pubs. Each time they uttered their call a chalk mark was made and at the end of the allotted time the number of marks was totted up and the bird with the most won the prize. Sometimes birds were blinded in the belief that it made them better singers. Chaffinch singing contests are still held in Belgium (called Vinken-zetting, from the Dutch for finch-sitting), although birds are no longer ever blinded. In England trapping finches was outlawed in 1896.

Thomas Hardy, like many others, was outraged by the cruelty than humans practised on this bird in the belief that it would produce beautiful song. He wrote an impassioned poem, 'The Blinded Bird', which is filled with biblical language and in which the chaffinch's sufferings are likened to those of Christ:

Resenting not such wrong,
Thy grievous pain forgot,
Eternal dark thy lot,
Groping thy whole life long;
After that stab of fire;
Enjailed in pitiless wire;
Resenting not such wrong!

Who hath charity? This bird.
Who suffereth long and is kind,
Is not provoked, though blind
And alive ensepulchred?
Who hopeth, endureth all things?
Who thinketh no evil, but sings?
Who is divine? This bird.



IMAGE: The picture shows a drawing of a chaffinch and a chaffinch's egg. The size of the egg is shown compared to a 20 pence piece but the drawing of the bird is not to scale.



Easter Birds Eggs Information



Goldfinch

The goldfinch is a beautiful bird with a bright red face and a yellow wing patch. Their Latin name is *Carduelis carduelis*, which derives from the Latin word of thistle, *carduus*). The goldfinch gets this name because its long fine beaks allows it to extract otherwise inaccessible seeds from thistles and teasels.

Because of this association with prickly thistles – and because of its red plumage – the goldfinch became associated with Christ and the crucifixion. The goldfinch is said to appear in more than 500 Medieval and Renaissance paintings, many of them depicting Mary with the infant Jesus.

One of the most famous is Raphael's *Madonna del Cardellino* (The Madonna of the Goldfinch) which was painted in 1507. At first sight it seems as if Jesus and his cousin, John the Baptist, are innocently playing with the beautiful bird. In fact, they are innocently playing, but this particular bird has been included to indicate to the viewer that things will be different in the future.



Madonna del Cardellino, Raphael (1507)



IMAGE: The picture shows a drawing of a goldfinch and a goldfinch egg. The size of the egg is shown compared to a 20 pence piece but the drawing of the bird is not to scale.



Easter Birds Eggs Information



Kestrel

The kestrel is the most familiar bird of prey with its pointed wings and long tail, hovering beside a roadside verge. They have adapted readily to man-made environments and can survive right in the centre of cities. All the same, kestrels have been recently declining as a result of habitat degradation due to continuing intensive management of farmland and the species is included on the RSPBs Amber List.

Birds of prey are reminder that we mustn't get too sentimental about birds – they are beautiful killers. In fact, many other birds will kill the young of other species given half a chance. As Charles Darwin underlined, the natural world is the place where only the fittest survive – and then only briefly.

The clergyman-poet Andrew Young (1885-1971) wrote a poignant poem, *Killed by a Hawk*, about finding the body of a sick hawk, which had been killed another hawk:

I stir them with my stick
These trembling feathers left behind

To show a hawk was sick,
No more to fly except on the loose wind.

(Extract)



IMAGE: The picture shows a drawing of a kestrel and a kestrel's egg. The size of the egg is shown compared to a 20 pence piece but the drawing of the bird is not to scale.



Easter Birds Eggs Information



Lapwing

Lapwings are handsome birds - black and white, with a splendid crest. They are well-known for their habit of trying to draw people and other potential predators away from their nest by simulating having a broken wing. They have many local names, reflecting the affection with which they are held by many – Pee Wit, Pie Wipe, Toppypup, Peasiewheep and so on.

Yet in British folklore they have a dark reputation. One legend says they flew over the cross crying ‘Pine Him! Pine Him!’ (Make him suffer) and were cursed for this. In Scotland their call is said to have betrayed persecuted Covenanters, hiding out on the moors. They are also associated with the Seven Whistlers (also called the Gabble Ratchet and Gabriel Hounds) – the pack of disturbed souls, in the form of hounds or birds, which can sometimes be heard flying wildly through the sky at night. Chaucer writes of the ‘false lapwing, ful of trecherye’ and Caxton describes it as a ‘foul and villainous bird’.

Poor lapwing! Maybe all of these traditions should be ditched. An alternative note is struck by John Heath-Stubbs:

The lapwing is a type of guile – that guile
Is elemental, sacrificial love.
She tumbles across the field, trailing
A simulated broken wing, to draw you off
From the hollow scrape or dried out cattle-footprint
Where lie the blotched and pear-shaped eggs ...

After all sacrificial love is what Easter is all about.



IMAGE: The picture shows a drawing of a lapwing and a lapwing's egg. The size of the egg is shown compared to a 20 pence piece but the drawing of the bird is not to scale.



Easter Birds Eggs Information



Magpie

Some people seem to have it in for magpies, blaming it for persecuting other song birds. Studies have shown that the increase in magpie numbers has nothing to do with the decline of some other species, but this hasn't stopped some people trapping and killing them.

Looked at objectively magpies are attractive black and white birds, with a purplish-blue iridescent sheen to the wing feathers and a green gloss to the tail. One folk-tale explains the magpie's black-and-white plumage with the story that after the crucifixion the magpie was the only bird to refuse to dress in full black mourning and was, therefore, condemned to wear 'half-mourning' (black and white) for ever afterwards. This refusal was probably not because it was a bad bird by nature, but because it is a famously mischievous creature; a born contrarian; a scallywag. Another tale, for example, says it was the only bird not to go into Noah's ark – it preferred to sit outside on the roof chattering.

The most famous popular naturalist of the nineteenth century, the eccentric clergyman J.G. Wood, had a pet magpie and he loved this aspect of its character. He ran a school in which all the boys were encouraged to keep pet snakes and hang upside down from the top of trees. Mag, the pet magpie, was loved by both master and pupils:

"He is a great plague to the household department, for he makes it a point of honour to undo whatever they have just been arranging. For example, one of the servants had been employing herself in beating the dust out of a doormat, and when she had completed her task replaced the mat. But Mag had been looking on, and instantly set to work. He hopped off into the yard, and returned with a beakful of dust, which he threw down on the mat ... "

(My Feathered Friends, p.141)

J. G. Wood and his pupils loved this anarchic impudence. As far as we know, Jesus didn't have anything to say about magpies, yet it's hard to believe he wouldn't have enjoyed it too. After all, just when the authorities thought they'd got the situation tidied up by getting rid of Jesus, he goes and spoils their plans by not staying dead.



IMAGE: The picture shows a drawing of a magpie and a magpie's egg. The size of the egg is shown compared to a 20 pence piece but the drawing of the bird is not to scale.



Easter Birds Eggs Information



Mallard

Everyone knows the mallard - the males with their beautiful dark green head and a yellow bill, the females a dull brown with an orange bill. They can be found on nearly every river and pond in Britain. Here's a story from the Hebrides that gives the common-or-garden mallard a role that it normally doesn't have – the star!

It's story that explain why ducks have webbed feet and hens don't. According to Hebridean tradition hens originally had webbed feet and were able to swim. However, once, when Jesus was visiting the Hebrides, some evil men tried to catch and kill him. A good crofter hid him under a pile of corn. Unfortunately, the greedy hens started to scatter and eat the grain, exposing the hidden Jesus. The ducks, on the other hand, tried to press the grain down with their feet to hide him. Because of this Jesus was able escape. Ever since then the hen has been 'sever-toed', confined to land and is scared of thunder (thinking it the voice of God). While the mallard retained its webbed feet and was given three joys – to be able to live on land, in the air and in water – and has no fear of thunder.

There are quite a few tales from the Western Isles which tell of Jesus living in Scotland – they are much loved by conspiracy theorists of the Dan Browne type! The story of the oystercatcher and Jesus, also to be found in this calendar, is another one. Whatever their origins, the tales are about making a decision to stand with Jesus. The mallard was brave! When it came to the crunch, the Bible tells us, not even Jesus' closest disciples stayed with him when they came to arrest him. Would we have behaved differently?

Perhaps the hen was chosen as the villain in this story because, in the Bible, it is the calling of the cockerel that brings home to Peter his betrayal of Christ?



IMAGE: The picture shows a drawing of a mallard and a mallard's egg. The size of the egg is shown compared to a 20 pence piece but the drawing of the bird is not to scale.



Nightingale

Nightingales are slightly larger than robins, with rather plain brown appearance. You would be lucky to see one. They visit the UK only in the summer, having wintered in Africa. Once they get here they like nothing better than hiding in the middle of an impenetrable bush or thicket. They nest in dense undergrowth and scrub that has thick foliage. They are not found in Scotland or Wales and England is right on the edge of their range.

Rather than watching them, most people are content to stand and listen to them because what makes them famous, of course, is their beautiful song. Their name comes from the Anglo-Saxon and means 'night singer'. Roman society, too, prized them for their song. Pliny records that a bird with a good voice could sell for the price of a slave.

The nightingale's reputation for being elusive and dark-loving makes it a suitable emblem for one of the more elusive and mysterious characters in the Jesus story: Nicodemus. John tells us that he was a member of the Jewish ruling council and that he came to talk with Jesus at night (John 3. 1-21). The implication is that he was attracted to the teaching of Jesus, but that he had too much to lose if he was seen in his company.

Later, after Jesus' death he comes to collect the body: 'Later, Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. Now Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he feared the Jews. With Pilate's permission, he came and took the body away. He was accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night. Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds. Taking Jesus' body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen.' (John 19.38-40)

What do you make of Nicodemus? Was he just a coward? Or do you sympathise with his all-too-familiar nervousness and lack of resolution? It might have been late, but maybe, after all, he did stand up and nail his colours to the mast.



IMAGE: The picture shows a drawing of a nightingale and a nightingale's egg. The size of the egg is shown compared to a 20 pence piece but the drawing of the bird is not to scale.



Oystercatcher

The oystercatcher is a bird of the seashore - a large, stocky, black and white wading bird. It has a long, orange-red bill and reddish-pink legs. It uses its long beak to pick out and eat cockles (rather than oysters!). This means that the population is vulnerable if cockle beds are overexploited.

Just a few months ago – on the day after Christmas day, in fact – the poet John Heath-Stubbs died. He was blind for most of his life, although he believed his progressive blindness stimulated his imagination. And despite his blindness he loved birds and wrote many poems about them. One of these is about the oystercatcher and celebrates a Scotch folktale, which tells how an oystercatcher helped Jesus:

They say in the Highlands and the Western Isles –
This tale was made by men who knew
What being harried and pursued could mean – that Jesus,
Fleeing the malice of his enemies,
Went down to the wild shore, to find a cave to hide in.
But the sea-pies, flying
About the limpet-covered reef, with clear bright calls,
Took pity on him there, and in their scarlet beaks
Brought kelp and tangle to cover him completely.
The ruthless foe went by. And for that season
His cup of suffering passed.
Therefore the oystercatcher
Is of good fortune and well seen of men,
Running at the tide's edge
Upon the cockle and the mussel banks.

There's nothing in the Bible, of course, about Jesus making a trip to Scotland, let alone being hid under a pile of seaweed by oystercatchers! It is also said that after the pursuers had gone Christ emerged from the seaweed and gave the birds a white cross to wear for their services. In the Gaelic language the oystercatcher is known as gille-bride, the page or servant of St Bride, a patron saint of birds.



IMAGE: The picture shows a drawing of an oyster catcher and an oyster catcher's egg. The size of the egg is shown compared to a 20 pence piece but the drawing of the bird is not to scale.



Easter Birds Eggs Information



Raven

The raven is massive, bigger than a buzzard. It is all black with a large bill, and long wings. In flight, it shows a diamond-shaped tail. In the past this dramatic bird was much persecuted by gamekeepers, but it is now protected and its numbers have stabilised.

The raven has mixed reputation in Bible. Ravens feed Elisha when he is hiding from persecution in the mountains (1 Kings 17). On the other hand, as in many cultures, the raven's taste for carrion gives it something of a sinister reputation. 'The eye that mocks a father, that scorns obedience to a mother, will be pecked out by the ravens of the valley ...' (Proverbs 30:17) You have been warned!

In old Norse culture the Raven was associated with Odin and battle. The flag of many a Viking raiding party was the famous black raven banner. Odin had two ravens, Hugin and Munin, who flew around the world bringing back tidings to their master. This is strangely similar to the other famous appearance of a raven in the Bible – its use by Noah to scout out the situation after the flood started to recede: 'After forty days Noah opened the window he had made in the ark and sent out a raven, and it kept flying back and forth until the water had dried up from the earth' (Genesis 8. 6-7).

It's the dove, of course, not the raven, who returns with a sprig of olive. It's the dove that has become the symbol of peace, not the raven. Despite all the destruction there doesn't seem to be any carrion for the raven! The world has been renewed and God makes a covenant of peace with mankind and all creatures:

And for your lifeblood I will surely demand an accounting. I will demand an accounting from every animal. And from each man, too, I will demand an accounting for the life of his fellow man.

Whoever sheds the blood of man,
by man shall his blood be shed;
for in the image of God
has God made man. (Genesis 8. 5-6)

The peace doesn't last long. Soon
the ravens can be seen circling.



IMAGE: The picture shows a drawing of a raven and a raven's egg. The size of the egg is shown compared to a 20 pence piece but the drawing of the bird is not to scale.



Easter Birds Eggs Information



Skylark

The skylark is, like its egg, a rather dull-looking thing, being mainly brown above and paler below. Larks spend a lot of time on the ground looking for food and they have sturdy legs. They make their nest on the earth too, disguised by the surrounding grass.

In the UK skylark numbers have declined over the last 30 years. There are now only 10% of the numbers that were present in the 1970s. The RSPB have shown that this massive decline is mainly due to changes in farming practices and only partly due to pesticides.

Despite its dependence on the earth most people think of the lark as a bird of the dawn and the air. They are renowned for the song of the male birds, which is delivered in hovering flight from heights of 50 to 100 meters, when a bird appears to be just a dot in the sky. In English literature they are frequently likened to angels:

‘Mighty angel’ (Blake)

‘Oh singing lark,
That singest like an angel in the clouds!’ (Coleridge)

‘Ethereal minstrel’ (Wordsworth)

It seems an appropriate bird for the morning of the resurrection. Who knows ... Jesus could have heard one, as the species is found in the Holy Land. Sadly, with an appalling lack of irony, one of the latest surveillance drones used by the Israeli Army is called a Skylark. They were used in last year’s invasion of Lebanon.



IMAGE: The picture shows a drawing of a skylark and a skylark’s egg. The size of the egg is shown compared to a 20 pence piece but the drawing of the bird is not to scale.



Easter Birds Eggs Information



Sparrow

The sparrow is a familiar bird, though few people seem to acknowledge its beauty. Looked at closely the brown, grey and white feathers of this urban bird are very striking. Sadly, these familiar birds are now struggling to survive in the UK along with many other once common birds. They are declining in both gardens and the wider countryside. Between 1977 and 2000, house sparrow numbers in the UK declined by 65%.

All of the pictures of eggs in this calendar are taken from a nineteenth century book, *Nests & Eggs of Familiar Birds*, by H.G. Adams. It's the kind of book that both delighted in birds and the same time inadvertently encouraged people to contribute to species decline by taking eggs.

Despite giving instructions on how to raid nests and collect eggs Mr Adams begins his book with a story 'to which our young readers are earnestly requested to pay special attention'. The story concerns a young boy who has watched sparrows carrying nesting material under the eaves of a cottage. The boy then raids the nest, carrying it off. When he looks closely, though, he finds that the sparrows had made their nest partly out of pages torn from a discarded hymn book. One of the fragments of paper turns out to contain pious verses written by Isaac Watts:

Why should I deprive my neighbour
Of his goods against his will?

Hands were made for honest labour;
Not to plunder or to steal.

The young boy is suitably struck by guilt!



IMAGE: The picture shows a drawing of a sparrow and a sparrow's egg. The size of the egg is shown compared to a 20 pence piece but the drawing of the bird is not to scale.



Easter Birds Eggs Information



Wren

This is the commonest and most widespread bird in the British Isles. Not the sparrow or the starling, the pigeon or the seagull – but the wren! It lives in every kind of environment – wherever there are nooks and crannies for it to make a nest. Its Latin name - *Troglodytes troglodytes* – means ‘cave dweller’.

Wrens, like robins, are famous for making their nests in all sorts of weird and wonderful places. Known nest sites include the base of an old magpie’s nest currently used by kestrels; the lower branches of cabbage and brocolli plants; trousers and jackets on washing lines; the running board of a lorry which drove twice a week from Kent to Covent garden; inside a human skull ...

This habit of making a nest anywhere might lie behind the story of St Malo and the wren. Malo was born in Wales in the sixth century and may have been a companion of St Brendan on his voyages. His life story was written down long after his death and includes this tale:

‘He was a follower of Paul the Apostle, whose own hands supplied his wants if aught were lacking. When he had leisure from his task of preaching the Gospel, he kept himself by the work of his hands. One day he was busy with the brethren in the vineyard, pruning the vines, and for better speed in his work took off his cloak and laid it out of sight. When his work was done and he came to take his cloak, he found that the small bird which common folk call a wren had laid an egg on it. Knowing that God’s care is not far from the birds, since not one of them falls on the ground without the Father, he let his cloak lie there, till the eggs were hatched and the wren brought out her brood. And this was the marvel, that all the time that cloak lay there, there fell no rain upon it. And whoever came to hear of it glorified the power of God and praised God’s own pity in man.’



IMAGE: The picture shows a drawing of a wren and a wren’s egg. The size of the egg is shown compared to a 20 pence piece but the drawing of the bird is not to scale.



Yellowhammer

The male yellowhammer is an unmistakable bird with a bright yellow head and underparts, brown back streaked with black, and chestnut rump. At times, as they hop about in the hedge, they almost seem like a canary. However, although they can still be seen in our hedgerows, there are nowhere as near as many of them as there used to be. As with many other once common birds the cause of this decline seems to be changes in farming practices, particularly the move from spring to autumn sown cereals, which deprives them of food at a crucial time.

Yellowhammers have at least 20 other names including yellow bunting, yellow amber, yellow ring, scribble lark and scribbler. The last two names derive from the squiggly marks on their eggs. The scribble marks on the eggs gave the bird, in some people's minds, an association with the Devil – the scribbles may have been thought to carry devilish messages and to have been written by a drop of the Devil's blood which it carried on its tongue.

It is often said that the yellowhammer's song sounds like the phrase 'A little-bit-of-bread-and-no-cheese', but in the highlands of Scotland it was said to resemble 'The de'il tak' ye a' and leave me'. Because it was a devilish bird, boys were taught that it is right to steal its eggs and sing:

Half a paddock [frog], half a toad,
Half a drop o' the de'il blood,
Horrid yellow yorling [the name in Scotland for the bird]

Why should such a beautiful bird be persecuted in this way? Sometimes people make scapegoats of others, blaming them for all sorts of problems and failures, when really the problems and faults are inside themselves.



IMAGE: The picture shows a drawing of a yellowhammer and a yellowhammer's egg. The size of the egg is shown compared to a 20 pence piece but the drawing of the bird is not to scale.