



Mary Edith Morris, her brother and niece.

Photos: courtesy Margaret Vaughan.

For twenty-five years Mary Edith Morris kept a diary in which she recorded the birdlife she encountered at her Carmarthenshire home. These entries provide a fascinating glimpse of the changing fortunes of birds like the corncrake. They also paint a picture of a more rural, more stratified yet more intimate society, perhaps with fewer material blessings but more immaterial ones than we have today. James Robertson delves into a countrywoman's diary.

Mary Edith Morris was born at Bryn Myrddin, a country house in the Towy valley, in the jubilee year of 1887. Her mother had been born at neighbouring Middleton Hall, now the home of the National Botanic Garden. Although she always saw Bryn Myrddin as home, and returned whenever she could, she had an active career with the Women's Police, including a spell in Germany after the first world war. Other stations included Sheffield, and when the diary entries begin in 1936, she was living in Beddington but visiting Bryn Myrddin whenever possible. In 1940 she returned to Bryn Myrddin, and she lived there or at Flynnonddrain, near Carmarthen, until the final entry in 1971.



Mary's brother Ryle inherited the house, and lived there all his life. He married Alicemargit, and one of their daughters, Margaret Vaughan, transcribed the handwritten diary entries from which this account is taken.

Mary had a lifelong interest in birds and nature generally, especially flowers. She taught her niece the common names of all the flowers they found in the hedgerows, and passed on her love of nature. Her diary is an evocation of a very outdoor life and a record of those things which excited her, as birdsong had a particular capacity to do. It also shows how much she talked to everyone, from her brother and his wife to the gardener, local farmers, cottagers and friends, for she is constantly noting down their records as well.

Here are a few examples of entries:

25 February 1938

At Bryn Myrddin, about 1 a.m. a hen chaffinch tried 3 times to get in at my bedroom window, a rough night. I let her in and she slept on top of the cupboard. In the morning she flew round the room and then perched. I picked her up and let her out, she flew off calling "pink pink".



22 March

Long-tailed tit under Bryn Myrddin verandah all day collecting cobwebs and flying off with them for its nest.

25 June 1939

Goldfinches nesting and green woodpeckers fledged. A young woodpecker was caught near back door and another came under verandah where it was followed by a carrion crow which I drove off. The young woodpecker's constant call is much like a jackdaw's. The mating display of pied wagtails very pretty.



13 December

Saw a fine stoat in pond field hedge near the rabbit holes. Gentian still in flower.

20 January 1940

Hardest frost since 1845. 10 inches of ice on Towy which is frozen from source to sea.

1 February

Heard wild geese flying west 2.30 p.m. past Bryn Myrddin. Ryle saw 50 the next day.

24 September 1941

Heard a sweet monotonous double note high above Wern Wuad [field below Bryn Myrddin]; saw a smallish bird flying in circles and darting about as it sang – probably a woodlark singing its lulu song.

27 September

Saw several house martins near Llanarthney. Near Tower found a large grey hawk killing a pigeon, young bird.

8 February 1942

Saw about 25 whooper swans on frozen flooded water on flat. Very long necks, black legs and dark beaks without black knobs. Very sweet musical cry while standing and flying. Also saw 10 wild duck on Towy and some peewits.

12 April

Heard willow warbler near Bryn Myrddin. Saw a cormorant on ponds. Davy Arthur [who lived at Bwlch Bach cottage, overlooking the Bishop's Ponds] says there are 20 there till 9 a.m. daily catching eels.

13 April

Larks singing near Abergwili. Saw 2 black back gulls on Towy nr. Towy Castle, oystercatchers and cormorant. Saw swallows and martins by Gwili Bridge, roadman saw them on 10th.

These entries give only a taste of the great range of observations and information contained in Mary's diaries, which run to more than eight thousand words. Frequent reference to local field names and places provide a layer of social history which runs alongside the natural history.

Mary delighted in the wildlife around her, and its changes and surprises from day to day, year to year and season to season. At the time when she was writing these entries, bombs were falling not far away, metaphorical storms were raging, and the songs of returning blackcap and willow warbler in spring must have carried a message of defiant hope. She would not have imagined that war-induced agricultural policies would banish the sound of the corncrake from Carmarthenshire.

Perhaps they were on their way out before, but either Mary heard them, or one of her network of contacts did, in most years between 1946 and 1966. There are two entries in 1946, both from the 'flat'. In 1947 Mrs Arthur Jones heard a corncrake near her house at Nantgaredig. The following year Mary heard a corncrake "by ponds and field opposite Bishop's Mill", and Mr Tims heard one by the tin works opposite Glynaur. There are reports of corncrakes in subsequent years from Penybank field, alongside a cattle track to

Cwm, on the banks of the Towy below Carmarthen bridge and at Llanegwad, as well as at previously mentioned sites.

This suggests that there was a viable corncrake population around Carmarthen, and there were sufficient suitable breeding sites available at this time, although numbers were certainly low. It also suggests that the rural community of the time was quite well attuned to the rasping sounds of a male corncrake announcing its presence. If nothing else, such entries stir one's resolve. There is no reason why the call of the corncrake should not be a familiar sound once again in post CAP reform Wales.



Bryn Myrddin.

Every now and then, there is a reminder in the diary of how the Towy valley has changed in recent decades. On 17 September 1957, she "saw about a thousand golden plover on moor about Gwythgrug", and there are reports of numbers of waders, such as peewits, and even a bittern. And yet magpies are never mentioned. There are also surprises, such as the "Manx shearwater found in wet ditch near bottom of drive" following a storm, which was released unharmed, and the two avocets seen flying over the estuary at Gwbert.

It is the common birds – she records over sixty species – which populate her diary. Most entries are brief personal mementos; she writes of "two young house martins clinging to wall under my eaves and being fed by parents every minute". This conjures up a picture not only of these youngsters and their energetic parents, but also of her own face at the window, a delighted observer.

Plants, mammals and invertebrates all put in an appearance. She notes the first dates when primroses, aconites, snowdrops and hawthorn come into bloom; records her encounters with foxes, badgers, red squirrels and rabbits, and with lime hawk and humming bird hawk moths and woolly bear caterpillars; and reports that "Herbert Vaughan counted 28 red admirals on an ivy bush at Tenby".

Her network of contacts is extensive, and suggests an energetic and sociable personality. As so often with diaries, the information she gives only whets the appetite, and invites the reader to learn more about her circumstances, the geography of the places she describes, her family and other relationships. For example, from the number of encounters she and her brother have with owls and other wildlife in various rooms, including her own bedroom, the house must have been large and very draughty!

If you had a love of birds and other wildlife and the time to observe them, rural Carmarthenshire fifty years ago must have been a rewarding place to live. I keep a wildlife diary, and I am struck by the similarities. Mary Edith Morris has reminded me how lucky I am to be able to observe so much wildlife at home and how important it is to appreciate and record it.

James Robertson is a writer with a particular interest in human relationships with the natural world.

Dyddiadur Mary Edith

Mae dyddiaduron Mary Edith Morris o Sir Gaerfyrddin yn rhoi cip ar ffawd bywyd gwyllt ac ar gymdeithas wledig glos yn y blynyddoedd hyd at 1971. Mae'n sôn am adael i asgell fraith glwydo yn ei llofft ar noson stormus, am gigfran yn ymlid cnocell y coed ac am aea' caled 1940 pan rewodd afon Tywi o'i tharddiad i'r môr. Bob blwyddyn rhwng 1946 ac 1966, fe glywodd hi neu ei ffiridiau swm rhegen yr yd ac mae cofnodion o'r fath yn ysgogiad – does dim rheswm pam na allwn glywed galwad gras rhegen yr yd unwaith eto yng Nghymru, wedi diwygio'r CAP. Uchafbwyntiau eraill yw'r sôn am fil o gwtiaid aur ar waun ger 'Gwythgrug', am aderyn drycin Manaw mewn ffos a dau gambig yn hedfan uwchben Gwbert.