

A Kestrel for a Knave - Session 3 Handout

Anderson's Tadpole Story (p60-61/160)

[Anderson] 'Well it was once when I was a kid. I was at Junior school, I think, or somewhere like that, and I went down to Fowlers Pond, me and this other kid. Reggie Clay they called him, he didn't come to this school; he flitted and went away somewhere. Anyway it was Spring, tadpole time, and it's swarming with tadpoles down there in Spring. Edges of t'pond are all black with 'em, and me and this other kid started to catch 'em. It was easy, all you did, you just put your hands together and scooped a handful of water up and you'd get a handful of tadpoles. Anyway we were mucking about with 'em, picking 'em up and chucking 'em back and things, and we were on about taking some home, but we'd no jam jars. So this kid, Reggie, says, "Take thi wellingtons off and put some in there, they'll be all right 'til tha gets home." So I took 'em off and we put some water in 'em and then we started to put taddies in 'em. We kept ladling 'em in and I says to this kid, "Let's have a competition, thee have one welli' and I'll have t'other, and we'll see who can get most in!" So he started to fill one welli' and I started to fill t'other. We must have been at it hours, and they got thicker and thicker, until at t'end there was no water left in 'em, they were just jam packed wi'taddies.

'You ought to have seen 'em, all black and shiny, right up to t'top. When we'd finished we kept dipping us fingers into 'em and whipping 'em at each other, all shouting and excited like. Then this kid says to me, "I bet tha daren't put one on." And I says, "I bet tha daren't." So we said we'd put one on each. We wouldn't though, we kept reckoning to , then running away, so we tossed up and him who lost had to do it first. And I lost, oh, and you'd to take your socks off an' all. So I took my socks off, and I kept looking at this welli' full of taddies, and this kid kept saying, "Go on then, tha frightened, tha frightened." I was an' all. Anyway I shut my eyes and started to put my foot in. Oooo. It was just like putting your feet into live jelly. They were frozen. And when my foot went down, they all came over t'top of my wellington, and when I got my foot to t'bottom, I could feel 'em all squashing about between my toes.

'Anyway I'd done it, and I says to this kid, "Thee put thine on now." But he wouldn't, he was dead scared, so I put on instead. I'd got used to it then, it was all right after a bit; it sent your legs all excited and tingling like. When I'd got 'em both on I started to walk up to this kid, waving my arms and making spook noises; and as I walked they all came squelching over t'tops again and ran down t'sides. This kid looked frightened to death, he kept looking down at my wellies so I tried to run at him and they all spurted up my legs. You ought to have seen him. He just screamed out and ran home roaring.

'It was a funny feeling though when he'd gone; all quiet with nobody there, and up to t'knees in tadpoles.'

Death of a Naturalist

All year the flax-dam festered in the heart
Of the townland; green and heavy headed
Flax had rotted there, weighted down by huge sods.
Daily it sweltered in the punishing sun.
Bubbles gargled delicately, bluebottles
Wove a strong gauze of sound around the smell.
There were dragonflies, spotted butterflies,
But best of all was the warm thick slobber
Of frogspawn that grew like clotted water
In the shade of the banks. Here, every spring
I would fill jampotfuls of the jellied
Specks to range on window sills at home,
On shelves at school, and wait and watch until
The fattening dots burst, into nimble
Swimming tadpoles. Miss Walls would tell us how
The daddy frog was called a bullfrog
And how he croaked and how the mammy frog
Laid hundreds of little eggs and this was
Frogspawn. You could tell the weather by frogs too
For they were yellow in the sun and brown
In rain.

Then one hot day when fields were rank
With cowdung in the grass the angry frogs
Invaded the flax-dam; I ducked through hedges
To a coarse croaking that I had not heard
Before. The air was thick with a bass chorus.
Right down the dam gross bellied frogs were cocked
On sods; their loose necks pulsed like sails. Some hopped:
The slap and plop were obscene threats. Some sat
Poised like mud grenades, their blunt heads farting.
I sickened, turned, and ran. The great slime kings
Were gathered there for vengeance and I knew
That if I dipped my hand the spawn would clutch it.

BY SEAMUS HEANEY (1966)

Flax: blue flowered plant that we get linseed oil and linen fibres from
Sod: the surface of the ground with grass growing on it. Turf.

A “flax-dam” is a small pond or swamp that farmers use to soften flax. They weigh the flax down under “huge sods”— heavy lumps of dirt — so it remains sodden with the water, where it stays for several weeks, rotting away just enough to soften up the fibres in the flax. When they collect the flax, some of it gets left behind and will continue to rot away for the rest of the year, making a stinky, but nature-filled environment.

Article: Steve Backshall

Exert from a BBC article referring to Steve Backshall Desert Island Discs

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/jHjhPSfQnkDxNv5ZGXT6R7/12-things-we-learned-about-steve-backshall-from-his-desert-island-discs>

Steve thinks lockdown connected many of us to nature in new ways.

Steve describes how the stretch of the Thames that he lives beside changed radically during lockdown: one of the busiest waterways in the UK became “totally silent, and [the river] was transformed into what appeared to be a wildlife refuge”. Water birds have bred there this year with what Steve calls “unparalleled success”.

“It was a time when we began to appreciate nature as a nation, and I hope, as a population across the world, more than we ever have before. People were savouring the birdsong in their back gardens. My sincere hope is that we can hang on to those connections,” says Steve. “Because I’ve spent my entire life living and working outside with nature, with animals, I know how much it can give us in terms of wellbeing. It is a potential panacea for so many of our ills. People have been discovering that through lockdown and I hope we don’t lose it now.”

Article: Chris Packham

Is Chris Packham right – should children eat tadpoles?

<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/shortcuts/2016/may/30/chris-packham-children-eat-tadpoles-springwatch-presenter-children-nature>

The Springwatch presenter's revelation may seem a tad unpalatable, but he is sending an important message to parents about children's encounters with nature

Patrick Barkham

Naturalist Chris Packham writes that allowing children to explore their natural curiosity can fuel a lifelong interest in living things. Photograph: Emilie Sandy/BBC

As celebrity revelations go, it's one of the more unusual: as a boy, Chris Packham would decant tadpoles on to a special spoon and eat them.

The naturalist and Springwatch presenter reveals his tadpolephagy in his new memoir, *Fingers in the Sparkle Jar*, and he's not sorry either. They are gritty and tricky to chew, Packham reports, comparing them to watery semolina with a bit more "thrashing" under the tongue.

The taste wasn't memorable but the experience was, and Packham argues that giving free rein to such natural curiosity "positively contributed to the ignition of a spark that fuelled a lifelong interest in living things". This could never have arisen from experiencing nature via books or television but "only from that heart that fluttered, as my throat was tickled, softly, by simple beauty at that essential point in my own metamorphosis".

Packham has previously spoken of the need for children to "be stung, slimed, slithered on and scratched". Although the natural drama delivered by programmes such as Springwatch is entertaining, it is no substitute for direct, sensory encounters.

Wildlife is often seen as either a health risk or too rare for children to mess with. But Packham and other conservationists increasingly argue that only by allowing children to mess with nature will they care for it in the future.

My four-year-old daughter Esme's passion for wildlife is currently akin to Sir David Attenborough's on the (now extremely unethical) 1950s TV show *Zoo Quest* – she wants to collect every living thing and keep it as a "pet". She's superbly gentle with, say, ladybirds but does not yet understand their complex requirements and may have inadvertently killed as many minibeasts as Packham did as a boy.

But what Packham's tadpole-tasting reveals is the importance of parents not supervising a child's every moment in nature. Parent-led pond-dipping is perfectly pleasant but we need to enable children to have their own private moments with wild creatures as well. We, too, are wild things, after all.

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Extracts from A Kestrel for a Knave

1.

(p13/160)

A thrush ran out from under a rhododendron shrub and started to tug a worm from the soil between loose asphalt chips. It stood over the worm and tugged vertically, exposing its speckled throat and pointing its beak to the sky. The worm stretched, but held. The thrush lowered its head and backed off, pulling at a more acute angle. The worm still held, so the thrush stepped in and jerked at the slack. The worm ripped out of the ground and the thrush ran away with it, back under the shrubs. Billy flicked the chocolate wrapper through the gate and passed on.

2.

(P24-5/160)

A cushion of mist lay over the fields. Dew drenched the grass, and the occasional sparkling of individual drops made Billy glance down as he passed. One tuft was a silver fire. He knelt down to trace the source of light. The drop had almost forced the blade of grass to the earth, and it lay in the curve of the blade like the tiny egg of a mythical bird. Billy moved his head from side to side to make it sparkle, and when it caught the sun it exploded, throwing out silver needles and crystal splinters. He lowered his head slowly, very carefully, touched it with the tip of his tongue. The drop quivered like mercury, but held. He bent, and touched it again. It disintegrated and streamed down the channel of the blade of the earth. Slowly the blade began to straighten, climbing steadily like the finger of a clock.

Billy stood up and walked on. He climbed over a stile and followed the path through a herd of cows. The ones grazing lifted their heads slowly, chewing their cud. The ones lying in the grass remained motionless, as solid as toy cows set out on a toy farm. A cover of partridges got up under his feet, making him jump and cry out. They whirred away over the field, their blunt forms travelling as direct as a barrage of shells. Billy snatched a stone up and threw it after them, but they were already out of sight over the hedges. The stone flushed a blackbird, and it chattered away along the hedge bottom, disappearing back into the foliage further along.

3.

(P26)

Billy zig-zagged slowly between the trees, searching any growth round the base of their trunks, then stepping back and looking up into their branches. He high-stepped his way through a bramble patch, trampling the tentacles underfoot as though tramping through deep snow. Below him four beaks opened at the noise, and he crouched down over a thrush's nest. The four young were almost fully fledged, and they fitted the nest as snugly as a complete jig-saw. Billy stroked their backs gently with one finger, then stood up and re-arranged the brambles over the nest before passing on.