

Book Review: Wild Winter by John D Burns

“At last it comes, drifting through the trees: a deep, guttural, primeval roar. A grunting yell that has echoed through these trees and across these hills since the ice retreated thousands of years ago.”

It is October in Strathconon, in Gaelic ‘the roaring month’, and John Burns is about to witness an ancient, bloody ritual: the annual rut of the Highland stags. It is the beginning of a winter that will end like no other, but for the moment it is simply a winter that John has decided to spend watching and learning about the nature and wildlife of his home country.

He will write a book to record his observations: *Wild Winter* ends up being a record of a year none of us will forget.



In *The Last Hillwalker* (2019) John wrote about his love of the hills and mountains, a love that began with a school trip to the Lake District and led to a lifetime of climbing – including ascents of some of the most famous peaks in the world. Based in Inverness for many years now, John is also a performance poet, storyteller and published author.

Now he wants to gain a more intimate understanding of the flora and fauna that have provided the backdrop to much of his career; to look more closely at the bond between man and nature. He's even written a bucket list of the things he wants to see; beavers, otters, mountain hares, seals, pine martens and even, if possible, the odd whale. The red deer rut was on the list – surely he can get the rest ticked off by May 2020?



One of the things I enjoy about John's writing is its humility. He freely admits how little he knows about

Scotland's wildlife. On a whale-watching cruise to Mull with a bunch of seriously keen retirees he experiences 'lens envy', takes part in a bird quiz in which he scores 'one hundred per cent. One hundred per cent wrong, that is...' – and misses the one whale who does bother to turn up. Instead he sees a sea eagle, and a school of dolphins;

“leaping and playing all around us...there is no mistaking their sheer joy.”

John starts to realise that you have to take the natural world as, when and where you find it. He goes looking for otters and instead sees a buzzard pursued by gulls; he buys a camera trap but never manages to film an otter; he crawls along a cliff top to see basking seals and ends up face down in a pile of sheep poo. And we feel we are learning along with him; when things go wrong – as they frequently do, for as John himself says;

“Wildlife doesn't co-operate, It's rarely where it's supposed to be.”

– we think that maybe, just maybe, we could have a go at this too. You don't have to be an expert; even Sir David Attenborough had to start somewhere (didn't he?)



Mountain hare (c) James Roddie

As John explores estates across the north of Scotland, the destruction and devastation caused by man becomes ever more evident. Vast tracts of land are owned by a few very wealthy people, many of whom are absentee landlords.

Traditionally the estates are run as 'playgrounds for the rich', where the only things that matter are deer and grouse and the shooting of both. To 'protect' these doomed animals, indigenous species are mercilessly eradicated – wolf, bear and elk are long gone, hen harriers, mountain hares, wildcats and eagles have been driven to near extinction. Where deer numbers are unchecked (something that, in their day, wolves would have seen to), no new tree growth can flourish, the land is overgrazed, and there are no habitats for many other native species. To facilitate access, the hills are scarred with bulldozed tracks. Heather is burned, illegal traps are set;

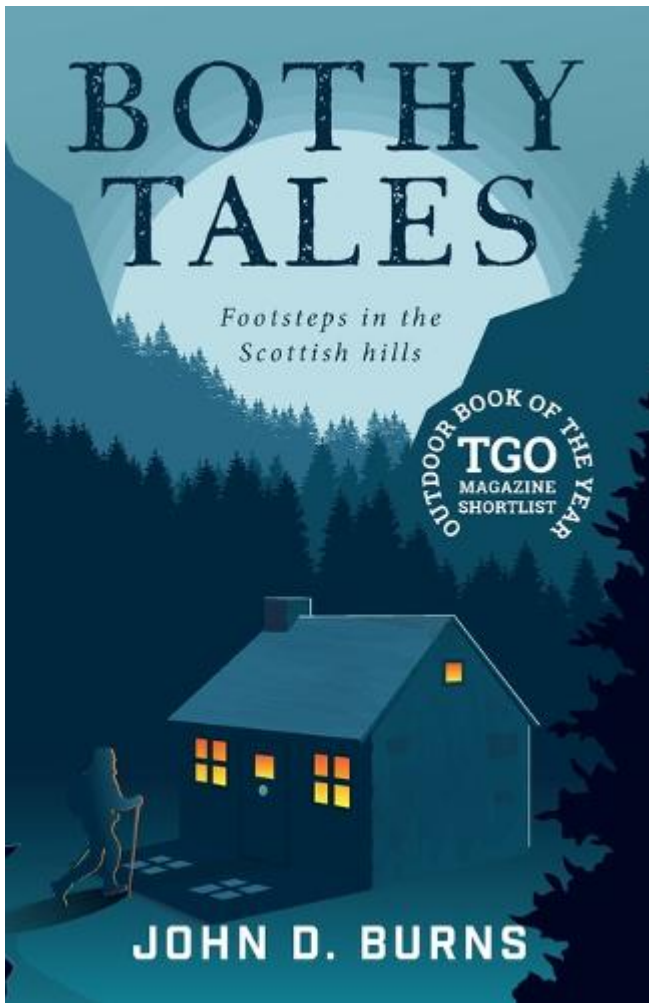
'the place stinks of death and I find no beauty in its landscape.'

Meanwhile climate change and pollution are wreaking their own havoc, with unreliable weather leading to a lack of food and habitation for birds, fish and mammals. Things aren't looking good.

Yet despite the parlous state of much of the Highlands, John finds room for hope. Some estates are moving away from the sporting model, their motivation being as much economic as ecological. Blood sports don't make money.

Enlightened owner Anders Povlsen, who also owns the Jenners building in Edinburgh, is famously rewilding Glen Feshie. At Coignfearn it's been four years since a hare was shot and heather is no longer burned. Hugh Raven, owner of Ardtornish, has continued his late brother's work to move the estate away from stalking – it now has hydro-electric schemes, a working farm and holiday accommodation; guns are only used to cull.

Beavers, long extinct in Scotland, have now been reintroduced in a controlled project in Knapdale – and in a rather less controlled release on the Tay. John meets with the manager of the Knapdale project, and discusses the huge benefits that beavers can bring to our waterways, and the need to involve all interested parties – farmers and landowners as well as wildlife advocates – if their reintroduction is to succeed. Sea eagles, hunted to extinction in the 18th century, have been back on the west coast since the 1970s. Legislation has now been enacted to protect that woefully slaughtered mountain hare population.



John loves bothies – he wrote a book about them (*Bothy Tales*, 2018) – and in *Wild Winter* he again visits many, from the freezing (Inver hut at Achnasheen) to the luxurious (the state-of-the-art Ruigh Aitechain at Glen Feshie), and here again he finds cause for optimism, meeting young people with understanding, vision and enthusiasm. In *The Last Hillwalker*, he worried that the next generation might have no interest in the hills, but now he realises that change is coming;

“I have a feeling that as we walk towards the future, these hills and glens will be in safe hands.”

One of the many delights of this book is the reappearance of John’s old hillwalking friends, Martin and Joe, on their annual visit to Scotland. Martin in particular is a wonderfully idiosyncratic character, still firmly anchored in the 1970s. He has no truck with technology, nor indeed anything ‘new-fangled’, does not drive, loves trains, and can

only eat foods on a mental list compiled fifty years ago. The stories of his encounters with various intransigent Scotrail officials are hilarious (Martin always wins.)

The year turns; there are rumours of a virus in China. As we are all too aware now, those rumours soon grew legs, and by early March John is desperately trying to fit in as many expeditions as he can before lockdown is imposed. Miraculously, with the help of wildlife photographer James Roddie*, he achieves his dream of seeing a pine marten just in time. Confined in his city centre flat, he at first struggles, but then learns to appreciate urban wildlife – and having failed to find an otter in remote Sutherland, eventually sees one swimming through the middle of Inverness. That's nature for you.

When lockdown is eased in summer 2020, there are reports of the Highlands being overrun with tourists. While having no time for the controversial North Coast 500 tourist route (a sentiment echoed by just about everyone who lives anywhere near it), John suggests that, instead of complaining about the visitors the Highlands have previously worked so hard to attract, they should instead decentralise, encouraging people to go to the less frequented areas. Education, not sanctions, should be the way forward;

“There is plenty of room for everyone.”

Wild Winter is a wonderful and very readable book, full of stories, ideas and optimism. It speaks of John's new understanding of the interconnectedness of all life;

“I am beginning to see how this great jigsaw of life fits together, and to realise how complex and interdependent everything is.”

And above all it speaks of joy and of hope;

“It never leaves me, this sense of wonder at a place. It is a

connection with the earth...the heart of nature still beats."

Wild Winter by John D Burns will be published by [Vertebrate Publishing](#) on 1 April 2021.

John's website is here: <https://www.johndburns.com/>

*James Roddie is a multi-award-winning professional wildlife photographer based on the Black Isle near Inverness. He runs [Black Isle Natural Photography](#) and offers tuition and wildlife tours.

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