



## The Writer and Nature

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**T**HE NINETEENTH-CENTURY Scottish essayist Alexander Smith once said that ‘the world is everywhere whispering essays and one need only be the world’s amanuensis.’ For me, the most intriguing whispers, those I want to eavesdrop on and write about, are the ones I hear emanating from nature.

I’ve been lucky. I grew up with unspoiled countryside close at hand. Both at home and at school, I came into contact with people who were passionate about birds and flowers and insects, and eager to share their knowledge of the natural world. Later, I had the opportunity of working as warden on a nature reserve. All of this has fed into my writing.

If you look at the titles of some of my essays, it’s clear that birds are often the source of the whispering I try to capture in my writing: ‘The Last Corncrake’, ‘Kingfishers’, ‘Swan Song’, ‘How Many Words Do You Need to Describe a Woodpigeon?’, ‘Waxwings’.

But nature offers all kinds of other prompts as well. I’ve also written under such titles as: ‘Meditation on the Pelvis of an Unknown Animal’; ‘How to See a Horse’; ‘Chestnuts’; ‘Mistletoe’; ‘Fuchsia’; and ‘In the Stomach of a Termite’.

Birds, insects, plants, animals, bits of bone, all them whisper in the way that Alexander Smith suggests.



The problem is that – once you stop to listen – these whispers are of symphonic complexity; catching them isn't the simple matter of notetaking that Smith's scribal metaphor suggests. I'm well aware that in my efforts to be 'the world's amanuensis' I can only convey a tiny fraction of nature's wonders. My books are as much records of an amanuensis failing to catch the world's whispered essays as they are transcriptions of the incredible things they say. But I think such failure can be justified by putting a comment of pioneer conservationist John Muir's alongside Smith's: 'When we try to pick out anything by itself', says Muir, 'we find it hitched to everything else in the universe.'

The more I write, the greater my sense of such hitching. Whether it's a fallen leaf, or the strange call of a corncrake, a tropical drift seed or a whale's tooth, each of nature's whispers leads into intricate mazes of connection, meaning, and association.

I've come to share J. A. Baker's view – expressed in his great book, *The Peregrine* – that 'The hardest thing of all to see is what is really there.' Baker's study of these beautiful raptors shows the folly of thinking that they surrender easily to the writer's pen. Even his masterful prose only allows us to catch glimpses of them. It provides a consummate set of variations on the theme of 'peregrine'. But what sparks the variations is uncatchable; the variations could be continued without end. It's what escapes the words on the page that keeps me writing about birds and leaves and insects, rather than any deluded sense of being able to give definitive accounts. But I like to think that I can at least point to, even if I can't fully transcribe, the astonishing things that nature whispers all around me.