



*In close-up: the mayfly, 'with wings like chapel windows'.*



## Nature Studies

By **Michael McCarthy**

An incomer's discovery of the natural world in the West Country

**T**he grand wildlife spectacle is not really part of nature watching in Britain, is it? I mean, colossal, awe-inspiring movements of big creatures—I'm thinking in particular of the annual Great Migration in East Africa, when hundreds of thousands of zebras and wildebeest and other hoofed animals shift with the seasonal grazing from the Serengeti in Tanzania, to the Maasai Mara in Kenya, and back. In doing so they become a vast, moving larder for the predators of the plains, the lions, the leopards and the hyenas, and for the crocodiles in the rivers which the hoofed ones have to cross; this wildlife wonder supports a whole industry of safari tourism.

For myself, though I've seen some inspiring wildlife in Africa—mountain gorillas in Rwanda and the Congo, and elephants, black rhinos and giraffes in Namibia—I've never been to Kenya or Tanzania to see the Great Migration, and probably now I never will. Yet reading a detailed account of it recently made me think about wildlife spectacles in general, and what do we have of them in Britain. Not many, I thought; but two did come to mind.

One is the starling murmuration, involving many thousands of birds in giant, shape-shifting clouds. It's a phenomenon that used to be commoner than now—starling populations have dropped over recent decades—but it's still reliably visible in the autumn at Ham Wall nature reserve in Somerset, and attracts lots of visitors. The other is the autumn arrival of the wild geese flocks, particularly pink-footed geese, travelling in great v-shaped skeins from their summer breeding grounds in Iceland and Greenland. They winter in Britain in Eastern Scotland, Norfolk, and North-West England where I see them on the Dee estuary, and they are a spectacular sight.

Yet neither of those are visible in Dorset. However, there is a third British wildlife spectacle which is, though it's on the miniature rather than the giant scale, and this is the mating dance of the mayflies. These are the graceful, butterfly-sized

upwing flies of our purer rivers, especially the southern chalk streams, like Dorset's Frome and Piddle. It will be happening soon—in late May or early June the newly-hatched mayfly males come together in thousands on the river bank and begin a courtship dance which consists of bouncing—there's no other word for it. They fly up vertically, to 12 or 15 feet perhaps, then parachute back down to about four feet from the ground; but the return back up again is so abrupt that they appear to have landed on an invisible trampoline. It can be seen from a distance, and the much larger females are attracted, fly in, and are grabbed and inseminated; then, while the males fly off to die in the grass, the females head back to the water to lay their eggs, and eventually collapse, spent and helpless in the surface film, when trout go mad to grab them. I've seen it on the watermeadows of the Frome above Dorchester—it's a truly remarkable display.

I thought about this when put in mind of wildlife spectacles generally in reading *Lion Song*, a vivid account of the Great Migration and other such marvels by Brian Jackman, long our leading writer on African wildlife. Now in retirement in Dorset, Jackman is still very active at 90, and has produced a stunning memoir of his long years on safari, writing mainly for *The Sunday Times*. His conclusion, after half a century of observing wild Africa and its iconic fauna, is that it is eco-tourism which has been its saviour. Available on Amazon, *Lion Song* is full of vibrant colour and dramatic incident—featuring charismatic humans such as George Adamson of 'Born Free' fame, as well as the big cats and other great beasts. I was left in awe of it.

But I have to say, seeing the mayfly dance on the watermeadows is pretty awesome too.

*Recently relocated to Dorset, Michael McCarthy is the former Environment Editor of The Independent. His books include Say Goodbye To The Cuckoo and The Moth Snowstorm: Nature and Joy.*