

Making Notes (1870 words)

Stanley shuffled sideways into the tiny hide, pulling the door closed behind him and sliding the bolt across. There was space for only one person and, even then, that person needed to be shorter than five foot eight and very slim. It was, he had often thought, a bit like stepping into an upright coffin.

When the wetlands preservation society gave him permission to place the hide, they had made it clear that they couldn't help with money. He'd had no idea how much it would cost and had been horrified when he found out. After all, it was just like buying a garden shed; although he'd never bought one of those before, so clearly his mental estimates had been wildly optimistic.

The Gofundme that he set up had raised only seventy-eight pounds and fifty pence, and he had very little money of his own, so it took five months to get the funds together, and then three more to source the hide and have it installed.

Once the hide was in place, he found himself wishing that he could wave some kind of magic wand, erasing all recollection of it from the minds of the two men who had transported and erected it. He was not usually given to such flights of fancy, and gave himself a metaphorical shake. The men were not interested in wildlife, and would probably have forgotten the location within minutes of leaving.

As a result of the delays, Stanley had missed the opportunity to record the migration patterns last year, but this year he had been here before dawn every day since the end of February.

He slid his backpack off, took out his flask and lunchbox and placed them on the narrow window ledge. Before dropping the backpack to the floor, he removed his battered but beloved binoculars and his notebook and pencil. He was ready.

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There was nothing to see for now, but as soon as the sun began to rise, the warblers would start to sing. He thought he'd heard a bittern yesterday, but he hadn't seen it, so he was hoping it would be back this morning and would show itself. He had faithfully recorded every bird he'd seen, although so far there had been nothing wildly exciting. It had only been a few weeks though, and there would be plenty more as the spring moved into summer. As the sky lightened, he gazed out across the reed beds and marsh, towards the lake, and prepared himself for the day ahead.

It was about three hours later when he heard the voices. He often heard people passing as they walked or cycled along the disused railway that split the marshland, and he would smile to himself, knowing they were oblivious to his presence. He had taken care to protect his location by pulling hanging branches across the tiny rabbit-run that led to his hide as he passed. When there was rain, he made sure to shuffle his feet in the mud, to obscure his footprints. He didn't want random strangers interfering and scaring the birds.

Once, in his first week at the hide, a woman had struggled through the undergrowth to set up an easel at the water's edge. His initial irritation at this intrusion faded, as he realised that she was doing her best not to disturb her surroundings. When her scarf dropped into the mud at her feet, she simply picked it up and stuffed it into her bag, and at one point he watched her top up the jar of water she was using by dipping it into the stream. He decided he didn't mind her being there, although the wren made it clear that she wasn't happy about it, shouting at the top of her tiny lungs, to no effect.

This was different; there was more than one person and they were making no effort to be quiet or take care. He could clearly hear the conversation and it was getting

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closer as they stamped through the mud and bashed against branches. As they got closer, Stanley understood that they were arguing; one of them thought this was a shortcut to something, and the other thought his friend was an idiot.

The grey heron, one of Stanley's favourite residents of this section of the wetlands, rose into the air, and disappeared over the treetops. Now he was angry. Surely these idiots would realise soon that this was not a shortcut to anything, and would go away?

They were so close now; he could hear every word. He allowed himself a moment of pride in the way he had carefully disguised his hide, covering the exterior with brambles and mud. They had no idea that they were standing only a few feet from him. But the argument went on, and neither of the young men was willing to back down. There was no birdsong now. Stanley considered opening the door and telling them to go away, but, judging from their voices and the language they were using, they were a lot younger than him and there was the possibility that they might become violent; even arguing as friends they were sounding more aggressive than Stanley was comfortable with. He remained silent and reached for a sandwich. He might as well eat his lunch while he waited for them to leave.

Finally, they reached a decision, although not the one Stanley would have hoped for. The youth who was convinced that this was a shortcut to their destination was going to continue along his chosen route and his friend would go back to the main path. They were to meet at a pub and there was a bet, involving alcohol. There was further crashing and swearing, as one of them left and struggled back to the path.

A young man came into view, as he stepped forward past the hide and onto a narrow, muddy track leading out across the reed bed. Stanley watched in horror as

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he trampled small plants underfoot. The plants weren't his focus here, but they were part of the environment in which his birds flourished, and every one of them had a part to play.

Stanley couldn't imagine where the lad thought he was going. The reed beds gave way in a few more yards to the marshy edges of a lake, and then to the lake itself. True, there were tracks running through the area, with shrubs clinging to the soggy soil, but his binoculars told him that these tracks faded to nothing.

Holding his flask of coffee in one hand and his binoculars in the other, Stanley continued watching. The boy had come to the end of a track and was gazing around himself. Finally, he reached a decision and took a leap across a patch of reeds, attempting to land on a patch of shrubby ground. Unfortunately, he didn't quite reach it, and there was a lot of splashing and swearing as he struggled to extricate his feet from the swamp and drag himself onto the small area of slightly drier land. Stanley struggled not to laugh out loud, as he saw that the lad had lost one of his shoes. He watched as the young man knelt and stretched his hands down into the water, trying unsuccessfully to find the missing item. Eventually, he stood and turned to face the direction in which he had been attempting to travel.

Now, Stanley did allow himself a small laugh. The bedraggled creature before him bore no resemblance to the cocky youth who had set off with such confidence. His trousers were soaked from the knees down, his t-shirt was only slightly drier, his remaining shoe couldn't be seen at all, because of the mud that caked it and his shoulder-length hair had somehow also become soaked and was plastered to his head and face.

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Should Stanley offer help? He tried to think this through rationally, but he knew from the start what the outcome would be. For one thing, the young man might react with aggression when he found out that his ignominy had been witnessed. For another, there was no way that Stanley could get to him, in spite of the fact that he was wearing sensible boots and waterproof trousers. It wasn't safe to try and cross the reed beds or marshes and if he were to try then there would be two of them in trouble.

He could go and look for someone with a phone. He himself had never found it necessary to own a mobile; there were more important things to spend his money on and anyway, who would he call? But if he left to look for help, he wouldn't be able to watch and know where the boy was. Perhaps his friend would come back looking for him?

He had allowed his binoculars to wander back to the area where the heron lived, but he jumped when he heard more splashing, and swung back towards the boy. Where was he? He must have walked quite a distance to be out of Stanley's line of sight. There was no sign of him, although there was more splashing. Stanley was about to give up and assume that the young man had been extremely lucky and found a way onto dry land, and that the splashing was a crow taking a bath at the edge of the reed bed, when he saw the arm.

It was just an arm, waving, and he wouldn't have seen it at all if the hand on the end of it hadn't been holding a muddy t-shirt.

So, he'd fallen in, not just into the muddy periphery, but into the lake. Well, he'd have to swim home then. That would teach him to come here, disturbing the peaceful habitat of Stanley's birds.

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The waving and splashing stopped. There didn't seem to be any movement at all.

Concerned for the first time, Stanley pulled back the bolt and opened the door.

Stepping out, and taking great care to tread only where he knew the ground was firm and safe, he moved cautiously in the direction of his last sighting. He only needed to walk a few feet, because there was a tree here, with a low branch that he could step up onto. When he'd been looking for the right location for his hide, he had used this spot to spy out the land.

Balancing on the tree, binoculars in hand, he peered across to the lake. Nothing. No movement. There was a soft sound to his left and he turned, to see the heron alight on its marshy nest. Then the silence was broken again, by the sound of a reed warbler.

That was ok then. The environment was fine and had taken care of itself. There was no need for interference from him. He moved back to his hide and took up his position again, taking care to note down the information about the heron, but making no notes about the reed warbler, because he hadn't actually seen that one yet. He didn't note the sighting of the youth because, after all, he wasn't a bird. He settled down to watch.