

THREE BRITISH BIRDS Donald Shephard

A greenbelt encircled postwar London and provided my youthful legs flat alluvial fields in which to run along the banks of the river Roding, a tributary of the Thames. My home county, Essex, has three or four points above three-hundred feet in elevation. I lived on the edge of Epping Forest, a green finger of preserved land which thrusts from its eponymous town well into London.

When I was six, as A. A. Milne would note, I jumped from an old look-out beech tree about six feet and sprained an ankle on its roots. At eleven, when I became interested in cross country running, I loved to trot around the playing fields wearing my father's old army boots. To strengthen my ankles, I had resoled and shod this cumbersome footwear with many metal studs.

Along the river Roding in a hole in a tall willow tree, I always found a Green Woodpecker nest. Imagine my joy at spotting a green bird with a red crest. As the Roding meandered through the football (soccer) fields and around the cricket pitches, it left an oxbow lake which we called the River Stink although it did not flow. During my bicycle rides to high school, I sometimes stopped by the stinky stagnant water to watch a Kingfisher dart from its perch to snatch a stickleback or minnow and return to its burrow to feed its young.

For nine years after World War II the government rationed food including milk. A dairyman drove his horse-drawn cart from house to house delivering imperial pints of pasteurized milk. No homogenization occurred in those days. Colored metal foil denoted Friesian, Jersey, or Guernsey milk. In winter, Blue Tits, those acrobats of the hedgerows and trees, pecked through the foil and drank the cream that accumulated in the bottle's neck.

Next month Becky Bowen will graciously edit this newsletter while I visit my sister and a friend I've known for sixty-two years since we were eight. We will slog through the gluey orange London clay of hills which are topped with glacial moraines and I hope to see once more those colorful birds of my youth, the Green Woodpecker, Kingfisher, and Blue Tit.

Photos Royal Society for the Preservation of Birds

