

Zeitschrift: The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK
Herausgeber: Federation of Swiss Societies in the United Kingdom
Band: - (1982)
Heft: 1796

Artikel: Watching from a solitary Swiss eyrie
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-688501>

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Watching from a solitary Swiss eyrie

**By PETER
HOLT**

SOLITARY tower on the threshold of water and land, lake and reedbed. A fixed vantage point amid the passing seasons and migrations. A point from which to watch without intruding, without disturbing. I'm up top on "my" Swiss tower, just watching and waiting.

Frost-numbered fingers fumble with flickering match, shield its flame, light an early morning pipe. Tobacco smoke drifts. Memory drifts, to bygone towers.

My first tower was that of the disused Low Lighthouse at the Isle of May bird observatory off the Scottish east coast. I can still feel the sting of salt spray wind-driven from the North Sea breaking on rocks below, still hear the herring gulls' wild cries borne on even wilder gale, still see the gulls swept across the storm-dark sky and sea of early spring.

Countless seasons later I stood watch in my second tower – a ramshackle wooden lookout flanked by the calm evening waters and reed beds of Lake Neusiedl in eastern Austria.

A lone ash gray male hen harrier (European version of the marsh hawk) was hunting on flexed and graceful black-tipped wings, brushing low over the swaying russets and sun-gilded straw yellows of the late-winter reeds.

The gentle movements and soft colours of harrier, reedscape and pre-spring sky were in quiet harmony – a total contrast to the harsh harmony of herring gulls wind-tossed over the bleak North Sea.

Set to music, the North Sea's Isle of May interlude would have been a movement from Beethoven's tempestuous Fifth Symphony; the Neusiedl evening would have been a part of his tranquil Sixth – the Pastoral Symphony.

Alas, I didn't have time to stay for the full four symphonic movements, the full four seasons, at either the Isle of May or Neusiedl. The towers there were simply staging posts in my own migrations that have brought me to rest

at another tower on another shore.

Here, beside Switzerland's Lake Neuchâtel, I've found not a temporary perch but my tower for all seasons. It's a squat, grey building mottled with the yellow and dull bluish lichens of more than 50 years. Like a latterday miniature keep it stands guard over the reedbeds, pools and lake islands of the Fanel/Witzwil reserve.

To the artificial nesting platform in the lagoon behind the Fanel tower, summer brings a screaming breeding colony of 200 common terns while out on the lake's two grassy islands the black headed gulls nest as loudly and gregariously as the terns.

Raucous noise turns to pandemonium as a black kite circles low, and is mobbed and driven away as it tries in vain to snatch a gull chick. Carrion crows are not tolerated either.

Two of these wily opportunists are homing in on a five-week-old black headed gull that has strayed ashore below the tower and is

scurrying to and fro, "mewing" miserably. An angry flock of gulls swirl protectively overhead, fending off the crows and chivvying the erring youngster to seek cover in the reeds.

The fluffy brown tern chicks have cover of their own on the shingle topped nesting platforms – short lengths of earthenware pipes set there for them to hide from raptors or from the glare of the midday sun.

Plop! Another half grown tern chick tumbles into the lagoon and swims frantically. It's not old enough to be able to fly back up to the ternery. Instead, it somehow has to struggle through the muddy water to one of the small "rafts" moored beneath the nesting platform by the reserve's honorary wardens as safe resting places for overboard young terns.

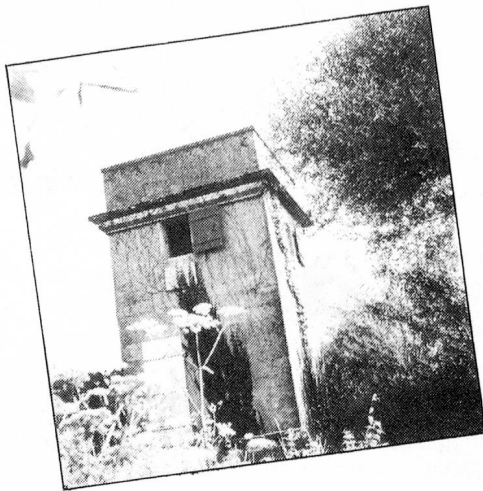
Distraught parent birds buss their floundering chick, tempt it with a fish and eventually chide and coax the wayward offspring to a raft already abob with earlier overboarders.

All round the lagoon and out along the placid lakeside the reed thickets are live with mouse-brown reed warblers, singing, foraging and darting down with beakfuls of writhing insects to their hungry broods in deep cupped nests woven between

Peter Holt, a journalist from Edinburgh, is married to a Swiss and his hobby is bird watching.

When he visits Scotland, he pursues his interest along the shores of the Firth of Forth, but these days his real base is Lake Neuchâtel.

A historian, he has co-authored a book, "Threats of Revolution in Britain 1789-1848", and graduated D.Phil at Sussex University with a dissertation on Swiss and Austrian neutrality.



Scenes from the watchtower (left) at the Fanel/Witzwil nature reserve. Below is the vista looking across the lagoon and right an inlet close to the watchtower.



swaying stems.

Here and there a larger brown warbler perches at the very top of a reed, singing loudly and occasionally shuffling its tail from side to side. Its song, its size, its pale beige "eyebrow" and the faint speckling of its upper breast all mark it out as a great reed warbler.

Much more difficult to spot are the Savi's warblers; there are only two to three pairs in the vast tract of reeds. Pause and listen for their curring song. Yes, somewhere over to the right. Scan the reed tops back and forth, again and again.

With luck and patience I find a Savi's in full view, steady my binoculars on the tower parapet and glimpse him just before he flicks down among the reeds.

Come the fall and the warblers of the reedbeds are fewer. Soon, all have departed south. Lesser whitethroats are passing through, feeding among low scrub. The terns have gone.

The little bitterns linger on; usually seen for only a few seconds as they fly from reedbed to reedbed. Soon they too will wing southward.

But before they do I look down upon a brown streaked juvenile fishing the narrow channel that runs from the lagoon, past the tower and into Lake Neuchâtel. There, a mere 30 feet from my vantage point, this small member of the heron tribe catches at least 18 fish in 45 minutes.

Clambering among the channelside reeds, the little bittern never lets go of the stems even when it darts out body, neck and bill to full stretch and grabs a fish. Always, the bird recoils like a

spring. The fish is held crosswise in the bill, then lengthwise, then gulp!

A flick of long tongue to clean the bill and the little bittern is already bracing itself for the next stab into the lagoon channel.

The lagoon is silent, its muddy margins a resting and feeding place for waders from the north. In shallows near the tower, a spotted redshank in marbled grey plumage feeds against the dark green background of water lily leaves. Belly deep in the lagoon, the slender bird pauses to preen its soaked breast feathers then goes on probing, its bill slightly open and dripping bright water.

By November, ice cracks brittle patterns along the fringes of the lagoon. The wind atop the tower is ice-brittle too. The passage of magnificent marsh harriers and a lone osprey is but an October memory. Even the hardy starlings have forsaken their reedbed roost for southern climes.

The first of the winter birds are here: A great grey shrike hunched into the breeze on the topmost branch of a silver birch; a peregrine falcon at his boulder perch on one of the lake islands; blue tits flocking in the reeds, pecking like tiny woodpeckers at the parchment dry stems; and a female hen harrier in elegant flight over the reeds.

Pale sun in December tempts three large brown bitterns – winter guests only – out to the edge of the lagoon unaware of the shivering watcher on the

tower. Along the path at the base of the tower the wind scatters the rust brown feathers of a reed bunting – the remains of a sparrowhawk's kill.

Out on the islands and lake are flotillas of wintering duck, mostly tufted, pochard and mallard, accompanied by a few golden-eyes, pintail, wigeon, gadwall and shoveler.

By January, about 15 smew have joined them, and a lone velvet scoter drake puts in a rare appearance. Onto the lake near the islands straggles a mid-morning skein of 130 bean geese in from the fields of the neighbouring plain.

It is over those selfsame fields that a fine pair of hen harriers have taken up their winter hunting grounds, patrolling even along a railroad embankment and the edge of a busy country road in search of voles and mice, and returning each evening to the Fanel reedbeds to roost.

Mid-February dawn. Curlews calling overhead – a "keep together" call as they blur past in the mist. By midday the frost that encrusts the bushes and reeds is melting into glistening droplets. The warm sun turns the mist to faint haze. There's a stirring of spring in the air. Literally in the air!

No longer winter loners, some 30 or more grey herons are circling and croaking above the high trees of their traditional nesting colony on the far edge of the reserve. Sharp winged squadrons

of starlings have returned from winter vacation.

A pair of long-tailed tits are gathering moss from tree trunk crevices but it's at least a month too soon for nest-building. Winter ducks are still diving or snoozing out on the lake. And on one of the islands stands the rarity of the year, a great white heron.

As the special heron and the winter ducks leave through March and April, spring is budding. Browns, greys and blacks of the landscape are touched with green. Hen and marsh harriers are passing through against pale blue sky; buzzards are riding the thermals; black kites are marauding again; and the winter peregrine is on its island, devouring a wood pigeon while a crow sidles in to snatch an entrail.

The first swallows skim over the early April lagoon but the ternery is still deserted; the reedbeds still devoid of warbler song; the islands just beginning to resound to the clamour of the black headed gulls in full breeding cry.

Into April and May the terns, the reed warblers, the little bitterns and the great crested grebes are all back and busily nesting. The birch where the great grey shrike kept winter lookout from bare branches is in full leaf, populated now by willow and garden warblers, blackcaps and chaff chaffs searching the foliage for insects.

The peregrine has departed to the mountains, leaving his island to the nesting gulls. The lake is loud with gulls; the lagoon ascream with terns. Summer has besieged the tower once more. The seasons and migrations have turned full circle.