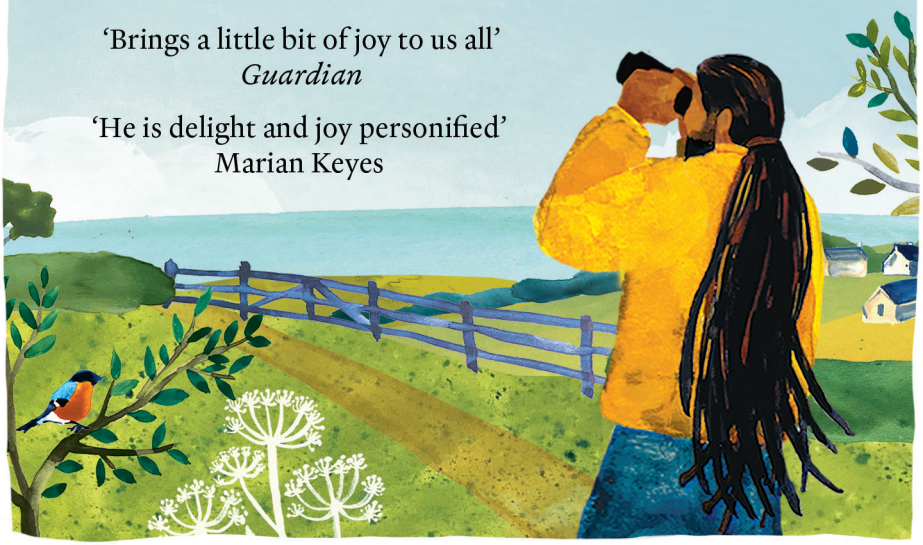
Hamza Yassin

Be a Birder

My Love of Birdwatching and How to Get Started

'Brings a little bit of joy to us all'
Guardian

'He is delight and joy personified'
Marian Keyes



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To my family, and to my second family and community in Ardnamurchan.

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INTRODUCTION

I absolutely love birds. They make me tick. It's no exaggeration to say that I wake up and go to sleep thinking about birds. All of my conversations get redirected back to birds somehow.

And I'm so lucky to have a career that used to be my hobby. That's all thanks to birds.

Birds have been with me my entire life – from the colourful Weaver Birds on the banks of the Nile in Sudan to the Magpies of Newcastle. From the roosting Peregrine Falcons on the Carlsberg Brewery sign near my parents' house in Northampton to the White-tailed Eagles that I can see from the living-room window in Ardnamurchan, on the west coast of Scotland. Pretty much wherever you are in the world, you're going to find a bird.

I was in the Canadian Arctic in 2021 and there was nothing but ice and snow for as far as you could see.

No sign of trees at all. One or two shrubs, but for eight months of the year they're just little mounds of snow. No sound. And then I heard a Raven calling. Even in the most unlikely of places and, however inhospitable it seems, you're never far from a bird. You'll find a bird called a Sandgrouse in the middle of the Sahara Desert, and they have special belly feathers that allow them to soak up water like a sponge, so when they travel back from a water hole back to their nesting site, they can share the water with their family. This is one of the beauties of birds. They're everywhere. And if you can't see them, you'll probably hear them.

When someone asks me what it is I love about birds, my first answer is that they can fly. I still find myself staring at their wings and thinking, *how on earth can you do that?!* Then when I hold one in my hands, like an injured Sedge Warbler, I think, *you're tiny and weigh nothing, but in three months' time, you will have made it past the Sahara Desert into central Africa. I can't walk to the end of the street without huffing and puffing!* You'd think they'd need the size and energy of an elephant to cope with the amount of weight they're going to lose on that sort of journey. The scientific side of how birds are able to cope with these feats of endurance amazes and baffles me. And then when I look at a bird through a pair of binoculars, I think, *Damn, you're beautiful.*

One of the real joys of watching birds (or 'birding', as we call it) is that you can do it anywhere, whether you're in your garden, in the countryside, at the beach or right in the middle of a city centre. If you take the time to stop and listen, you'll find that the world is full of song. Then, if someone with a bit of knowledge about birds helps show you how they birdwatch, you might end up with a completely different relationship with places you know well. That could be a park, a garden, a wood, a churchyard, a beach – even a rooftop or a car park. You'll see the world through different eyes. And it might bring you as much joy as it's brought me.

After I've shown people a few tips and tricks on where to see birds, I often get messages. One such message said, 'I felt like I was a muggle before you showed me how much there is going on beneath the surface!' Suddenly, you're not just seeing Pigeons and Crows, although both of these are incredible for their own reasons. You'll also be seeing beautiful birds like Jays, Nuthatches, Green Woodpeckers and Parakeets. And when you take a minute to properly look at a bird you might already be familiar with, you start to find all sorts of other unexpected gems too. A Magpie just looks black and white, right, with a long tail? But if you really look, you'll see that its feathers shine with greens, blues and purples. And its tail, when it's fanned out, looks like a diamond or a spear. This kind of knowledge can be

infectious. Before you know it, you want to see another bird, one that's maybe harder to find or more secretive. So your adventure in birding begins!

When you're looking at buying a new or second-hand car and you've got an idea of what you want, suddenly everything you see on the road is that car! It's a kind of confirmation bias that draws your attention to something without you even knowing it. That's what I want this book to be and its what often happens once people get the bird bug. You might find that you're pointing out birds without even realising it, or passionately explaining some of their unique habits or characteristics to other people. Friends are always telling me how happy they are that they saw a bird they've never seen before. And it's free joy! You don't have to pay for a personal trainer, shell out a small fortune to see something at the cinema or buy that app everyone's talking about. It's all just out there, waiting for you to find it.

And once you're into birds, it can take you in all sorts of different directions, whether you begin to fall in love with other animals or start trying to make your garden or local parks more biodiverse to attract different types of wildlife. It's for this reason that I feel birds are the gateway to the natural world.

But I know that birding isn't for everyone. My brother's wife is terrified of them (!) but my enthusiasm has rubbed off on my nieces and nephews and they've

taken me on walks near them and shown me some of the birds on their patch. Birding is sometimes seen to be a solitary activity, but it doesn't need to be. Especially after Covid lockdowns, lots of people have started birding as a family, all enjoying the wonders of being outdoors together. That's one of the reasons the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) 'Big Garden Birdwatch' was such a big success when everyone was at home.

My own mum, bless her, isn't really a bird fan, but she loves how passionate I am about them. One day in my early 20s, when I was still living with my parents in Northampton, I was filming a bird out of a window in our kitchen and my mum asked me what I was up to. So I told her. The next morning, my mum wakes me up, really early in the morning, like 5am, so excited.

'Hamza, Hamza! That chicken you've been looking at is just outside!'

'The…the what, Mum?' I said, through half-opened eyes.

'The chicken, Hamza. The green chicken you were filming yesterday!' she answered.

'The green chicken?' I said, beginning to wonder if I was actually still asleep. 'Mum, I was filming a Green Woodpecker yesterday.'

'Yes, yes, whatever it is. The one that was hoovering up the ants.'

Now, whenever I see a Green Woodpecker, I think of my mum!

I don't know everything about birds, but I love learning things. And the day that I stop learning is the day that I stop living. If you get out there and start looking at nature, the chances are that you'll enjoy it. And if you enjoy it, you'll start to learn things. Then, you'll find yourself looking up information on YouTube, *Springwatch* and Attenborough documentaries. Seeing how passionate the kinds of presenters you'll find on these shows are will probably help inspire you. And you can always look online to find groups of people who are interested in the same things as you are. I guarantee you'll meet people who know things you don't know and want to share them. I have friends who I've got interested in birds and then sometimes they surprise me with something they've found out that I had no idea about. I love it when that happens – the student becomes the teacher! My work is done.

Moving from Sudan

I spent the first eight years of my life in Sudan, in north Africa, which is such a beautiful, amazing place, but quite desolate. Our house was situated on the banks of the River Nile in Khartoum, the capital of Sudan. I grew up surrounded by so many birds, which we knew by their African names. They were so bright and made lots of

noise and I had no idea that they were special – they were just our common birds to me. And when we moved to the UK when I was eight – my parents are both doctors and were invited by the Royal College of Medicine to move here – I did miss it there. But then I began to realise that there was so much to offer to a young boy obsessed with Mother Nature. Northumberland was so green, so vibrant, so lush, by comparison to the dry heat and the dust of Sudan and it was a massive shock. It was winter when I arrived in the UK and I was surprised at how cold it was, but I've grown to prefer the cold to the heat, unlike every other member of my family. I actually used to get nosebleeds in Sudan pretty much every day when I overheated, so maybe something's telling me to head north! I still speak Arabic and seem to be good at it because if someone from Sudan rings up for my mum or dad, they're convinced it's my dad talking on the phone, not me. And then when I tell them I'm not Dr Yassin, they say 'But you haven't got an accent – how does that happen?!' That's all thanks to my parents – they spoke Arabic when I was at home and we'd go back to Sudan for summer holidays. It's a bit more difficult when I go back now that I'm older though, because I'm at an age where a lot of people get married, so my grandmother is always on a mission to find me a wife!

My first school was Star of the Sea on Tyneside. I didn't speak any English, but I remember standing up when our

teacher came in for my first lesson – that's what we did in Sudan as a mark of respect, although I got some weird looks on that first day for doing it in a primary school in Northumberland! But you learn fast when you have to. You adapt to your surroundings, and that meant without realising it, I developed a Geordie accent for a while.

I remember being asked by a kid at my school what pets I had at home. I said 'We used to have a monkey,' and I'll never forget his little face lighting up with a mixture of disbelief and wonder. I realised that I'd been exposed to a few more creatures than just cats and dogs where I was growing up. But I knew nothing about the wildlife in the UK until I started watching nature shows on TV. I got to see two people that were absolutely amazing – Steve Irwin and David Attenborough. And that was it. From that point on, I wanted to be them, and failing that, the next best thing: the guy holding the camera filming them do what they do. Steve Irwin's enthusiasm was so infectious. He was excited by everything, and I loved that, especially animals that everyone's afraid of. He just had no fear at all, and I think he did a lot to make people understand how crocodiles behave. And then, you've got David Attenborough, with his engaging but laid-back sort of style, presenting to camera while being groomed by a family of gorillas. He was just so fascinating and funny. It always felt like he was talking directly to you.

I owe a lot to both of them. I feel like they sparked the love of nature in me that set me off on the journey to become a wildlife cameraman. One of my favourite memories is a phone call from my friend Jessie, who I'd worked with filming a sequence of White-tailed Eagles hunting Geese. He said: 'I thought you might like to know that David's watched our film of Eagles and said it was a really strong piece.'

I said: 'David? David who? What – wait; you don't mean *Sir* David?!'

That was a massive milestone for me. We're a three-generation team of cameramen: John is the veteran cameraman, Jessie used to be his assistant and I suppose I'm the young buck. In that moment, I wanted to be able to do the same thing for the next generation. I want to inspire kids to say, 'Daddy, can we walk to school instead of drive?' or 'Can we build a bug hotel in the garden?' Because if you connect with kids in this way, I always think to myself, *I might be talking to the future head of the RSPB or the next Attenborough*.

I spent all the time I could out in RSPB reserves when I was young. It was the safest place my mum could take me to. The golden rule in our house growing up was: 'stay out for as long as you like, keep out of trouble, but when the street lights come on, we want you home!'

My parents were really comfortable leaving my brother and me outdoors and letting us have a bit of freedom.

And I think it was that freedom which built up my love for nature and birds, especially. I was fond of the birds I remembered from Sudan. But I really wanted to learn about all the birds we had in the UK. And as soon as I told my mother that, she found out all about the RSPB and learned that there was a reserve near us. The first time I went there, I remember just sitting in a corner of a hide reading a book quietly, then studying the pictures on the walls and the leaflets you'd get there and try and work out which birds I was looking at. Eventually, one of the birders kindly offered me his binoculars because he was looking through his telescope. The next time I went, my mum had got me a cheap pair of binoculars (which I still have!) and she'd come along and read a book in the car while I sat in the hides. You'd see the same guys in the hides and they'd look at me like 'Ah, there's that Hamza guy, we recognise him'. So I'd feel comfortable chatting to them and they were happy with each of the hundred questions I'd throw at them! I loved what they taught me. Eventually, when I got older and a bit more responsible, my mum would just drop me off in the car outside the entrance to the reserve and go off about her daily business. She'd pick me up at the end of the day, ask me what I did and I'd be rattling off a whole list of birds that I saw and facts that I'd learned. She could really see the joy on my face.

Being out at RSPB reserves ticked a lot of boxes for her because it's not exactly the kind of place you can

get up to mischief in. I'm out with Mother Nature and a few middle-aged dads with binoculars who took me under their wing and started teaching me the Latin names for things. That was where I learned *Troglodytes troglodytes*, the Latin name for a Wren. I remember finding out that troglodyte was Greek for 'cave-dweller' and came about because Wrens nest in dark crevices. It made sense to me because you never see a Wren's nest out in the open. I get how using Latin names can be off-putting for some people. When people use them, it sort of sounds like they're showing off their knowledge or something. But the helpful thing about Latin is that it's a common language that you can draw on when you go to non-English-speaking countries. It's also useful because it tells you something about the different bird families. For example, if it starts with *Fringillidae*, you know you're talking about a member of the Finch family. If you see *Alba* or *Albus* in a name, you know the bird is going to be at least partly white. Don't worry – I'm not suggesting you take a crash course in Latin, or anything, but being familiar with a few Latin terms gives you that little more information about the bird.

Because my mum and dad were both doctors, they'd be moving across different hospitals around the country on clinical rotations, so we'd have to move house every year or six months. So, while my teachers at school began to suspect I had a problem with reading and writing,

I'd be off to another school before anything could really be done about it. When we first arrived in the UK, we started in Newcastle, then Carlisle, then Whitehaven, then back to Newcastle before we dotted around the Midlands for a bit. It was only when my mum was offered a permanent position in Northampton that we settled there. And it made sense to move there. My parents wanted to be somewhere fairly close to Heathrow, because we did have lots of friends and family visiting from Sudan, but also somewhere that was in the countryside where we kids could all be in the same school. The only trouble was, my dad was on a placement at the Royal Preston Hospital, so he had to stay up north for work and come down to Northampton every weekend. He spent a lot of time yo-yoing around. That's just the way it goes in medical families, though, because it's really hard to both find jobs in the same place at the same time. But, after a few years, a job finally came up in the same Northampton hospital, so were all together again under the same roof all the time.

At the first school I went to in Northampton, you had to take an entrance exam, which involved mostly English with a bit of maths and science. I aced the maths and science, but massively stuffed up the English. I got in, but the teachers said that I'd have to work hard on my English. So I wasn't able to study French or History – I spent the time taking extra English lessons. I basically ended up

in a special needs class, until my mum took me out, and got me a place at another school – Wellingborough. In lessons, I'd be there at the front of the class with my hand up and the answer ready, but in exams I failed everything. I loved the school and got on so well with my teachers, but I found the reading and writing so difficult. After I'd take an exam, my teacher would say, 'Were you ill for the exam or something? I know you know this stuff!' And I'd say, 'No – I thought I did pretty well!' It was then that my teacher, Mrs Strange, diagnosed me with dyslexia.

I remember crying when she told me I was dyslexic. I'd never heard of it before and at first, it sounded like a really serious physical condition. But she told me kindly that it means it's hard for me to read and write. Everything began to make sense. I wasn't dumb, like I sometimes feared – I just think and do things slightly differently. Mrs Strange informed me the school would be able to help support me with a computer, a reader and a scribe – which was amazing. Thinking about it now, I genuinely believe that we dyslexics have a gift that other people don't see. I realise that I see and feel the world in a different way to other people and I've got to the point where I'm glad I'm dyslexic. I find it difficult to read, but I've managed to work out ways around that. I listen to podcasts, the audio content in apps about nature, watch documentaries, look through photographs. It feels like I've learned to read again, but in a different way.

I look up to amazing people like Whoopi Goldberg, Robin Williams and Octavia Spencer who have used their dyslexia to their advantage. Whoopi wasn't diagnosed until adulthood, but she realised that she learned best by having someone read things out loud to her, and she wouldn't have a problem remembering them. So after she became an actress, that's how she learned her lines. Now she's one of only 18 EGOT winners – the acronym for people who have won an Emmy, Grammy, Oscar and Tony Award. She's a legend. She found a way of adjusting and working around something she was struggling with. That's how I feel about dyslexia. We're faced with having to get from A to B and we find a way around. We learn to adapt, and that often involves thinking creatively. And on that journey, maybe you find new things about yourself or develop new skills.

Following My Dream

Although I had this desire to become David Attenborough or Steve Irwin, I did briefly want to become the character Leroy Johnson from the film (and spin-off TV show) *Fame* (for those of you too young for this reference, it's an American teen musical set in a New York performing arts high school). I remember watching in awe the famous scene where he did the jumping splits and I thought, *right, that's it – that's what I'm going to do.* So I trained hard at gymnastics and learned how to do it. I was so

happy! But I think my life was always going to involve nature. I knew how much I loved spending time outdoors looking at birds, first in Sudan, then the UK. And I've carried a camera around with me pretty much every day since I got my first one, aged 12. It was a birthday present from my mum and it was a Fuji with a 35mm film. I've still got it at my parents' place. I remember I'd had it for about two hours, though, and it stopped working. So I took it in to show my mum:

'Mum, my camera's stopped working!'

'What do you mean, Hamza?'

'The click button isn't clicking anymore, and the flash isn't going off.'

'Well, you've filled it up – you've taken all the 36 pictures on the film. Now we need to take it to a place to develop it, so we can see the pictures. But each time we do this, it costs us money, and it takes a wee while to get the pictures back.'

'Ah.'

It turned out that every click worked out as 50p, which was my week's pocket money! And at that point in my life, 50p meant 50 penny sweets from the newsagent. So I had an agonising decision to make: *do I want to take a picture or do I want a bag of sweets?!*

So from snapping everything I saw in the space of two hours, I'd learn to only take a picture when something really cool came up, whether that was family, friends, pets

or the swans by the park. The next film we developed (Mum paid for that one) was a month and a half later and the images were curated a bit better! I remember limiting myself to a certain number of pictures for each bird, though. And then digital came along. When I first heard about it, it didn't sound that impressive, until someone at school said, 'You can take a thousand pictures on it.'

That was it. 'Mum,' I said, 'I need a new camera.'

I was 14 when she bought me my first digital camera, another Fuji. I could fill cards to my heart's content, run through them on my computer, keep the ones I wanted, and delete the rest. I was in paradise. I've had a few cameras, but now, whenever I'm going to Africa on a shoot, I'll take a couple of my old digital cameras and give them to the guides to say thank you for their help. Because more often than not, guides absolutely love the natural world, but they might not have the means to capture what they love. When I ask them if they'd like the camera, I ask them to stay in touch and send me pictures, and a lot of them still do. Sometimes I get messages telling me that they've upgraded their camera but they've passed it on to their son or daughter and they've fallen in love with photography. It makes me so happy, that kind of thing.

I knew what I wanted to do with my life, but there was something else weighing on my shoulders. I come from a long line of doctors and dentists (both my parents are

Obstetrics/Gynaecology doctors, and at that point my sister was on her way to become a GP and my brother on the path to become a dentist) and I felt like this is what my parents wanted me to do. They never said anything like 'you should be a dentist', but it seemed like I was being subliminally guided towards it! So I found myself following my siblings and choosing biology, chemistry, physics and maths for my A levels before applying for Dentistry courses at university. I knew that my struggles with reading and writing were always going to be an issue because there were all sorts of essays that I'd need to write for a medical course, but I figured I'd find a way to adapt and overcome these challenges. I wanted my parents to be proud of me, so I sent off the forms and, to my surprise, I got into a couple of unis.

But then, four months before I was due to start on the Dentistry course, I just couldn't face it. So I plucked up the courage and had the conversation with my parents. Thankfully, they were really understanding, proud of me for finding the courage to come and talk to them honestly about it. They told me that they wanted me to choose what I wanted to do, not what they thought might be good for me, and that they'd support whatever decision I wanted to take. So I said: 'Mum and Dad – I want to work with animals as a wildlife cameraman and I know that you need to have a degree in Zoology to be taken seriously.' They told me they'd support me

100 per cent. And that had such a powerful impact. Not only did I feel like a great weight had been lifted off my shoulders, I also felt properly excited. I set out straight away, trying to find a degree that combined my two passions – wildlife and photography. The one I liked the sound of most was Zoology with Conservation and Animal Behaviour that Bangor University was offering. Plus, Bangor is incredibly well situated, on the north Wales coast, for marine wildlife and birds. Just across the water, on Anglesey, you've got the well-known birding hotspots of South Stack, Puffin Island and the beaches of Rhosneigr, and just ten miles south, you've got Snowdon, the highest mountain in England and Wales, and the unique wildlife around it. Bangor is surrounded by all the wildlife you could hope to study or learn about, so you find yourself learning about animals and then jumping on a coach for a field trip the next week and actually seeing them within an hour or two. And, on top of all that, people kept telling me that if you're dyslexic and you want to go to uni, Bangor is a great option because their Dyslexia Team was the best in the UK. They'd even won an award for it that year. I visited two other universities, but when I came to Bangor for the Open Day, I knew immediately that this was the place for me. And it's proved to be one of the best decisions I've ever made. It felt like a course that has made me who I am.

I was the first one in the lecture theatre, sat there right at the front with my Dictaphone, because I knew I wouldn't be able to keep up with the writing. The amazing guys in the Dyslexia Team gave me what I called the 'Madonna Mic', a device that allows you to sing along or speak into it, while it writes your dissertation down for you. I also got the use of a laptop with specialised software and the help of both a reader and a scribe, like at Wellingborough, and they were amazing. It felt like we'd formed a really collaborative relationship, and it really helped me work closely with other people. When it came to writing essays, I dictated what I wanted to say and then I worked with the Dyslexia Team to tidy up parts that didn't make sense, add the correct grammar, that sort of thing. They were incredible, and it's one reason I go back each year to give talks to the students at Bangor Uni about how I followed my dream and became a cameraman.

I was lucky because I knew exactly what I wanted to do after graduation, so I went about getting as much camera experience as I could. I love sports. I'd played a lot of rugby at school and I made the Bangor Uni Rugby team, but an idea struck me. What if I photographed as many of the other sports teams playing their matches at uni as I could? It sharpened up my hand-eye coordination and helped me anticipate things that are about to happen. I've since learned that there's no real set way to become

a cameraman or camerawoman – if you ask anyone in the business, you find out that everyone's arrived at it from all sorts of directions. A lot of it is about who you know rather than what you know, because personal recommendations go a long way, but once you get that opportunity to deliver, you've just got to take it.

I fell in love with the people and the place straight away up in Bangor. One person I met there, who's had a big impact on my life, is my friend Chris Bridge. I first met him, late at night, clanking around as he was carrying a big tripod through Bangor Uni. I asked him what he'd been out shooting.

'I'm a birder,' he said. 'I've been out bird ringing.'

In case you don't know (I didn't at the time) bird ringing involves safely and gently catching birds and fitting tiny rings with identification tags to their feet or wings so we can study population and survival rates, feeding patterns, lifespans, migration patterns and incidences of disease like avian flu, among other things. Bird ringing is something you need a permit for as well as a licence to catch wild birds, as well as permission from the landowner, if necessary.

Chris and I hit it off straight away. I told him next time he went out bird ringing, he was taking me with him. Chris knew as much as some of the older birders I'd hung out with in RSPB reserves, but he was a fellow young'un, so I naturally gravitated towards him. His

mum and dad used to carry him on their backs when they were going on birding trips, so his whole life has revolved around birds. He taught me a lot and got me into twitching (travelling sometimes serious distances to see a particular bird). And part of the reason I think he did that was because he couldn't drive! A year after we met, we moved into a shared house together outside uni, and he used to tap on my wall at like 3am and then whisper, 'Hamza! Are you awake?' And before I'd reply, he'd excitedly follow it up with something like, 'There's a bird in Anglesey!' after getting an alert in one of his groups. And I'd say, sleepily, through the wall, 'Is it a pretty bird, Chris?' because I'm a photographer and I'd always be thinking about the pictures, even when I'm half asleep. The next question I'd ask though, before grabbing the car keys was, 'Is it close? Or are we talking a telescope on top of a telescope to see it?'

I ended up going on a few twitches, but I was much more interested in bird ringing. Chris introduced me to a couple of specialised techniques: cannon netting (which involves firing nets high over birds so the net is lifted safely over a flock before everyone sprints to the net to remove the birds as quickly as you can, cover them in a light material to calm them, then examine them) and mist netting (a similar technique, but the net is held between two poles and the birds fly into it). Bird ringing is another level of birding because you're able to hold and examine

birds that you'd only ever otherwise see at the end of a telescope. And that massively appealed to me because instead of seeing a fleeting glimpse of a bird through binoculars or a scope, you're able to really study it in your hand. How its flight feathers are arranged. How much they weigh (it always surprises people how little they weigh, even birds like Tawny Owls). And when you've got a bird like a Firecrest in your hand, you can't even feel the weight. It's less than a 20p coin and yet it's capable of flying thousands of miles. It's only when I held a creature like this safely in my hand that I really appreciated how phenomenal that ability is.

My first bird-ringing trip involved ringing Shelducks, which are large, beautiful ducks. Before I knew it, someone had passed me a Shelduck and then another, so I'm suddenly holding a duck under each arm.

'What do I do with them?!' I asked.

'Hold the head up and the feet out!' someone shouted.

'OK,' I said, still not really sure.

It's a bit like when someone passes you a baby and says: 'Hold the head,' and you don't know what they're talking about until you're actually holding one. Then you get it. That day, I learned how to put a ring on a duck, how to read the numbers on the rings and how to take the various measurements they needed. I'd never been that close to a bird, and it was such a thrill. After I'd ringed

one of the Shelducks, I was told to sign a form and then give the bird a name.

'It's your first bird, Hamza – they've always got to have a name!'

We were in North Wales, so I came up with the name of a valley, but someone told me it had to be something a bit shorter and more memorable.

And then an older volunteer said, in a deadpan voice, 'Call it Krusty.'

'Krusty the Shelduck it is,' I said, and wrote it down. And then, when I looked back up, everyone was pissing themselves with laughter before patting me on the back. It was a lovely, funny community and a world I was just beginning to get a taste for. It's something I'd recommend to anyone who's getting into birds because there really is nothing like seeing a bird that close. There's no textbook that can teach you the things you'll discover and you come out with a whole new appreciation for how incredible these little creatures truly are. And there are bird-ringing groups all over the UK.

So, after having the kinds of incredible experiences I had at uni on my course and with friends like Chris, it was hard to head home to Northampton each summer, because you go straight back to being a kid again when you're at home. It's tricky because you love your mum and dad, but you love your new independence and you want more of it! After I'd graduated from Bangor, my

parents wanted to know what I was going to do next. In fairness, so did I! I remember my dad asking me why I didn't just get a job in Next or something like that in the short term, but I didn't want to do that. I wanted to be a wildlife cameraman, so it seemed like the best thing to do was to go back into education to take a Masters, and I found a course that I liked the sound of, in Biological Photography and Imaging at the University of Nottingham. I loved that and when I got back the next summer, I knew I had to work out how I was going to make this dream happen. That started by saying yes to a friend's kind offer.

A Whole New World

I'd met this friend on my undergraduate course. She had been going to a place in Scotland with her parents for years, and kept inviting me, but I'd always say 'maybe in a few months' or 'maybe next year'. Then, when I went to stay with her at her family home in Yorkshire and saw this stunning photograph of a stag in their lounge, I asked where they took it. 'Ardnamurchan. The place I've been telling you about! Dad took the picture just outside the car on his phone,' she answered.

'No, no, no – this has to be with a zoom lens,' I said.

'Nope – the stag was just over there,' she said, pointing about 3 metres away.

'When are you going there next?!' I asked.

'Three weeks.'

'I'm coming with you.'

It did take a while to get to Ardnamurchan, but that's part of the beauty of it. It's a peninsula, unlike any other, and is home to the most westerly point on the mainland. On my first day there, I just walked around with my mouth open. I was in awe of everything around me. And then I saw a Golden Eagle. There was something so special about the place. I knew it was where I was going to learn to become a cameraman. It also kind of made sense, because all the filming that I'd been doing so far was in North Wales or Scotland. And I thought, *why am I living in Northampton? If I moved to Scotland, I'd be a few hours away from jobs, max*.

With that in mind, I returned home, and two weeks later, I moved up there for good.

I spent the first week trying to convince my parents that I wanted to live in Scotland. They were asking me all the sensible questions parents ask, like, *how are you going to fund yourself? What are you going to do for a job? Where are you going to live?* And I told them I'd found a spot, which wasn't untrue. It was just that the spot I found was a car park and I'd be sleeping in my car! The second week, I spent packing my car with all the essentials I was going to need. My dad was certain this was just a phase I was going through and that after I'd used up the washing powder I'd taken with me, I'd be

straight back home. Well, it's been 12 years now and that phase is still going, I guess!

I didn't have a job or a place to live when I drove up there. But I knew where I wanted to be and felt like I was living the dream. I ended up parking my car (it was a big seven-seater) in the ferry terminal car park right next to the big yellow 'No Overnight Parking or Camping' sign so no one could see it! I spent the first six months there, usually moving the car every morning before 8 o'clock, when people would start using the car park. But I imagine people were asking themselves, 'Who the hell is sleeping next to the pier?!'

But I had everything I needed there. The toilet block was next door and there were showers just down the road. I put my shoes under the car each night before I turned in for the night in case it rained. And to be fair, they were pretty stinky – way too stinky to join me in my luxury accommodation. There was a nice pub a few minutes away which I'd drive to to use the Wi-Fi and for meals (I had chicken nuggets and chips so much, I think the landlord just came over and asked if I wanted 'the usual' after a couple of days!). I had this rough plan to stay at the hotel for a couple of nights and then find my own place, but that didn't end up happening. I was quite happy in my car! The pub – the Kilchoan Hotel – is the only watering hole for 22 miles, so if anyone in the area says 'We're going out', you know exactly where they're

headed! It's a time-warp of a pub but I love it, right down to its heavily worn 70s carpets, plates hanging on the wall, tartan everywhere. That was my life for nine months until I started working for the Kilchoan estate as a ghillie – a right-hand man to someone stalking game, basically. You do the dirty jobs, like skinning, that the stalker doesn't want to do.

For me, it was money I needed. I didn't really want to see animals shot, but I did make an exception for Red Deer on the west coast because the population was out of control, to the extent that it's still affecting the ecosystem today. Trees aren't growing, and new saplings get bitten back as soon as they're planted. As a ghillie, you've got to learn how to approach animals quietly and that's something I've taken with me into my camera work. I also cut grass and chopped logs for people, which was easy because many of the cottages are holiday homes, so I'd just needed to make sure everything was ready for the new guests. I started doing house cleaning as well for new guests coming in. I started with one house and was soon doing three, which was great because it paid £50 a house. I worked out that I needed £100 a month to survive, which was enough for my petrol (because I didn't move much around the village) and for food. I was earning enough to make a mini-living out of it, and even started being able to save up for equipment I needed, like a new lens.

I moved into a caravan – one that you tow on the back of the car – which the stalker I worked with on the estate offered me. It had been left inside a shed for years and was full of mouse droppings, but he told me that if I wanted to clean it out, I could stay in it for a few nights. I was still in there two years later! There was no running water or heating, but I had two big hoodies and two duvets, and that kept me warm enough. I remember in the winter having the same conversation with myself each night: *Do you want to pee now or wait until the middle of the night?* Either way, it was pretty chilly, but at least if you went out straight away you get that over and done with. And that was life for me. Surviving.

During the day, I'd be walking the hills, filming birds, looking for nests, searching for otter holts (dens) – trying to cut my teeth as a wildlife cameraman. My binoculars are always attached to me by a mini-harness, but I wasn't going to lug all my camera equipment everywhere looking for wildlife and then take pictures. If you do it that way, you'll be absolutely knackered within two days and having a big argument with your camera. What you do is do your research beforehand. You see a Barn Owl coming out of an outbuilding and you stop to investigate, or 'inspectorgate' as I call it, and you find loads of owl pellets. So I'd put up barn owl boxes, fill the boxes with the owl pellets, because that's what they use for their

nesting material, and then next year, they'll hopefully use it for their nests.

After that, I'd sit down and make a list of all the animals I could think of attracting. Sadly, quite a few deer get hit by cars up in the Scotland, and especially around Rannoch Moor, a beautiful area of moorland near Glen Coe. But it presented me with an opportunity – I wondered if I could use the meat to feed eagles. So I started doing night-time drive-bys to pick up and recycle roadkill. I mean, I must have looked like a murderer, turning up in famous beauty spots in the dead of night and heaving bodies from A to B. But it proved to be a gamble worth taking because I soon found myself just a few metres away from Golden Eagles. And they happily took the meat, so I got to have these extraordinary experiences sitting just feet away from one of the most incredible birds of prey in the world. I'd stick the camera on, but I wouldn't even need to look through it – I could see them with my own eyes in incredible detail. And I was just thinking, *this is phenomenal. How on earth is this even possible?*

A year after putting together the owl boxes, a couple of Barn Owls moved in, and it was such an incredible feeling, especially when the eggs hatched. It only took a year to get those shots, which in wildlife photography terms, is nothing!

Over time, I've become a sort of Dr Doolittle in Ardnamurchan, helping treat injured animals and pets.

Anything that moves will basically end up at my place, which has become a sort of unofficial animal rehabilitation centre. I do my best, but my speciality is birds. My training as a bird ringer means I know how to handle birds so as not to hurt them. Beyond that, though, I get called in for any heavy lifting people need in the community, which has earned me the nickname 'the Walking Forklift'. But the way people ask for help up here is really sweet. They tend to invite me over for dinner and then mention that they might need a bit of help moving the Aga. There's a real sense of family, camaraderie and community, and I've found a place among them. There's a famous saying in Africa: It takes a village to raise a child. It's taken a village to help me become the wildlife cameraman that I am now. Everyone helps each other out.

I can see White-tailed Eagles, Golden Eagles, Whinchats, Ringed Plovers, Redshanks and Curlews just outside my window. Granted, it is a big window looking out to sea, but there are so many different habitats within that view and it fills me with joy. I still think, *What the hell!* every time. It blows my mind. I love seeing how they live throughout the seasons, in different weathers. I usually see a pair of Mallards that nest in the reeds in front of the house, and I see they have ten chicks. The next day, though, they might have only eight, and I can't help but feel sad. Then a week later, I see that they still have eight, and I'm instinctively filled with joy. I know

that they're not all going to last, though, and that two or three will probably survive, but that's exactly why the Mallards will have ten to twelve chicks each time. Several of them will be taken by birds of prey as well as Herons, otters and mink. It's all part of a chain and keeps those others feeding their families and surviving. By the time the Mallard chicks have reached juvenile stage, there will be two or three to start up the next generation. Beyond the Mallards in the reeds, I can see the local otter family on the edge of the bay shaking the water off their fur to keep themselves warm. And then, in the distance, I can sometimes see dolphins and minke whales. It's funny, because at first glance, this area can look pretty barren, but if you know where to look and the places to go, you'll start falling in love with it. I can see something from my living room and be filming it within 90 seconds. This is where I want to be, surrounded by the wildlife I love. Nowhere else can you see a minke whale, a dolphin, an otter, an adder and an Eagle on the same day.

A Lucky Break

Studying in North Wales for my undergraduate degree, I managed to get the number of an amazing wildlife cameraman called Jesse Wilkinson from a friend of a friend. I did my research, sent him a message telling him I wanted to be a wildlife cameraman and asked him if he'd help and advise me. As a bit of a sweetener,

I mentioned that I was a big dude, an ex-rugby player and that I could carry his gear for him. He wrote back saying thank you, but he usually works alone because it is kind of a solitary job and suggested contacting the BBC. I thanked him, but then a couple of weeks later, he phoned me up. It caught me a bit off guard to be honest because he said 'Hi Hamza, it's Jesse', and it took me a good few seconds to realise it was Jesse Wilkinson. He told me he'd injured his back, and would be grateful if he could take me up on my offer! I ended up becoming his assistant for a few years, and it was such an incredible experience. He found out about my love for birds and the fact I could identify them very quickly and one day he asked if I knew a nearby plucking post – which is like a tree stump or something similar – where a bird of prey returns after catching something, to remove the feathers before eating it. He wanted to use it for an upcoming sequence.

Well, it just so happened that I did know one nearby that I'd seen a Sparrowhawk using, but I said, 'Nope Jesse – it's my secret place!'

'Attenborough's going to be narrating over the top of the footage,' he replied.

'Well, why didn't you say?!'

It turned out it was going to be a TV show called *The Hunt*, a BBC nature documentary that came out in 2015 about the relationship between predators and their prey.

I worked as a camera assistant. Everything took off from there really, helping each other out on jobs, all thanks to a dodgy back and me putting myself out there and taking a chance.

It's never felt like a job to me. It feels more like I'm being paid to do a hobby I love. 'Find a job you enjoy doing, and you will never have to work a day in your life' is an old saying I live by.

My advice to young people who want to become wildlife cameramen and women is to contact everyone you can find who does it for a job and ask if you can help and learn from them. The worst they can say is no. But someone will be grateful for the offer of help at some point and then you'll have the opportunity. And once you're there, you're getting the most valuable training there is – being an apprentice to someone skilled in a profession you already love. The other advice, which I'd borrowed from someone I admire greatly, formed the speech I gave to the graduating students at Bangor Uni, my alma mater, in July 2022. I'm still flabbergasted that I got a call to say that they wanted to award me an honorary Master of Science degree. And that news was made even more special because I knew that my hero, David Attenborough, had received one of the uni's first honorary degrees in 2009. The three pieces of advice (given by American actor, singer, dancer and choreographer André De Shields during his acceptance

speech after receiving the Key to the City of Baltimore in 2019, just two months after winning his first Tony Award at the age of 73) were:

1. Surround yourself with people whose eyes light up when they see you coming.
2. Slowly is the fastest way to get to where you want to be.
3. The top of one mountain is the bottom of the next, so keep climbing!

When I'm working, I'm giving it 100 per cent, I always do, whether I'm staying alert for hours at a time in a hide or giving a talk to a group of kids. But the truth is, when I'm not working, I'm a bit lazy! I love my bed and I love sleeping. So I'll wake up late, see what's happening outside and maybe do a bit of filming. It's the complete opposite when I'm commissioned to work as a cameraman on a project. If it's summer, I'm usually up at 2.30am, out of the house by 3am and I'm probably getting back home at 10pm.

And you might be dealing with long hikes carrying heavy equipment, long waits in a hide and even in summer, when you're not moving, it will get cold. You train yourself to adapt to these new surroundings though, teaching yourself to become more and more patient and learning to keep your concentration level up. The way I tend to think about it is if I switch off and I miss

the crucial few minutes of footage, not only will I have wasted however much time I will have been in a hide, I'm also not going to get paid!

Most people think that hides are really big and posh-looking – like the ones you get at nature reserves – where you can stretch and move around, but the ones we actually use on shoots are tiny, usually a 1m x 1m cube where you're sitting sideways on a little tripod stool. I make my own hides out of wooden pallets, one of which is at an angle with a hole cut out for the front. You wrap a waterproof membrane around and then cover with vegetation. The one I made to shoot the White-tailed Eagles near me my friend and I built into a section of collapsed dry stone wall; we camouflaged the hide by rebuilding the wall around it. The animals will know there's a drystone wall there already, so they might register that something's changed slightly, but not enough to spook them. The hide has to be small so that the animal barely notices it. Plus, if it's bigger, you have to work even harder to camouflage it.

Living in a hide does take a bit of getting used to and requires more concentration than you might think. The first time I was inside a hide by myself I went along with my headphones but I realised I was constantly getting distracted. It's the same thing if you try and read a book – you lose focus on the animals. You also don't want to be too comfortable because you might nod off.

And you don't want to miss any giveaway behaviour from a chick that they're about to do something or from an adult Golden Eagle who's suddenly focusing on something in the distance intently. So, you have to have all your senses switched on because at some point, something's going to happen and you don't know when, but you do know you have to be ready to catch it when it does. I've learned that the hard way, watching a Red-Throated Diver incubating her eggs and thinking it'd be a good time to take a break, because I was expecting her to just sit on the eggs for the next six hours, as she had been for the past few days. But then, she got up, and the chick started to crack the egg and I wasn't in position to film it. So you learn to sharpen your focus through your mistakes.

It also takes more stamina, preparation and creativity than I imagined. You've got to think about your wellbeing – the last thing you want to be doing is injuring yourself, because you'll be out of the game for a while and you can't afford that, as a freelancer. On the first couple of hide shoots, I was crawling out of the hide with massively swollen legs, so I've learned to wear those pressure socks you wear on aeroplanes or after surgery to stop deep vein thrombosis (DVT). You also have to learn to cope with the boredom and figure out workarounds for problems like hay fever, which I do suffer from. The answer – plugging my nostrils with tissue!

You also want to double-check you've got all of your equipment with you before you leave the car. I've hiked for miles with all my stuff before I've realised I've left the memory cards I need to record the footage onto. Or the tripod I need to mount the camera! I've now got emergency cards that do not leave my bag and if they do, the first thing I do when I get back home is replace them! You develop a routine. I call it the 'idiot check' to make sure I've got everything I need. It's got longer as I've got more experienced, mainly because it includes things learned from previous mistakes I've made. Like remembering to turn the auto-flash feature off on my iPhone. I left that on when I was shooting a pair of Golden Eagles (not my local ones) and wanted to take a cheeky phone snap. I didn't make a sound, but the flash was enough to spook the Eagle, who flew off straight away.

These sorts of things are small sacrifices to get to do what you love: getting to travel the world, seeing the most incredible animals and environments. At the beginning of my career as a wildlife cameraman, I never really thought I'd do any presenting work. But then one of my friends kept telling me that he reckoned I'd be great on camera. I just shrugged it off at first. I thought, *I don't have the right body type or charisma that people are after.* But my friend got in touch with her friend, who was making a programme about up-and-coming

wildlife camera operators and she asked me to come down and sent me the address. Little did I know until I arrived that it was *The One Show* on the BBC! After the show, I bumped into an agent (Jan) who was actually waiting for a client of hers there. A few people had already approached me asking if I was represented by anyone, but Jan and I got on so well straight away. She took me out to dinner to discuss it more and I'm glad she did, because she's become a part of my extended family now!

Jan thought I definitely had a personality for TV and started to look for work for me. And soon afterwards, in late 2019, came some unbelievable news. CBeebies wanted to make a show called *Let's Go for a Walk* and had me in mind to present it! And then, in 2020, Channel 4 approached us to make the one-off documentary *Scotland: My Life in the Wild* about my home and the wildlife around me in Ardnamurchan. The following year I was offered guest presenter roles on *Countryfile* and *Animal Park*. I still can't believe any of it, really. It had been an incredible couple of years, it really had.

And then, in the middle of 2022, out of the blue, I got a strange message from my agent Jan.

'Do you like to dance?' it read.

I wondered what she was on about, but I replied:

'Yeah!'

Then she dropped the bombshell on me.

'One of the execs at *Strictly Come Dancing* has been in touch. Have you got a video of you dancing?'

Woah.

I searched everything that I, my friends and family had, but the best I could find was a video from about 2015 someone had taken on their phone at a house party, which we sent over.

Then I was invited to come down and meet the guys at *Strictly* in London. When I did meet them, they said 'Thank God you came down because we wouldn't have picked you based on the video you sent over!' The meeting went really well, but then I didn't hear anything for ages. In the meantime, I'd flown to the Canadian Arctic on a wildlife shoot for a few months. But that was coming to an end, and I was wondering what was next on the horizon, so I messaged Jan from the satellite phone to ask what was happening with *Strictly*. Because if it wasn't going ahead, I needed to know so I could pick up some more camera work! She said 'Give me a week – I'll message you'.

A week later, I got this message:

'You've got *Strictly*. Don't tell a soul!'

Bring it on! The first person I told was a sleeping polar bear under the stars in the middle of nowhere. I couldn't tell any of the humans around, the camera guys or the guides until the news was aired, so I kept completely silent about it. Wow, that was hard! Also,

we were struggling to get a hunting sequence shot of a polar bear catching a beluga whale. So it wouldn't have been the best time to drop into conversation that I was heading off to *Strictly*. Three weeks later, we finally got the sequence, and we were all happy with it. So that was the moment I chose to tell everyone. If we hadn't have got the sequence, I would have told everyone after we landed back in the UK, but it felt like a good time to break the news. Suddenly, everyone on the shoot was asking me: 'Hang on a minute – how famous are you, Hamza?! How many followers have you got?' I was like: 'I'm just a dude that does a bit of wildlife camerawork for a living and does a few bits on kids' TV. And a bit of guest stuff on *Countryfile*. It's a surprise to me too!'

Strictly was a whirlwind, and to be honest, I still feel like I'm flying with the birds. I think I experienced every single possible emotion. It was quite a feat of endurance, though. On Mondays, I would start training with my dance partner Jowita for a few hours before heading down to Longleat to film *Animal Park*. Then Tuesday evening, Jowita came down to Longleat so we could carry on training. I'd wake up on Wednesday morning and it was back to filming at Longleat, then training with Jowita in the evening before we drove back to London together. Then we had the whole of Thursday to train.

Being on *Strictly* was the first time I'd ever been to London, apart from picking up grandmothers and

aunties from Heathrow Airport. I don't do cities, really! Sometimes the heavens would open and the streets would get an absolute drenching. I think that was the only time I'd seen the streets so peaceful. I love the wind and the rain, and I think I'm built for the wild, really. But even in the middle of a concrete jungle, hanging out with a friend for a coffee, I'd be seeing Parakeets whizz by, Sparrowhawks on the hunt and Peregrine Falcons chasing down Pigeons.