

John Muir, Earth - Planet, Universe: Pupil Activity Support Notes

The Wild Boy of Dunbar – Explore Birds



The aim of this activity is to identify birdlife today and then compare your findings to the birdlife John Muir would have experienced when he lived in Dunbar, Scotland (from the year 1838 to 1849).

History tells us that John Muir could identify up to 71 birds from their song, nest or egg.

1. How many birds can you identify from the following list? Match them to their egg, nest, sound or general description.

- Puffin
- Victorian Slender-billed Curlew
- Robin
- Gannet
- Skylark

a. I am a plump bird with a bright orange-red breast and my face, throat and cheeks are edged with grey. I have a white belly and olive-brown upper parts. I sing a melodious warbling song from strategic perches, often quite high up; it sounds like ‘twiddle-oo, twiddle-ee-dee, twiddle-oo twiddle’. I lay blue eggs. What bird am I?



I am a

John Muir, *Earth - Planet, Universe*: Pupil Activity Support Notes

- b. I am a small bird with a 77–88 cm wingspan and a long, curved, slender bill. I am mainly greyish brown above, with a whitish rump and lower back. My under parts are whitish, heavily streaked with dark brown. My flanks have round or heart-shaped spots. The sound I make as my alarm call is a fast ‘*cu-ee*’. What bird am I?



I am a

- c. I am a large black and white bird with a yellow head; long, pointed wings with a wing span of up to two meters; and a long yellow bill. My huge nest is made of seaweed and sticks. I eat big fish and hunt them by diving from a height into the sea and pursuing my prey underwater. My eggs are large and speckled. What bird am I?



I am a

- d. My upper parts are brown with heavy black streaks. My under parts are buff to white and my breast is streaked with black. My outer tail feathers are white. My legs are yellowish-brown and my bill is horn-coloured. I am well known for my singing. Most people hear me more than they see me. I sing while I fly with a rapid ‘tweet, tweet, tweet, whistle, tweet, tweet’ sound. I lay smooth, glossy eggs that are greyish-white with heavy brown and olive spots. What bird am I?



I am a

John Muir, Earth - Planet, Universe: Pupil Activity Support Notes

- e. I have a brightly coloured beak and bright orange feet. I eat sand eels and I lay my creamy white eggs in a burrow. The sound I make is a 'growling laugh'. What bird am I?



I am a

- 2. Which birds from the above list do you think John Muir would have seen or heard when he lived in Dunbar?

.....
.....
.....

The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds' surveys show that some bird species, since John Muir's time, are in decline.

For example:

- a. The Slender-billed Curlew has disappeared from Scotland all together. So if John Muir were alive today they would no longer be part of the 71 birds he knew. Slender-billed Curlews are now so rare, there is thought to be fewer than 50 adult birds left in the whole of the world!
- b. Also in recent times the Skylark population has plummeted so that today the population is about one-third what it was when John Muir was alive!

John Muir, *Earth - Planet, Universe*: Pupil Activity Support Notes

3. Why do you think this has happened? What do you think you could do on your own or as a class group to help get to know and look after your local birds?

.....
.....
.....

(1. Answers: a. Robin, b. Victorian Slender-billed Curlew, c. Gannet, d. Skylark, e. Puffin)

(2. Answer: all of them!)

Further work:

For more ideas and activities to use with this section of the John Muir story go to [The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds](http://www.royalsociety.org/education/birds) (this site includes links to wildlife explorer clubs as well as other educational resources).

Another great website to help you identify birds is this one:

<https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/visiting-woods/trees-woods-and-wildlife/animals/birds/>