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The lasting influence of the Northern Naturalist, Artist and Engraver – Thomas Bewick (1753-1828)

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Looking at the books for sale in my local garden centre, I came across copies of Bewick's British Birds by Thomas Bewick. This is a facsimile copy from the original two volumes of British Birds, Volume 1 – Land Birds (1797) and Volume 2 – Water Birds (1804). These books were of immense importance when they were published, bringing fame to the author that reached far beyond our shores.

Thomas Bewick:
Painting by James Ramsey

His name, however, seems to have been forgotten by most modern naturalists, unlike John Ray, Gilbert White, Charles Darwin and Alfred Russell Wallace, and yet, the American ornithologist John James Audubon (1785 - 1851) made time to meet Bewick during his visit to England and then on his return to America Audubon named the Bewick's Wren *Thryomanes bewickii* after his new friend and northern naturalist. This was not the only bird named after Bewick, as in 1830, the English zoologist and naturalist William Yarrell (1784 - 1856) named the Bewick's Swan *Cygnus bewickii* in his honour.

In literature too, Thomas Bewick was recognised for his books, with Charlotte Bronte (1816 - 1855) writing in her novel Jane Eyre, Jane would hide from her adopted family by sitting on the windowsill behind the curtains, and "With Bewick on my knee, I was then happy". The poet William Wordsworth (1770-1850) also recognised Thomas Bewick's genius in his poem The Two Thieves: -

"O now that the genius of Bewick were mine,
And the skill which he learned on the banks of the Tyne!
Then the Muses might deal with me just as they chose,
For I'd take my last leave both of verse and prose."

There are better scholars than I who have studied and written of the life of Thomas Bewick, and there is a suggested list of books for those who wish to become more familiar with the man. Within this article, I will look at the art and understanding of Bewick the naturalist, and discuss his influence that exists today and for the future of natural history studies, here is some background into my relationship with Bewick which may help as the story unfolds.

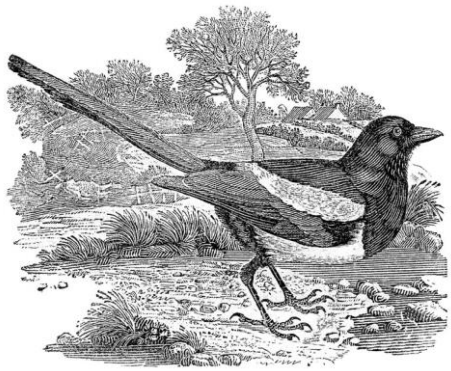
Thomas Bewick grew up at Cherryburn Farm next to the village of Mickley on the southern banks of the River Tyne. The features of the surrounding countryside are to be seen in much of his illustrations, some still recognisable to me today, as it is only eight miles from my childhood home in the village of Lemington, so we must have shared some of the same playgrounds. The illustration, for example, of the Nuthatch *Sitta europaea* on a dead tree next to a river seems at odds with this woodland bird. Nuthatches are not thought of as riverside birds, however, the river banks at the bottom of the vale on which Cherryburn stands, has a small wood on each bank and this riparian feature still holds Nuthatch today. The river side would have been a popular place for Bewick as he played and crossed the river to go to school and church in the neighbouring village of Ovingham giving him opportunities to observe the Nuthatch in this wood.

Cherryburn. Photo: S. Rutherford

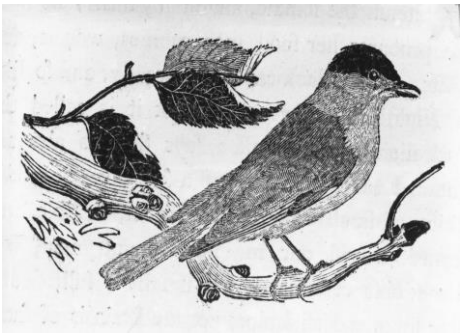
An original boxwood block used by Thomas Bewick (© Cherryburn) photographed by S. Rutherford, with kind permission from Cherryburn.

Nuthatch

Yellowhammer



Magpie



Blackcap

We can say with some confidence where Bewick observed another bird, the Yellowhammer *Emberiza citronella*, by looking at the background to the image. Ryton Willows is an area of scrubland on the south banks of the River Tyne and is some six miles east of Cherryburn, but is still, as it was when I was a child, a place I see and hear Yellowhammers. Even though the profile of the river has been altered since Bewick's day with ash from the now decommissioned Stella Power Stations, the scrub at Ryton Willows still edges the river on this low-lying space.

Bewick used Boxwood blocks to carve the images for his bird books. This technique was a cheaper option than using metal plates which were becoming a more favourable medium, but woodcarving was thought to give inferior quality to the image. Bewick's skills and artistic abilities meant he could produce a high-quality picture using woodblocks. The fineness in his cuts could show light and shade that suggests depth which we shall look at with the Magpie *Pica pica*. It was this ability to produce a quality identification book that allowed birdwatching and an interest in nature to a greater proportion of the public which was previously restricted by cost. There is another quality to the images in these books, that of storytelling. Bewick's Magpie picture is a beautiful and accurately detailed image of the bird, with the correct proportions and stance, and, even though it is in black and white, the iridescent shades that give the spectacular brilliance of the plumage are suggested through the cuts; there is also more information which helps us to understand the Magpie. If we look at the background of this picture, we can see it is more than just the identification. Bewick places the bird in an open field setting surrounded by hedges with a single standard tree and the farmhouse at the top of the hill. This is typical habitat where we would expect to find Magpies. If we then look at the background beneath the tail, we can see that a tragedy has occurred – the fence has broken and a horse has fallen to its death. Through this scene Bewick is suggesting that the Magpie is a bird of carrion, and so the picture is now not just giving us the ability to put a name to the bird, we now have information on the bird's habitat and food requirements.

In the study of the Blackcap *Sylvia atricapilla*, we can see that Bewick was more than just a birdwatcher, he was in fact a competent naturalist. The image of the Blackcap is at first glance, quite simple in that it is the bird sitting on a twig. We can admire the technical skills of the precision and accuracy in the detail of the bird from the hand of Bewick, but again let us look at the story telling skills of the naturalist. The Blackcap is shown with its bill open and the crest raised, this is suggesting that the bird is singing. Next, if we look at the twig, (I don't believe that it was just a prop to show the bird from); we can see that some of the buds have yet to open while a few are in full leaf. The buds are dark and very small, while the leaves have a double toothed edge and the shape is asymmetrical, there is also a suggestion the upper surface is rough and scratchy. There are other small round buds that have a rosebud look to them, these are the flower buds of the tree, and all of these features are from the English Elm *Ulmus procera.* These were the most common tree of the hedgerows in Bewick's time and so would have been very obvious to the people who were interested in the natural world at that time. The information taken from this image now tells us the best way to find a Blackcap is by searching the standard trees in the hedgerows in spring when the leaves are starting to unfold and the bird is easier to observe, and these birds are best found through the song when the males are singing.

Conclusion

When looking through these books today bird watchers will see Bewick's limitations, birds that he was familiar with are anatomically accurate with great care and fineness of detail brought by his skills as an artist and observer of nature, while with those that he was not so familiar, he used paintings and taxidermy specimens with poorer results that would not be accepted in a modern bird identification publication. But we must realise the time which we are looking at, and respect the fact that Bewick was a busy business and family man, and these limitations should not diminish the significance of his books and their legacy to the modern naturalists. Before Bewick, books to encourage the study of natural history were priced way beyond most people's ability and were only for those fortunate to have had an education, Bewick opened up the study of nature by the power of storytelling through his pictures and words, and using the woodcarving medium kept the price affordable for a greater audience. This principle has been continued with books today which opened this world to many young naturalists; and with books such as "The Observers" and "The Wayside and Woodland" series nurturing the delights of looking at nature; and gaining more depth on the subjects with the Collins Bird book which is still the 'go to' bird identification book for the majority of todays birders.

I see Thomas Bewick as a major part of the development in the study of nature – John Ray gave the science of naming species, Gilbert White showed how to observe and record, Charles Darwin and Alfred Russell Wallace brought the understanding of natural selection and Thomas Bewick opened up the study of nature for everybody to be able to contribute and enjoy.

Suggested reading –

Bain, I. (1979). *Thomas Bewick an illustrated record of his life and work.* Tyne and Wear County Council Museums.

Bain, I. (1989). *The Workshop of Thomas Bewick a Pictorial Survey.* The Thomas Bewick Birthplace Trust.

Bewick, T. (2010). *Bewick's British Birds.* Arcturus Publishing.

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Steven Rutherford is Honorary Chairman of the British Naturalists' Association since he took over the role from Roger Tabor in 2019. He was awarded the Richard Fitter Memorial Medal in 2015, and the David Bellamy Award in 2025.

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