

# The bird of passage

Malcolm Green tells the story  
behind his performance piece  
*Gone Cuckoo*

This story begins sometime back in the mid-1990s when April came and went and I didn't hear the voice of the cuckoo from my office window in the Rising Sun Country Park, in Newcastle upon Tyne, UK. It was a voice that had been there every year since I had started working in North Tyneside in 1983. A hole appeared in the world where the cuckoo song had once been. A hole that gradually expanded as the voices of other familiar birds – the wood warbler, the yellowhammer, the spotted flycatcher, the turtle dove – also began to fall silent, seemingly largely unnoticed by the wider world. Then, in the early 2000s I visited a primary school on the estate just near to where the cuckoo used to sing, and I played a recording of a cuckoo's voice to a group of wide-eyed children sitting cross-legged on the floor. I was taken aback when hardly a child recognised the song and many didn't know what a cuckoo was. Unthinkable in my childhood – I realised then how quickly the once familiar can be lost from our cultural memory.

I decided to create a performance piece about the cuckoo that both celebrated the bird and highlighted its plight. The cuckoo is, after all, a bird that is immediately recognisable in its call and one that has likely been woven into our identity as humans since we first walked the Earth.

Indeed, there cannot be a bird (except perhaps the nightingale) that features in more songs, stories and poems across the northern hemisphere than the cuckoo. It is an important character in tales from Ireland to Japan, where it has variously brought Jack a gift from Africa, been born from an old man's pipe, and been caged to keep the summer. It appears in the 13th-century English round 'Sumer Is Icumen In' and has been put into verse by Ted Hughes, William Wordsworth, John Clare and many others. It is an essential part of our folklore: it brings the spring, tells us when to plant our seeds, lets us know how many children we will have, and informs us of how long we have to live. It is a bird that is embedded in the human imagination, it is a very part of who we are, yet we are watching its disappearance from the English countryside with only the faintest murmurings of concern.

An organisation that has shown concern for the plight of the cuckoo is the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO), which in 2011 developed an inspirational project, tracking the birds on their migration from Britain to sub-Saharan Africa. The aim was to discover where they go, the routes they take, and where they encounter trouble. People are invited to sponsor these satellite-tagged birds, which can then be followed online as they make their extraordinary journeys. I sponsored one and found myself identifying with my bird and willing it on as if it were a part of myself, which in a sense of course it was. This cyber-journey became the obvious backbone to my cuckoo story, and it was clear I needed to be involved with one bird from the beginning to the end of its journey.

## It is a bird that is embedded in the human imagination

The BTO were interested in working with artists to communicate ecological stories and had already got together a team of visual artists to represent migrant birds in their sub-Saharan locations, so they were open to the idea of other artistic intervention. Oral storytelling was much more of an unknown, but willing to give it a try they teamed me up with a group of BTO scientists who were satellite-tagging birds on the wild land surrounding Fylingdales Early Warning Station on the North York Moors.

I remember arriving at Fylingdales in the 3 o'clock darkness of a May morning and having to show our passports before being allowed onto the military site. We were driven out onto the moor surrounding the base, and there under the shadow of a great monolith, with its mighty discs pointing to the heavens receiving messages of possible nuclear attack, we set our nets to catch a cuckoo. The man who facilitated it all was northerner Mick Carroll, an ex-RAF man and fearless bird conservationist with a huge presence undiminished by the incurable cancer that was gradually sapping the life out of his body. It was he who released