

## INTRODUCTION

In what state that ever I be,  
*Timor mortis conturbat me.*

As I me walkèd one morning,  
I heard a bird both weep and sing,  
This was the tenor of his talking:  
*Timor mortis conturbat me.*

I asked this birdë what he meant;  
He said, 'I am a musket gent;  
For dread of death I am nigh shent,  
*Timor mortis conturbat me.*

'Jesus Christ, when he should die,  
To his Father loud gan he cry,  
"Father," he said, "in Trinity,  
*Timor mortis conturbat me.*'

'When I shall die, know I no day;  
In what place or country, can I not say;  
Therefore this songë sing I may:  
*Timor mortis conturbat me.*'

I was in hospital waiting for an operation for colon cancer when I first read this anonymous fifteenth-century poem, which I have called *A Sparrowhawk's Lament*. It set me thinking. In 15 minutes they would be coming to wheel me down to the theatre. Times like these concentrate the mind wonderfully. Why, in this poem, is a male Sparrowhawk worrying about the fear of dying? Then the bond between man and hawk or falcon was iron-clad. For over 3,000 years man had depended on their hunting skills for his next meal. Was the Sparrowhawk able to look into a crystal ball and foresee the future of his species – an echo of Leonard Cohen growling "*the future it is murder*:" persecution and pesticides?

This thought passed through my mind as I was wheeled down to the theatre. The surgeon popped in to say hello as the canula was fitted. The anaesthetist offered comfort as the anaesthetic swelled in my veins. The clock at the end of the room blurred and as an icy black curtain swooshed up my arm, I am sure I heard a bell ring followed by a chorister singing *Timor mortis conturbat me*.

The next thing I remember was a disembodied voice saying, "David, come on, David." A face swam into focus. It was a nurse in the high-dependency unit checking that I was all right. I had shared the male Sparrowhawk's fear of death. There was now an indefinable bond between us.

As I convalesced I began to wonder if all our British breeding birds of prey shared the Sparrowhawk's same anxiety of the fear of death? At the beginning of the nineteenth century game preservationists embarked on a reign of systematic and vicious persecution,

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*Timor mortis conturbat me* is a Latin phrase commonly found in late medieval Scottish and English poetry that translates as 'fear of death worries me.'

ensuring that the Goshawk was extinct by 1889, the Marsh Harrier by 1898, the Osprey by 1908, the Honey Buzzard by 1911 and the White-tailed Eagle by 1916. Thankfully, since 1981 all birds of prey have been fully protected by law. I decided on a plan of action. I would go on a quest to find out how each of these species was faring. As a wildlife filmmaker and conservationist of birds of prey over the last 40 years, I wanted to share my memories of encounters with these thrilling predators. Foremost among those accompanying me on my travels would be the world-famous wildlife artist Bruce Pearson, whom I first met, in Antarctica, in 1976.

There are 15 species of birds of prey breeding in the British Isles: Osprey, Honey Buzzard, Red Kite, White-tailed Eagle, Marsh Harrier, Hen Harrier, Montagu's Harrier, Goshawk, Sparrowhawk, Common Buzzard, Golden Eagle, Kestrel, Merlin, Hobby and Peregrine Falcon. At the beginning of each chapter I will detail the population of that particular bird of prey in the British Isles. These figures have been extracted from *Population Estimates of Birds In Great Britain and the United Kingdom*, a survey carried out by The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and published in *British Birds* magazine in 2013. It shows whether a bird's population is increasing, declining or remaining stable, and when the survey was carried out.

I will set out to meet the writers, artists, poets, wildlife filmmakers and television presenters who have done so much to rehabilitate birds of prey in the public's mind. I will also talk with a wide cross-section of scientists, conservationists and all those, who strive to safeguard our precious raptors. I want to carry out a detailed appraisal across the British Isles to discover the true state of our relationship with our British birds of prey and how they are faring, and how many still share the Sparrowhawk's fear of death implied in the phrase *Timor mortis conturbat me*.

