

The early birder

Pioneering photographer Emma Turner roamed the Norfolk Broads from her houseboat a century ago, capturing some of the first dramatic photographs of wild birds. While many of her pictures have sadly been lost, her legacy lives on, writes **James Parry**

Even by the standards of British eccentricity, it must have been an extraordinary sight: a middle-class lady of a certain age, lying on the ground while two men cover her with rotting vegetation.

So it was that pioneering bird photographer Emma Louisa Turner was camouflaged by her assistants, her camera lens peeping out so she could take close-up images of some of Britain's most elusive species. In her landmark book, *Broadland Birds* (1924), she described an encounter with a snipe, which potted about on the dead sedges covering her face. "Once or twice I felt the slender bill gently prodding my cheek all over," she wrote, "and once it was thrust into my ear... The rubbish-heap method of photography was absolutely exhausting, but it had lively compensations."

Turner's episode with the snipe took place in Norfolk at Hickling Broad, a place with which she became inextricably linked. Tantalisingly little is known about her early years. Born in 1866 and raised in Kent, she seems to have come from a well-to-do background – she never worked for a living and never married, so clearly had independent means. In 1900 she felt "the need to take up an outside occupation," and a chance encounter with early wildlife photographer Richard Kearton encouraged her to set her sights on birds.

Location photography in those days was not for the faint-hearted. Heavy equipment and lengthy exposure times made capturing wild birds on film particularly problematic. Undaunted, Turner and her camera made a first visit to the marshes

around Hickling in the spring of 1902. "Just what it is in the marshland that grips the imagination and casts a spell over its lovers, I do not know – we none of us know," she wrote. It was an affair of the heart that was to last for the rest of her life.

Three years later she was installed on Hickling Broad in a houseboat called *The Water-Rail*, which she had



ABOVE Emma Turner's 1911 picture of a fledgling bittern in Norfolk provided proof of their return to Britain

designed herself and was to live in for several months every year. Each day she would go out in search of birds, often accompanied by local marshmen Alfred and Cubit Nudd.

A PICTURE OF CHANGE

The Water-Rail was not Turner's only waterborne craft. She also had a dinghy and a canoe, which enabled her to lead a virtually aquatic existence and enjoy intimate contact with birds such as bearded tits, marsh and Montagu's harriers, ruffs, grasshopper warblers and short-eared owls. Her stunning photographs of these

encounters were often the first time such species had been recorded on film. One of her greatest triumphs came in 1911 when, along with local gamekeeper Jim Vincent, she discovered a fledgling bittern, the first evidence that the species had bred in Britain for over four decades. Her atmospheric images of the gawky youngster stunned the ornithological world and helped promote the idea that a camera and a photo – rather than a gun and a corpse – could 'prove' science.

Turner was awarded a Gold Medal by the Royal Photographic Society and was one of the first women to be admitted as a fellow of the Linnean Society. A highly respected ornithologist, she corresponded with the leading bird experts of the day and lectured on her observations in Norfolk and elsewhere.

Cruelly denied her sight following a bungled cataract operation, she was forced to give up photography and retired to Cambridge, where she died in 1940. Her collection of original photographs has never been traced, but a record of her achievements is being compiled from various archives and a biography of this remarkable woman is planned for 2018. Meanwhile, the island at Hickling where she lived on *The Water-Rail* still bears her name. ☺

NOW READ TURNER...

Broadland Birds, Country Life, 1924

Birdwatching on Scolt Head, Country Life, 1928.

Every Garden a Bird Sanctuary, HF&G Witherby Limited, 1935



James Parry is a writer, editor and author based in Norfolk, specialising in wildlife, the environment, heritage, art, and anything else that catches his eye.

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Emma Turner**

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30-minute profile, is available
on BBC iPlayer: [bbc.co.uk/
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Bittern by the camera bug: ornithology and photography occupied much of Emma Turner's life, but she was also a keen gardener and dog lover, training her various terriers to flush birds from bushes so she could count them

Photos: Courtesy of James Parry and the Maurice Bird Archive