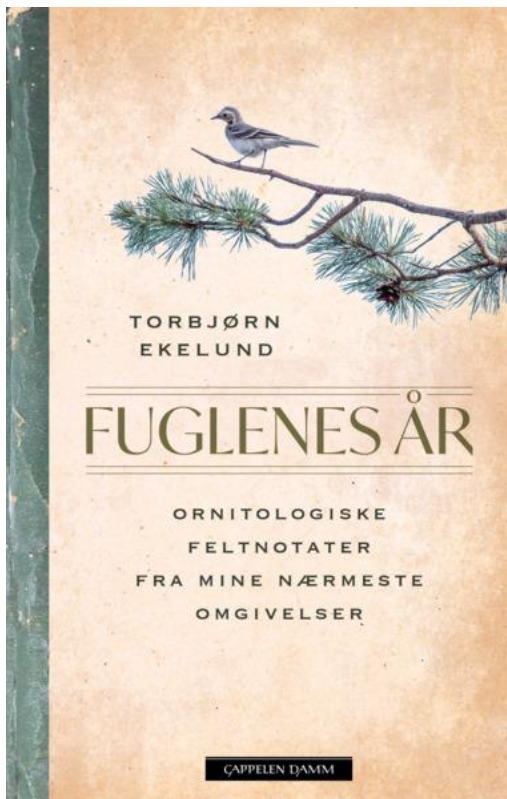


Cappelen Damm Agency *Autumn 2025*



Sometimes you discover something new, or see something familiar in a new way. The space expands. The world gets bigger. A curtain is pulled aside, and you see into a parallel universe.

With these words, a journey begins. Not across continents, but into the small things that surrounds us. When epilepsy forced journalist and amateur ornithologist Torbjørn Ekelund to abandon his plans for a globe-spanning bird book, his world shrank to the local woods of Maridalen, his garden, and a small cabin by the sea. But in that shrinking, something expanded.

Told through a series of diary entries over the course of a year, *A Year of Birds* follows Ekelund's growing awareness of the birds around him. At the beginning of the year, he knows almost nothing about birds. By the end of the year, he knows a little more. He watches blackbirds and bullfinches, observes gulls and geese, and lets the ordinary transform into the extraordinary through simple, sustained attention.

A Year of Birds:
Ornithological field
notes from my local
surroundings

This is a book about birds but also about perception, limitation, and the beauty of staying still. It is about discovering nature not in far-off landscapes, but right where you are. With warmth, humour, and a quiet existential undertone, *A Year of Birds* invites us to look more closely, live more attentively and see the world anew.

Torbjørn Ekelund
b. 1971

Torbjørn Ekelund is a writer, author and part owner of the online magazine Harvest. His books have been translated into ten languages, including English, German, Spanish and Mandarin. He was awarded the The Banff Mountain Adventure Travel Award for A Year in the Woods.



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A Year of Birds
Torbjørn Ekelund

A YEAR OF BIRDS

Ornithological field notes from my local surroundings

By Torbjørn Ekelund

English translation by Diane Oatley

This translation has received a support grant from NORLA

A PLACE TO REST THE GAZE

On an autumn day some years ago I realised that my life had changed. I had turned fifty. I had been diagnosed with epilepsy a few years before. The seizures came on a regular basis, without warning. I was prescribed with heavy medication. The side effects tapped all my energy. I could sleep for ten hours straight, wake up, and five minutes later feel like going back to bed. Things that had formerly come easily to me now seemed like unsurmountable challenges. It was impossible to predict when the next seizure would arrive. The uncertainty generated both fear of a kind I had never before experienced and the conviction that the safest option was to remain within the bounds of what was familiar and stable. Take it easy. Stay in my home office. Spend time with people I trusted.

My world became smaller but even so, that world was not uneventful. I started noticing small things around me, the simple life, the details of everyday existence that had previously gone unnoticed. Things that had always been there, that are found in the immediate surroundings of all human beings, but which we often overlook, because our attention is always focused on something larger.

One such thing was the birds in our garden. We have lived in the same house for many years and the birds have always been there, but I hadn't really noticed them before now.

Maybe this was something that had lain latent for a long time, an inherent interest waiting for the opportunity to blossom.

My mother was interested in birds. She has been dead for many years now, but I can still remember how she taught me about them when I was a child. The names of the species that inhabited the area where we lived. Which were migratory birds, arriving in the spring and leaving in the autumn – and which were resident birds, species that did not migrate and were always around us. She explained how different they were, that some were predatory birds while others ate seeds, that some lived in flocks while others were solitary and that all the species had unique characteristics. The blackbird sang at dusk in the spring. The wagtail waved its eponymous tail. The magpies stole things that glittered. The owls carried mysterious secrets and the cuckoo bird left its eggs in the nests of other birds.

These were the kinds of things she taught me, but the most important thing I learned from my mother was how to see.

*

Sometimes you discover something new or see something familiar in a different way. It doesn't happen often, but it happens. Something changes. The world expands. A curtain is drawn aside and you stare into a parallel universe.

This was what happened to me on this cold winter day. It was the first day of January, nine o'clock in the morning. I had just awakened, made a cup of coffee and taken my daily dose of medication. I saw a bird in the garden. It perched there, staring at me, and there was nothing remarkable about this situation, a bird in a garden, but nonetheless I experienced it as an extraordinary event.

Why?

It's hard to say. All I know is that it was more about me than about the bird. A few months had passed since that autumn day when I realised my life had changed, that nothing was any longer as it had been. I must have been receptive to something at that moment. I saw the bird in another way than usual. A small creature in a small habitat, with a life wholly different from my own. Still, there was something that led me to identify with it in this moment, which triggered the birth of a new direction in my life that I hadn't seen coming.

I became a bird watcher. Over the course of the next year, I carried out a form of everyday ornithological field work. My first impulse was to travel far and wide and go birdwatching all over the world. This was the way I used to think before I got sick and it takes time to grow accustomed to the fact that one has become someone else. Every time I tried to embark on a journey, I was reminded that I no longer had the strength for it. Epilepsy and the side effects of the medication had come to stay. I had no choice but to accept this, so I abandoned all my ideas about travel.

Instead, I studied the birds in our own garden. If I had the energy, I went on short excursions to Maridalen, a cultural landscape located a few kilometres from where we live. And during holidays at our cottage I studied the birds on the skerries off the coast of Fredrikstad.

That was it, the modest scope of my activities. I often thought that in a sense I was living my golden years ahead of time. I thought: perhaps old age and birds have something in common? Maybe the older we get, the more important these feathered creatures become for us.

Birds are everywhere. They are wild creatures living amongst us, nature in its purest form. And most of them are diurnal, just like us. I know there are wild animals in our neighbourhood, rats and mice, foxes and badgers, every now and then a deer. Once we even saw a moose in our garden. It had strayed out of the forest in search of something to eat during

a particularly snowy winter. But for the most part, we don't see the wild mammals. The fox and the badger, they hide away during the daytime and lurk around in search of food while people are sleeping.

The birds, on the other hand, are everywhere. There are 50 billion wild birds on earth, ten thousand different species. No living creature inhabits a greater portion of the earth than they do. Some live adjacent to water, others live high up in the treetops. Some are tropical, others are arctic. Some live deep in the forest, while others live on mountaintops. And quite a large number of them spend the entirety or large parts of their lives in cities or gardens, in close proximity to humans.

I wrote down my experiences and that is how this book came about. A year of birds. Winter, spring, summer, autumn. Everything the birds do is decided by the time of year. If you want to learn about their lives, you can't get around the seasons.

As I am writing this, I can look back on my first year as a bird watcher. The second year is already well underway. The winter is coming to an end. I sit in my home office. I take my medication. The side effects continue, but I am feeling a bit better.

Outside the birds are flying here and there. Chickadees, sparrows, finches, thrushes. They build nests. They sing. It is spring. Before long it will be autumn. Their life on earth is short. They have no time to lose.

I am no scientist and this is not an ornithological dissertation. It is a book about a year of my life that was different. About the art of observing. About birds and people. And about everything that connects us.

DISCOVERIES IN A FROZEN GARDEN CHAIR

Early in the morning on the first day of the year. I was the first in our household to wake up. It was still dark outside. I made coffee at the kitchen counter. I took my medication, waited for the side effects and hoped that this year would be better than the last.

I looked out the window. Day was breaking. The sky in the east behind the neighbours' rooftops was blue. The garden lay empty and silent, buried beneath a half metre of snow. Against the leafless hedge separating our garden from the neighbour's was a garden chair reminiscent of summer.

A magpie flew past. It landed on the garden chair. Its feathers had a metallic sheen, almost purple in the dim winter light. The bird cawed. The sound shattered the silence. It cawed again, turning its head from side to side, uneasily, as if it knew something was about to happen.

I stood by the window and watched it. What was it searching for? What was it waiting for? There was excitement in the air, an apprehension I didn't understand. The magpie flicked its tail back and forth. Again and again, it seemed on the verge of taking flight or hopping to the ground.

I raised my arm to scratch my head. This small movement, in the semi-darkness behind a window ten metres away, caused the magpie to take off and fly over to the neighbour's property, leaving the garden just as lifeless as it had been before it had arrived.

When the magpie disappeared, an idea came to me: tomorrow I would sit in the frozen garden chair and study the birdlife in the garden. I would use the first working day of the year to learn more about the life that unfolds out there, every day, year-round, but about which I know so little because I don't pay attention to it.

A new morning, the second day of the year. I stood by the window with a cup of coffee in my hand. I looked out into the garden, but the magpie was nowhere in sight. I packed lunches, filled knapsacks and sent the children off to school. The Christmas break was over. My partner left for work.

It was ten below zero and overcast. I put on my down jacket and hat and retrieved a birdfeeder from the storage unit. The birdfeeder was a cylinder-shaped pipe covered with netting. I had received it for Christmas a couple of years before but had never used it. I filled it with what I could find in the way of birdfeed. We had no food specifically for birds, but in the kitchen cupboard I found hazelnuts, walnuts, pinenuts and unsalted pistachio nuts. I found chia seeds, linseeds, oatmeal and pumpkin seeds. It turned into a costly affair. I trusted that nobody would notice.

We live on the first story of a red wooden house in the neighbourhood of Tåsen in Oslo. The house is a four-family house built in 1929, and outside there is a large garden divided into four equal parcels that run from the house and out to the road. Each parcel is about ten metres wide and thirty metres long, three hundred square metres of grass and trees and plants and bushes.

There are no fences in this garden; back in the day each parcel was marked with small wooden stakes driven into the ground, but they have long since disappeared. The entire garden is surrounded by a large hedge of lilac bushes. There are old apple trees in the garden, a scattering of berry bushes and a grass lawn that is quite uneven and interspersed with a lot of moss. It is an ordinary garden and a pleasant place for birds.

It was now mid-winter and the garden was just a large white blanket of snow. I hung the birdfeeder on the old apple tree and sat down in the frozen garden chair to wait for the birds.

Then the cat arrived.

We are good friends, the cat and me. Since I work from home, we see one another pretty much all day long. The cat follows me wherever I go. It climbed up the tree where I had hung the birdfeeder. It settled down on one of the thickest branches. There it lay, like a living scarecrow.

The minutes passed. I tried to concentrate. Look, listen and sit still. At first it was silent. Then background noises began to emerge. They cropped up one after the next. Some far away, others close by. I heard birds from all directions. There was an orchestra out there, even though it was January. Some birds chirped, others cackled. All these sounds, which up to now had been natural background noises in my life, which had blended in with a larger soundscape – of cars, voices, footsteps crunching on gravel, the leaves rustling, doors opening and shutting, a siren in the distance, a helicopter in the sky. The sounds made by the birds had a given place here. It was nature's elevator music. Perhaps that was why I seldom noticed them.

The more I listened, the clearer it became that it wasn't just the sounds of many different birds I heard, but different sounds made by the same birds. They were communicating. I didn't know what they were talking about, but I nurtured a hope that they had noticed the birdfeeder. That it was the topic of their conversations.

I heard the sound of schoolchildren out on the street. A new year, a new semester. Small human beings wearing large down jackets who were late for their first class. They walked slowly, shuffling along in huge winter boots, while they chattered and laughed, their voices cheerful and carefree. Beyond the sound of schoolchildren I heard the vague buzzing of the city in the south. The sound of hustle and bustle. The humming of a million different endeavours, none of which involved birdwatching.

The cat sat quietly on a branch at the top of the apple tree. I stretched my legs and adjusted my position in the garden chair.

I noticed two blackbirds in a bush on the neighbour's side of the hedge. They were perched with their backs to each other, the way the drunken regulars tend to sit in dingy corner pubs. One of the birds had black feathers and a yellow beak. The other was more brownish. These were two blackbirds, a male and a female, that much I knew. I had learned this from my mother when I was a child. The blackbirds' plumage was puffed out and one of the feathers on the head of the male was sticking straight up. I recognised it. I had noticed it before and knew that this bird had been a resident of our garden for several years. It must have suffered an accident – flown into a window or been attacked by a predatory bird. Or the cat. Since one of its head feathers was sticking up, I decided to name it after a famous chief of a Native American tribe. These are the kinds of things you come up with when you are sitting by yourself in a frozen garden chair on a weekday in January. Your name will be Sitting Bull, I said to myself. The fact that a feather on your head is sticking straight up enables me to distinguish you from

other members of your species. You will be my object of study. Through you I will learn more about the blackbird's daily doings here on earth.

An hour passed. I could feel the side effects of the medication, they always kick in during the morning. It is impossible to describe the feeling. A shift in my brain chemistry, a slow deconstruction of the self, of the ability to think, to concentrate. But doing nothing helps, like now. Noises and lights and voices and stress aggravate the symptoms. Silence and calm alleviates them. It doesn't eliminate the side effects, but it makes them less unbearable.

I sat completely still and watched the blackbirds. Sitting Bull and his wife perched motionless on the branch. They had sunk into themselves, resigned in relation to the season and the gloominess of their surroundings. Perhaps they were dreaming about the carefree period of their lives they'd spent in the egg. Perhaps they wished that they had never been hatched.

Then something surprising happened. A great spotted woodpecker whizzed through the leafless branches of the lilac bushes. I recognised this species as well. Red and white and black, a sturdy body, a long beak. I wasn't aware that there were woodpeckers in the neighbourhood. I had never seen one here before, but then I had also never really looked. The woodpecker passed the birdfeeder and the garden chair where I was seated. I don't think it noticed me. It landed in one of the neighbour's old apple trees. It started pecking at the frozen trunk in a frenzy, maybe because it hoped to find something to eat inside or simply because pecking is inherent to the woodpecker's nature.

Time passed slowly. The woodpecker flew away. A few great tits came and went. Then a blue tit arrived. Then a flock of five or six house sparrows. The birds investigated the birdfeeder, but they seemed timid. They behaved as if an invisible threat lay lurking. It could not be the cat, who had moved and was lying on the ground beneath the garden table.

Then I got my answer. Two magpies came flying over the fence that separates the garden from the road. Maybe it was the same bird that had been sitting on the garden chair the day before, back now with a friend. The magpies screeched and took over the garden. They behaved as if they owned the neighbourhood and they weren't afraid of anything, at least not the cat.

The other birds disappeared. The magpies investigated the birdfeeder. It was too small for them. It teetered when they tried to alight on it, but they didn't give up, because Corvidae are problem-solvers. I had read about this. The magpies clung to the feeder with one leg while flapping their wings to keep their balance. The difficulties seemed to pique their interest even more. They took turns hanging from it. While one of them hung on, the other hopped around in the snow. Or they flew from tree to tree, screeching hoarsely and ominously.

All other life in the garden had disappeared. Only the magpies and the cat and I remained. My sole consolation was that they couldn't get hold of the costly nuts in the feeder.

I knew that this was only the beginning. I had caught a fleeting glimpse into something that I understood was of immense proportions. I knew almost nothing about birds. I had to learn more, but there was no hurry. I had all the time in the world and the side effects were bothering me now, so I decided to conclude the first phase of my field work and go inside instead to lie down on the couch.

I got to my feet and left the frozen garden chair. The cat jumped down from the tree and followed faithfully behind me.

PART II: WINTER

The snow had come early. By November it had covered the landscape and the world became white and silent. January is an ornithological low point for those of us who live in the far north. A hundred million migratory birds, more than half of Norway's total bird population, had travelled south to the European continent, Africa or Asia. The only birds left were those that don't migrate to warmer regions in the winter and instead stay in Norway year-round.

My ornithological project was straightforward and simple. In the days that followed, I kept a close watch on the birdfeeder in the garden. I settled into a routine that involved either sitting in the frozen garden chair or standing at the window and looking out. Other species appeared, not many, but a few. Tree sparrows and robins, tits and bullfinches. I learned to recognise them. First and foremost, I was able to tell them apart by the colour of their feathers, their appearance. But I also noticed differences in their behaviour, in the way they moved and flew. I understood a bit more about their activities. What they liked to eat. The time of day when they were active. It was cold and dark and there was not much to sing about, but the birds were vocal all the time. They communicated with one another and sounded the alarm in the event of danger.

Because all of this was new, it was all exciting. An ordinary bird was exotic. If I saw a species I had never seen before, I did a search for it on the internet. Often the description was 'a common species found throughout all of Norway', but I didn't care about that. The bird was new to me. It didn't matter that it was common for others.

During the month of January, this became my fixed routine. I sat in the frozen garden chair as often as I could. The robin roosted in the hedge. The woodpecker reappeared on a regular basis. The blue tit and the great tit, the house sparrow and the tree sparrow. Sitting Bull and his wife were there every day. They lived in the garden.

MY ORNITHOLOGICAL MENTOR

I have a friend who is interested in birds. His name is Jørn. In the world of birdwatchers, Jørn is also an amateur, but he has come further than I have, which is why I called him every time I saw a new species or if I had a question.

Jørn is a photojournalist and he lives on the other side of Oslo. Jørn kept a bird journal, where he recorded any new species that he observed in his garden. He had written down the names of more than forty different species. He told me that enjoyed this more than his photojournalism job at the newspaper.

I bought several birdfeeders in different designs and for different kinds of feed. Jørn explained to me how to make my own suet balls. I cut off the bottom portion of a milk carton and filled it with sunflower seeds. I melted shortening in a saucepan. Then I poured the hot liquid into the milk carton and pressed a string down into it, so I could hang up the suet ball. After a couple of hours in the refrigerator, the shortening had hardened and the suet ball could be hung from the branch of one of the trees in the garden. The menu out there expanded with every passing day, and I was excited about whether this would attract other species.

And so did the days of January pass. The first thing I did in the morning was to stand by the sitting room window with a cup of coffee in my hand. They always appeared at daybreak. I became familiar with the birds' behaviour. I noticed the differences in the habits of the different species. Noticed the time of day when they were most active. Which birds were solitary and which operated in flocks. The nuthatch was a loner. I never saw it with another bird of its species and if there were other species nearby, it seemed indifferent to them. The house sparrow was always accompanied by fellow members of its species. It was fundamentally social, it seemed, each individual bird was always part of a flock. Some species liked to eat food that was hanging from a tree, others preferred taking their meals on the ground. Some ate neatly and daintily, while others binged and soiled. The number of differences between them was astonishing.

I joined the Norwegian Ornithological Society and received an invoice in the post. The invoice bore the words 'The birds need your support!' I cancelled my membership in other organisations to compensate for the added expense. The only membership I retained was my monthly donation to Save the Children. Children and birds. These priorities felt right.

I downloaded bird apps onto my telephone. I read books. About classification systems, plumage, egg-laying and nest-building. About extinct and endangered species. Bird song and migration. I understood that ornithology is an enormous field. Technically complex and vastly daunting. The more I read, the more I learned. But mainly, I was left with a feeling of inadequacy. I realised that this nerdlike approach did not suit me. I wasn't the type to carry on like this. The learning-by-doing method was more my style. If this meant that I would learn a bit less, it would just have to do.

I had been an avid hobby photographer for a few years. I like how this pastime sharpens the gaze and heightens your alertness when you are out in nature, but I was accustomed to photographing landscapes, not small birds.

Jørn explained that if I wanted to take photographs of small birds in movement, I needed new camera equipment. There are two things in particular a bird photographer must keep in mind. You must have a powerful zoom lens. And you must have a camera with a fast shutter speed that can freeze rapid movements. The birds are small, or they are in the distance. Their movements are lightning quick. If you want a clear image of a bird in flight, you must have good camera equipment.

I ended up with a camera with an 800mm lens that shot 24 frames per second. Jørn taught me the basics and advised me to start slow. I began taking photographs of house sparrows in the garden, because when there were many of them around the bird feeder, they would often hang suspended in the air, flapping their wings while they waited for an opening. The photos were brilliant. A tiny bird with its wings outstretched. The winter sun illuminating its feathers from behind. A tiny creature frozen in a moment's movement which one could never have studied had it not been for the phenomenal optical device.

I spent days at the window, with my camera at the ready. Photographing birds became an almost obsessive compulsion. It interfered with my work and daily household duties. Every time I sat down in my home office to write or stood at the kitchen counter making dinner, I was struck by the thought that at this very moment there might be a bird in the garden.

#fieldnote

It is snowing and a northern wind is blowing. I hang an apple on the apple tree. The apple is red and ripe. I loop it onto a branch. It looks absurd in the sterile winter landscape. It is for the fruit eaters in the garden, especially the two blackbirds and I find myself wondering whether the birds will be perplexed by the oddity of a shiny red apple suddenly appearing in the garden in the end of January. More intelligent creatures would perhaps suspect foul play and fear it was a trap, but not the birds.

Before long Sitting Bull appears. He sits on the branch and pecks lightly at the apple. His head trembles in the cold wind. Sitting Bull likes fruit. He eats slowly and politely, but soon he is sidelined by a fieldfare and the fieldfare's table manners are of a different order entirely. It attacks the apple, savaging it and after a while its tiny stomach is full and it starts to defecate. I stand at the window and witness the entire digestive process. The apple goes in and the apple goes out of the tiny bird – and it all happens simultaneously. The fieldfare does not relent until nothing is left of the apple but a small core and the snow beneath the branch is covered with greyish-brown bird droppings.

I send Jørn an SMS and tell him about the fieldfare's eating habits. He answers immediately, even though he is at work at the newspaper.

'The blackbird is a favourite. It just wants the apple and it eats carefully. Blue tits don't make a mess. They will eat the seeds one by one, finishing one before taking the next. The

greenfinch eats one sunflower seed at a time and cleans its plate. The tree sparrow just makes trouble. It eats one seed and discards nine more. The siskin cleans up when the tree sparrow makes a mess. It sits on the ground and eats up all the rejects. It is very practical. Almost like a dog when you have children who are sloppy eaters and drop food on the floor beneath the kitchen table. The goldfinch makes just as much a mess as the tree sparrow, but it doesn't matter because it's so pretty.'

#fieldnote

I consider building a bird table, but I don't know where to put it. My grandmother had a bird table on her porch and I was the one who built it. I remember it well. I gave it to her for Christmas the year I turned ten. I had made it in shop class. The teacher had given us an open assignment and I decided that I wanted to make something nice for my grandmother. So I made a birdhouse with a pitch roof and four walls with large open windows, a rectangular porch, and even a fence, so the birds could choose between eating indoors or out. This was my plan when I built it and the bird house remained on her porch for the rest of her life. For three decades it stood there, aging alongside her, crooked and weatherbeaten and draughty, but it still looked like a birdhouse and the birds used it during all the seasons.

#fieldnote

Saturday. I am alone in the house. I am lying idly on the sofa and can hear the magpies poking around in the garden. I take out my telephone and open Instagram. I know that scrolling is not good for me, that staring at a bright screen only makes things worse, but every now and then my fear of missing out gets the better of me.

Paul Gascoigne has posted a photo of a robin. He's not a bird photographer, but rather a retired football player, who was capped 57 times for England. Under the photo he has written: 'Loved seeing my little friend this morning. Have a great day and big hugs from GAZZA.'

Gazza posts photos of this robin all the time. I think he is lonely, that he finds consolation in the little bird. It lives in a hedge just outside his house and in this sense is like Sitting Bull. Gazza takes photos with his phone from a distance of twenty metres. The robin in the photo is therefore blurry, almost unrecognisable. Still, there is something uplifting about this. The football star has struggled with addiction since he ended his career. The robin is a sign that there are bright spots in Gazza's life. A bird in a hedge is better than nothing.

#fieldnote

The side effects of my medication make me lethargic, listless. It think this is what is known as fatigue. When you feel tired over a long period of time, a feeling of sadness arises. It creeps up on you. It is inescapable; there is no way around it. I know that I have nothing to be sad about, yet what I feel is sadness. What can one do? I put on my jacket and boots and go out into the garden. There are no birds there. They often take a break midday. I wade through the snow, because I want to hang up a suet ball by the wooden deck at the far end of the garden, the one my neighbour insists on calling a lounge. I pass the blackcurrant bush which stands all by itself, naked and dejected amidst all the white. I run my fingers over the branches, lift my hand to my

nose and smell the scent of summer. That's what is nice about the blackcurrant bush. It smells like blackcurrants even in the wintertime. I wade through the snow and smile into the cold wind and think that it's good to appreciate any bright spots you can find.

(END SAMPLE)