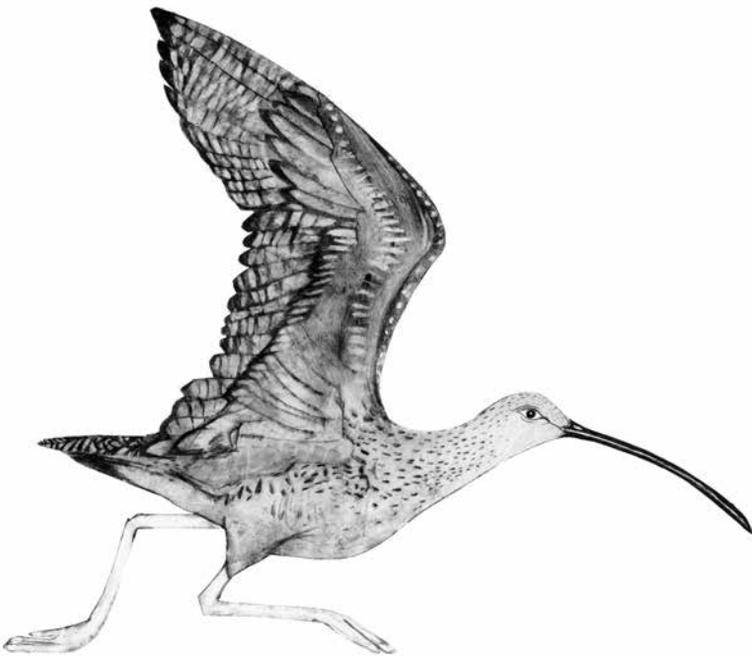


Introduction  
to a Ghost





When I was commissioned to tell the story of the western world's rarest bird it did, at least officially, still exist. It was a grail of the birding world. From the winter of 2009 to the spring of 2011 a huge international search saw teams of ornithologists scouring likely areas of eastern and southern Europe, North Africa and the Middle East – to the extent that vast swamps and impenetrable wetlands can be scoured.

From Serbia to Saudi Arabia, from Kazakhstan to the Maghreb, men and women went to the likeliest places (saltmarshes, lagoons, estuaries and deltas) at the most promising times (winter in the south and east, spring and autumn in Europe), levelled their binoculars, scanned with their telescopes, solicited local knowledge and advice, watched, waited, trudged, waded and hoped to see a beautiful creature, a species of curlew plumaged in a blend of whites and golds, with dark spots on the flanks, slim and graceful of form, more refined than the plumpy common curlew, with a thinner down-curving beak which makes it look as though it is chewing a stem of grass.

Very few people alive have seen a Slender-billed curlew, and for all their work and watching, none of the searchers was able to claim a definite sighting. There were some possible encounters, including a group of five glimpsed in the Crimea, but what was termed 'the final push' to find the Slender-billed curlew, *Numenius tenuirostris*, came to nothing.

The species is still listed as ‘critically endangered’ by the International Union for Conservation of Nature, but it is an open secret that the authorities of the bird world believe it is either extinct or as good as gone.

This year, existence having intervened with me (we had a baby, I wrote a book, we migrated from Italy to Britain) even while extinction may have been closing with the curlew, I set out to follow the trail of the bird, to tell its story, and to discover what happened to it. I knew I stood no chance of finding *Numenius tenuirostris* (‘of slim beak and the new moon’) even before consensus among conservationists removed it from the unofficial lists of the living. The last officially-accepted sighting was in Hungary in 2001, and this is contentious. The Hungarian Institute for Ornithology believes it, but similar organisations in other countries do not. You have to go back to 1999 to find verified records from Greece and Oman, though there have been various unconfirmed encounters since, including one in Oman this spring. Thus my grant from the Royal Geographical Society was given to fund an account of its passing, a tale that seems to begin with a mournful ending, though nothing about this story is as it first appears. While an account of the end of a species might seem destined to be gloomy, the human story that attends it is one of entirely counter-intuitive and quite marvellous success.

“The Slender-billed curlew has three problems,” says George Handrinos, the father of modern Greek ornithology. “It is very rare, so to see one is a miracle. It is very difficult to identify, and it is very, very shy.”

Handrinos uses the present tense deliberately. Proving negatives in this case being only marginally more difficult than asserting positives, the bird is now a kind of

Shrodinger's curlew, both alive and not.

Initially I saw my task as the compilation of a requiem for the opposite of the passenger pigeon: a creature largely unseen, scarcely considered, and hardly missed. As well as its marketing problem – it might with equal accuracy have been called the Golden curlew, about which we might have cared more – this bird seems to have formed a series of inadvertently perilous habits.

Almost no terra incognita remains on what is becoming Terra Hominis, the planet of Man (a dozen species are estimated to collapse daily) but not even having had the wit to find a piece of wilderness seems to have helped our hero. Nesting behind the former Iron Curtain, near Tara in western Siberia, in a swathe of taiga swamps and marshes about twice the size of France should have been a good move. Nesting only there now looks like a slip.

Migrating over the Curtain via the Black Sea coast of the Balkans through Greece, southern Italy and the gun-happy islands of the Mediterranean to wintering grounds on North African coast was asking for it. The bird's favoured deltas, the Danube in Romania and the Evros in Greece, are thoroughly hunted. Italy jumps with shotgun-fire during migration season. Malta is a death-trap. When the flocks are on the move the shooting there goes on all day, then by torch and moonlight.

Surviving birds arrive on the coasts of Egypt and the Maghreb hungry, tired and flying low. Hundreds of miles of mist-nets await them. The unlucky are trapped and taken to bird markets, and if not sold for food, discarded.

Being a bird of the saltmarsh, of the littoral margins where earth, the great rivers, the sea and sky bleed into one another also placed the Slender-billed curlew in harm's way, as these regions have been drained, cultivated, desalinated, exploited and polluted.

And yet none of the specialists who think about the bird believes that hunting along its route or environmental degradation are responsible for its decline. Plenty of suitable habitat remains. The species was no more of a target for hunters than any other.

If it has gone it is the first avian extinction in the Western Palearctic since 1852 when the last Great Auk – a flightless, oceanic fowl – went the way of the dodo, eaten out of existence by sailors. The end of the auk was a sign that the oceans were now utterly within man's grasp. Plunder, pollution and over-fishing were about to surpass even the depredations of the whalers. The Slender-billed curlew might well have some similar message or signal for us – but what? And where to start looking for it?

Not so long ago your best chance of seeing *Numenius tenuirostris* was to travel to the Merja Zerga lagoons near Kenitra on Morocco's Atlantic coast. A small population wintered here and a pair were filmed in 1994: you can watch them online, vigourously alive, pecking, probing, feeding and regarding the camera with apparent insouciance. Until 1995 birdwatchers who wished to study it, or merely to tick the species off their to-see lists, made a hopeful pilgrimage here. I did, too. It was pointless. Yes, the lagoons have been somewhat drained, grazed and hunted, but they are still vigorous with avian life, including many of our target's common cousins. "Yes, I remember this bird," said a fisherman at the site. "It doesn't come here anymore. I don't know why."

Matching locations of observations with their times of year gives a calendar of previous appearances. I followed it to Sicily, to Italy and to the Evrotas delta in the Peloponnese, simultaneously hopeful and hopeless. No bird did I find, and no witness either, though there was a moment of

wild hope in Evrotas, as a juvenile whimbrel flew straight towards my binoculars. They look very like Slender-billed curlews, but they are not.

“Any sign of your bird?” people began to ask, grinning. This year I changed approach. Instead of chasing a fowl that had disappeared I resolved to track down people who had not: the eye-witnesses and searchers along its route. At once a futile-seeming quest became a journey through time, societies and the Europe of living memory. Whatever else it has done, the Slender-billed curlew creates a link between generations, between eras, between cultures and between different stages in our relationship with the environment. This story begins in the cradle and, perhaps, the cenotaph of Euro-genic civilisation, Athens.