

# AFRICAN STORYBOOK

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## McAfrican in Scotland...

*"Well, obviously we can't compare with Africa", he says in his mild Sc-o-r-r-ttish accent, looking a bit sheepish, "but there is a surprising amount of wildlife out here in rural Scotland".*



It may sound odd, but my name is Angus and I am an African travelling in Scotland. Jasper's identity is less confusing. A Springer spaniel, he seemingly cannot get enough of the green and hilly Scottish outdoors, a little like his lord and master, Adrian. For when Adrian Davis steps outside into the broadleaf wonderland outside the historical village of Birnam, so does Jasper. Peas in the proverbial pod, they thrive, loving their wild Scotland, with bracing air coursing through nostrils and soggy leaves beneath their feet.

Born in England, it's Adrian's yen for nature and adventure that drove him to make the Scottish village of Birnam, at the eastern edge of the highlands, his home. An ecological consultant, he is a lead mountaineer, an international mountain runner and a wildlife guide. More than just talking nature, Adrian *lives* it, enthusing with no little excitement about pine-martens and wild-cats. It is a common interest that found me staying at his modest Bed 'n Breakfast in the village.

With the fresh, morning scent of the wet forest mildly liberating, we get to discussing wildlife in Scotland. I ask if there is much left. 'Well, obviously we can't compare with Africa", he says in his mild Sc-o-r-r-ttish accent, looking a bit sheepish, "but there is a surprising amount of wildlife out here in rural Scotland".

With wolves having been hunted to extinction in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century already, 40-something *Adrian is*

understandably modest about the creatures likely to be found on the walks he leads, even through the deliciously rugged and remote northern Scotland. Yet time spent with him reveals a man in deep love with Scotland's natural offerings – among them the uncommon Scots pine, deer, badgers, pine martens, wildcats and the recently returned osprey - they're all out there he says, and he regularly sets out to find them.

I have been introduced to Adrian by my brother, who lives in the apartment below Adrian's office and B'nB. It's a short visit, and with time pressing we have no time to embark on any significant hikes – joining him instead on visits to a couple of his favourite spots outside this village made famous by Shakespeare's *MacBeth*:

*To kiss the ground before young Malcom's feet,  
And to be baited with the rabble's curse.  
Though Birnam wood be come to Dunsinane'.*

The history books aren't decided as to whether Shakespeare actually visited Birnam, although the remarkably intact English historical archives reveal that a certain William was part of a group of traveling actors who visited the area in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. A stout oak tree, amongst the birches on the path alongside the river below the village, is home to a plaque with that story on it – apparently the oak would have been around when Shakespeare would've passed through.

*...with thoughts of Potter and Shakespeare, it's almost the setting for a literary work of note.*

And there is more. Birnam is where Beatrix Potter's family spent their summer holidays, and the Arts Institute across the road from Adrian's flat offers a compelling exhibition and shop dedicated to Potter's life. The sort of place where those with fond childhood memories of characters like Peter Rabbit and Miss Tiggywinkle willingly linger.



A five-minute drive and jaunt-in-the-woods out of Birnam, Adrian introduces us to The Hermitage, possibly the earliest viewing hide ever built - in this case to watch fish. Over 100 years old, it was here, deep in the trees above the waterfall, where those early Victorian leisure tourists would watch salmon leaping up the river Braan as it burst over the rocks.

Although Miss Potter is associated with the Lake District - where she lived - it is only after spending time in the environment around Birnam that one fully grasps the settings for her tales. As a tiny girl she would spend holidays being shown the river Tay by the local game-keeper, walking on his massive waders. It's perhaps not surprising then that here one gets a real feel for the manner in which Jeremy Fisher (the frog) negotiates the currents in his lily-pad boat.

Birnam is a quaint village, linked to the better-known and historically more significant little town of Dunkeld by an aged bridge spanning the river Tay - itself known for its salmon fishing. Dunkeld has a classic UK high street, featuring the odd coffee shop, boutique and butchery. It also boasts the partly ruined Dunkeld Cathedral - built between the 13<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries and found behind the shops and houses in a forest of distinctive larch trees (*in an early example of plantation forests, they were brought from Europe and planted in 1738 by the Duke of Atholl*)

With Jasper's nose glued to the forest floor and bird calls sounding, Adrian reveals the occasional Scots pine in and amongst flourishing heather and bracken. Flourishing, resurgent indigenous growth in a damp woodland heavy with scent, the autumn air crisp with intention.

Heavy with thoughts of Potter and Shakespeare, it's almost the setting for a literary work of note. In the meantime Adrian is thinking more to the day when wolves and lynx are once more part of the landscape.



The view from The Hermitage - enjoyed since Victorian times.

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