



TWITCH

CAN A BIRDWATCHER OUTWIT
AN ESCAPED CONVICT?

M. G. LEONARD

"An original voice in children's literature." THE TIMES



PRAISE FOR *TWITCH*

“A winged masterpiece.”

MAZ EVANS

“Enthralling from beginning to end, it really touched
my young bird-loving heart! Just wonderful!”

DARA MCANULTY

“Birds, mystery and fowl play! What more could you want?”

GILL LEWIS

“Glorious! Full of excitement and wonder!”

SOPHIE ANDERSON

“Cracking characters, beyond pacy plotting and
an ending that is almost Buggy Malone-esque!”

PHIL EARLE

“*Twitch* is a compelling read – an adventure mystery
with birds – what more could any reader want?”

STEPHEN MOSS

“Adventure, friendship and the pure unassuming beauty
of nature ... a book that could have been a collaboration
between David Attenborough and Roald Dahl.”

DR JESS FRENCH

“A superb adventure of friendship, bravery
and the wonderful world of birds.”

THE BOOKSELLER





TWITCH



M. G. LEONARD



WALKER
BOOKS

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or, if real, used fictitiously. All statements, activities, stunts, descriptions, information and material of any other kind contained herein are included for entertainment purposes only and should not be relied on for accuracy or replicated as they may result in injury.

First published 2021 by Walker Books Ltd
87 Vauxhall Walk, London SE11 5HJ

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Text © 2021 MG Leonard Ltd.

Cover illustrations © 2021 Paddy Donnelly

Map illustration © 2021 Laurissa Jones

The right of M. G. Leonard to be identified as author of this work has been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988

This book has been typeset in Berkeley and Futura



Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, transmitted or stored in an information retrieval system in any form or by any means, graphic, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, taping and recording, without prior written permission from the publisher.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data:
a catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-4063-8937-1

www.walker.co.uk



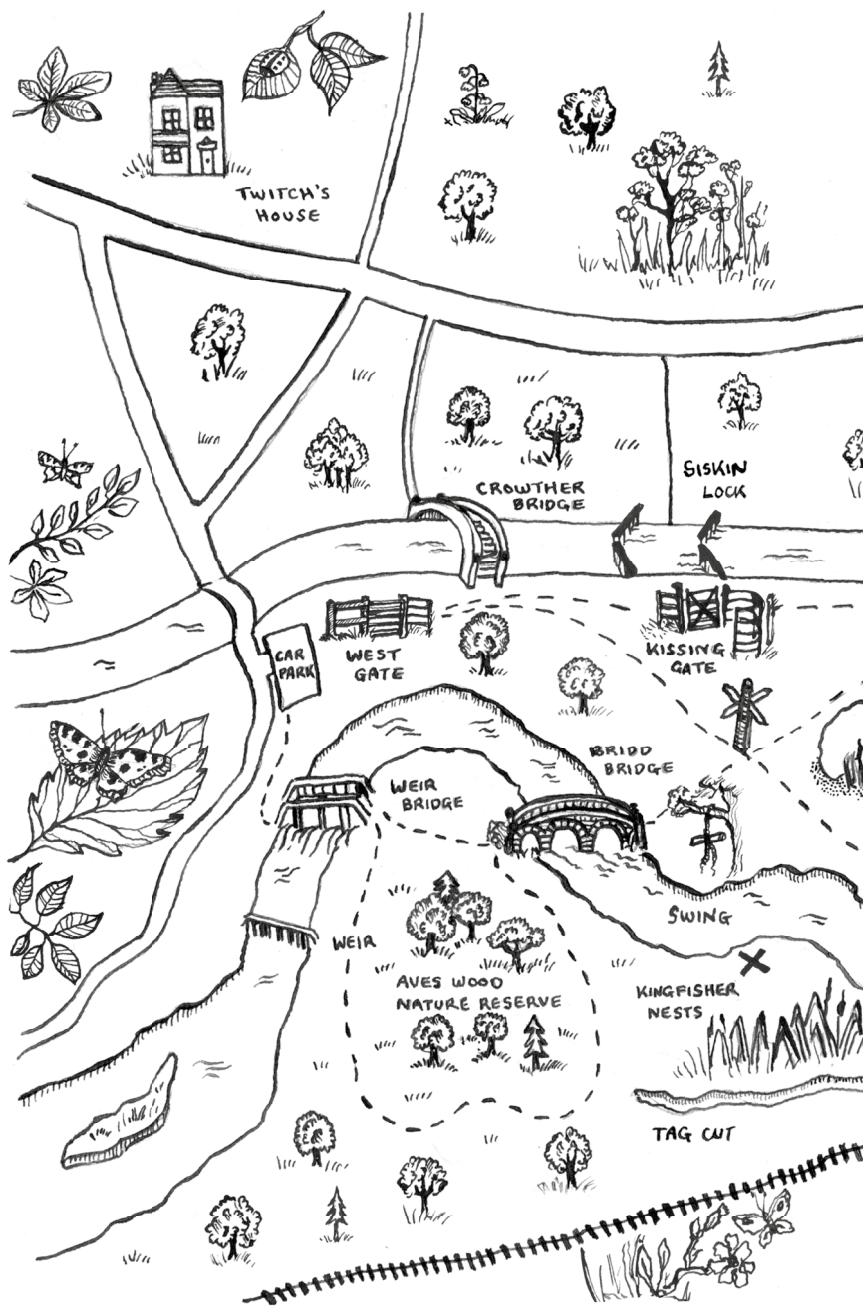


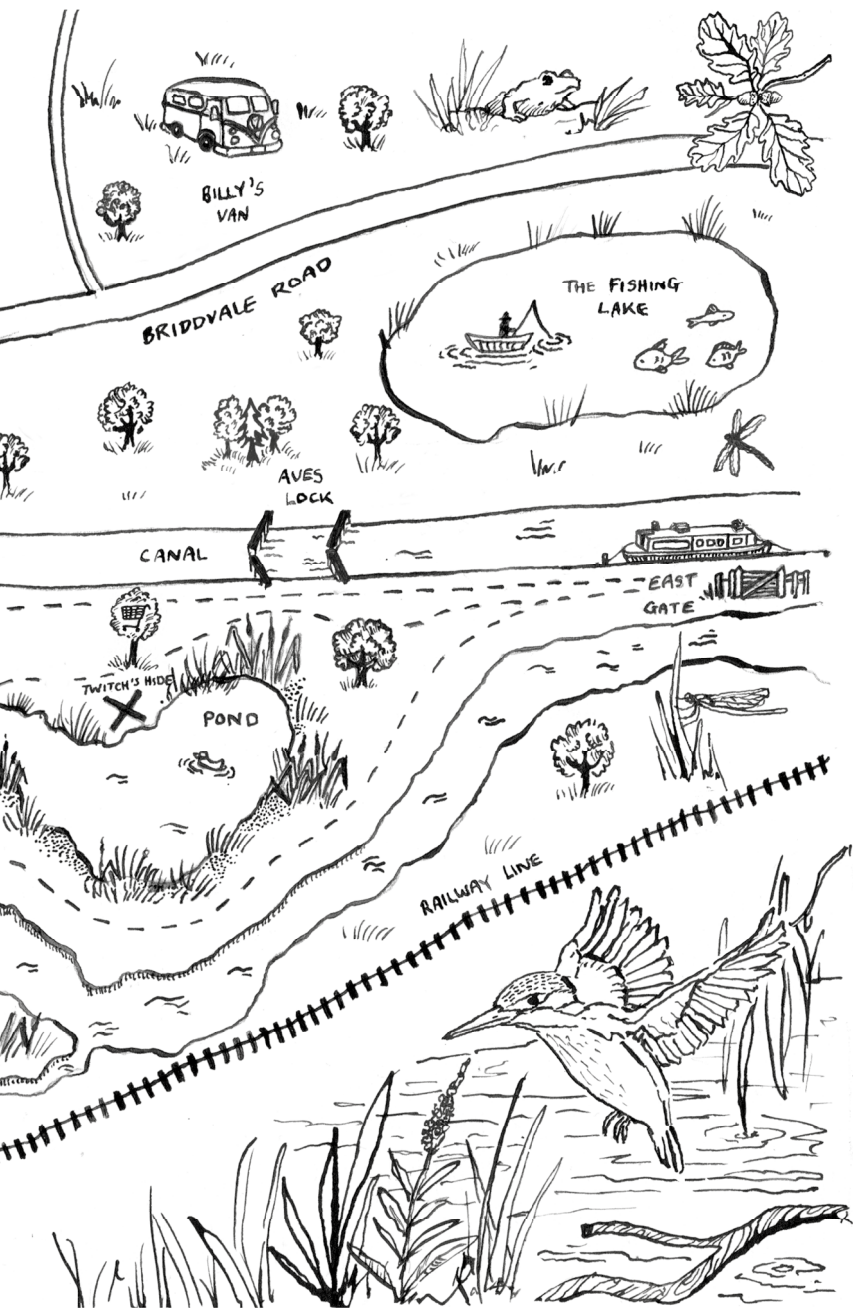
*In loving memory of
Jane Sparling,
1948–2020*



“I hope you love birds too. It is economical.
It saves going to heaven.”

— Emily Dickinson







1

ROCK DOVE

“Kill it!”

Twitch stopped dead on the path to the main school building, ignoring the spots of rain landing on his cheeks. He listened.

“Go on. Do it!”

The feverish voice belonged to Jack Cappleman, a charismatic boy with caramel-coloured hair who’d moved to Briddvale a few months ago. From the moment he’d sloped into school with his city boy manner, everyone had danced to Jack’s tune, following him like the Pied Piper’s rats.

“My dad says if you crush a pigeon its eyes’ll pop out,” said a deep voice that could only belong to Vernon Boon. Vernon was the size of a grown-up and as sensitive as a sandbag. Outside school he always wore wellies, and his dad ran the local abattoir. Vernon rarely

spoke to Twitch, although he shoved him on a daily basis, laughing if he stumbled or fell.

Twitch heard a chorus of “Ewww!”, “Let’s see!”, “Do it!” and “I can’t look!”

Bending down, he picked up a flint from the barren flower bed that ran alongside the chemistry block and slipped the stone into his blazer pocket, hurrying to the corner of the building. Peering round at where the big silver dustbins were kept, he saw four boys crowded around something on the ground.

Terry Vallis, a skinny boy with dark curly hair and braces, was babbling. “Are you sure this is a good idea? I mean, it’s the eye-popping thing. It’s making me feel sick. I’m not going to puke or anything, but...”

Jack started to chant. “Do it! Do it! Do it!”

“Do what?” Twitch asked loudly.

The boys were startled by his voice.

“Ozuru, you’re supposed to be keeping watch!” Jack scolded the short boy standing at the edge of the group.

Ozuru Sawa shrugged and looked away.

“Ooorrrhh! Ooorrrhh!”

Twitch recognized the alarmed calls of a bird, saw the brick Vernon clutched in his fist, and folded his arms to try to contain the anger that blazed in his chest. “You’re going to kill a rock dove?”

“No.” Vernon sniffed. “Gonna kill a pigeon.”

“A pigeon is descended from a rock dove.” Twitch glared at the boys through his brackish-blond fringe. He was a bit taller than Ozuru and stronger than Terry, but the odds of him surviving a punch-up with either Jack or Vernon were slim, and he had no chance against all four of them. “That bird has as much right to live as you do.”

“It’s vermin.” A mean smile twisted Jack’s face and he stepped forward. “We’re performing a public service by exterminating it.”

“It isn’t.” Twitch’s forehead throbbed as Vernon’s fist tightened around his brick and the terrified bird kept calling. He blinked furiously, trying to calm down.

“Are you going to stop us?” Jack made a show of looking past Twitch. “On *your own*?” The three boys gathered behind Jack, who was blinking theatrically, mimicking Twitch’s nervous habit. “Tell me, birdbrain, what’s it like being such a loser that your only friends have feathers?”

“Yeah, feathers, heh-heh,” the others echoed.

Jack called out to the pigeon. “Hey, birdie, don’t worry, your best bud is here to save you.” He mimed counting the boys. “Oh, wait. There’s only one of him and four of us.” He pulled a mock sad face and the other

boys laughed. Jack grabbed the brick from Vernon, raising it as if to strike the bird.

“NO!” Twitch lurched forward, driving his hand into his pocket, grasping the flint and hurling it hard. The stone sailed through the air, hitting Jack on the side of the head.

Jack cried out, dropping the brick and clutching his hand to his temple. The brick landed on Vernon’s foot. He roared, hopping about as Twitch ran head first into Terry’s stomach. Terry fell over with a yelp. Twitch felt Vernon grab him around the middle and whirl him away. He saw Ozuru staring at him with a stunned look on his face.

“I’m bleeding!” Jack cried, staring at a red smudge on his hand.

Twitch felt a flash of satisfaction, but it was cut short by Vernon throwing him backwards. He slammed into the bins. As he hit the ground, all the air was walloped out of his lungs. His eyes snapped wide as he desperately tried, and failed, to breathe in. He felt the fire of a kick to his ribs and saw Ozuru standing over him.

“I’m going to need stitches,” Jack cursed as a trickle of blood ran down the side of his face.

“I think my toe’s broken,” Vernon remarked, apparently unbothered.

“You’ll regret this, Twitch!” Jack barked, marching away, shouting over his shoulder, “This isn’t over!”

“This isn’t over,” Ozuru repeated as he helped Terry to his feet. He was bent double with his arms wrapped around his stomach.

As Ozuru and Terry stumbled after Jack, Vernon grinned and Twitch flinched, thinking he was going to punch him, but instead he snorted and lumbered after the others.

Twitch lay still, waiting for his breath to return. His ribs were sore, but it was nothing he hadn’t felt a hundred times. The main thing was the bird was alive. Getting to his knees, he crawled towards the panicked cooing. Tucking his fringe behind his ear, he saw an unhappy rock dove trapped between the brick wall of the chemistry lab and the side of a silver bin.

The pigeon’s head jerked back, emerald bib shimmering, its orange eyes staring out of the puffed-up ball of storm-cloud grey. The bird had one healthy foot, but the other leg ended in a lump of gristle, and one of its ashen wings was injured, feathers ragged.

“What did they do to you, eh?” Twitch whispered as a tremor of emotion shook his body. “You’re scared half to death.” He slid off his rucksack and blazer, pulling his jumper off over his head and laying it on

his knees. He inched towards the bird. Then, in a swift move, he tenderly cupped his hands around it, lifting it onto the jumper. "There you go," he cooed as he pulled up the sides of the sweater to make a dark cocoon for the frightened pigeon.

Rising to his feet, Twitch cradled the bundle of bird with one arm. He peered over the top of the open bin. There was a stack of flattened cardboard boxes inside. He took one and put it on the ground, folding in the flaps and building the box with his spare hand. Then he lowered his bundle into it, peeling back the jumper.

Lunchtime was nearly over, but Twitch couldn't leave the bird behind the chemistry block. Jack and his gang would be back, and this time they would kill it. If he took the bird home, he'd never get back in time for afternoon registration. He wondered if there was anywhere in the school that he could hide it until the end of the day, but couldn't think of anywhere.

"You're not safe here," he said to the distressed bird.

"*Bcrrooo-bcrrooo*," the pigeon replied.

Twitch stuffed his blazer into his rucksack, no longer aware of his bruised ribs or the falling rain. He knew he'd be in trouble, but some things were more important than double PE. Picking up the box carefully, he walked out of the school gates and headed for home.



WORMS FOR FOOD

Three months had passed since Twitch had saved the injured pigeon. Walking out of school with the bird in the box had cost him a week of detentions. He'd made an enemy of Jack Cappleman and become more of a social outcast than he already was, but it had been worth it.

Twitch had named the pigeon Scabby, on account of his numerous grisly injuries, and built him a pigeon loft from a tall thin wardrobe he'd found at the dump. The pigeon's wounds healed and he was happy to hang around as long as he was being given free food and shelter. To Twitch's delight a female pigeon took a shine to him and they began courting, eventually building a nest in the loft. She was a pretty bird with a slender white neck and dark eyes set in a charcoal face. He called her Maude, after his grandmother.

Within a week of Maude moving in with Scabby, their nest boasted two eggs.

From Scabby and Maude's eggs hatched Squeaker and Frazzle, two chicks that began life dodo-shaped and pink with a fine yellow down. Twitch had watched with amazement as, over ten days, they grew bigger, darker and stronger. Now, more than a month after they'd hatched, the squabs looked pigeon-shaped.

Today was the last day of school before the summer holidays and the sun shone white-hot. The tarmac under Twitch's feet felt sticky as he hurried out of the school gates, the deep green of the distant hills calling to him. The air was charged with the electricity of freedom. The summer holidays rolled out before him like a magic carpet of perfect possibilities. No school, no homework, and pigeons to train.

"Oi, Twitch. *DUCK!*"

Something hit his back. Twitch looked round to see what it was. On the ground was a silver takeaway container; beside it lay scattered bones and charred flakes of brown skin. Peals of laughter instinctively made Twitch drop his chin to his chest, letting his hair cover his face. He picked up his pace, jamming his hands into his pockets, his shoulders rising to his ears, knowing if he ran, they would chase him.

“You hungry, Twitch?” someone shouted. “Wanna eat a friend?”

Another silver container hit his leg and bones flew.

A girl, her name was Pamela Hardacre, made quacking noises, and then they all joined in. A mean choir of ducks, honking and hooting at him.

“Duck! Get it?” Jack called out. “It’s duck, Twitch, so you’d better *DUCK!*”

Another silver missile hit the back of Twitch’s head. He felt the scratch of crumbs slipping down the collar of his school shirt and shivered.

“Yeah, I get it,” he called out, putting one foot in front of the other, telling himself that each step took him closer to home.

“Then why aren’t you laughing?” There was a hint of menace in Jack’s voice. “It’s a joke! Where’s your sense of humour?”

“Leave me alone,” Twitch replied wearily. But he knew Jack wasn’t going to let him walk away from year seven without punishing him one last time for the pink scar above his cheekbone.

“Aw, is *Corvus* sad?” Jack taunted. “Does the dead birdie make him want to cry?”

There were murmurs and titters as other children caught the scent of blood. A crowd was building.

It was jarring to hear Jack use his real name. People only did that when he was in trouble. “Twitch” was a nickname he’d earned because he had a nervous habit of blinking, but he’d always liked the name because his grandad had told him a twitcher was a birdwatcher with an interest in rare birds. Everyone called him Twitch; he even thought of himself as Twitch.

Someone grabbed his rucksack and yanked him backwards.

Jack stepped in front of him. “You should thank me.”

“What for?”

“For bringing you a snack.” Jack held the remains of a duck leg in his right hand. He threw his left arm around Twitch’s neck, grabbing him in a headlock. “Eat it,” he growled, thrusting the leg in Twitch’s face.

Twitch turned his head away, struggling. “I’m vegetarian.”

Jack pushed the scaly duck leg against Twitch’s lips. “Eat it!”

“Get off,” Twitch muttered through clenched teeth. The smell of the meat was making his stomach turn. He didn’t want it near his mouth. “I’ll puke!”

Jack let go as Twitch retched.

Someone swiped at his feet and Twitch fell to the ground. He rolled away, ending up on the grass verge

beside the pavement, trapped between Jack and the peeling silver trunk of a birch tree.

“Aw, Twitch loves the birdies too much to eat them.” Jack stood over him, sneering.

“If he loves birds so much,” Pamela’s mocking voice called out, “why doesn’t he eat what they eat?”

“Yeah!” Jack’s face lit up. “Worms!” He glanced over his shoulder at the watching faces. “Find me a worm. Twitch is hungry.”

Twitch tried to get up, but Jack put a foot on his chest. “Oh no. You’re not going anywhere.”

Vernon kneeled, pulling a wooden ruler from his bag, and started digging in the turf. Terry dropped to his knees beside him.

“Found one!” Vernon said, yanking a wriggling pink spaghetti string from its cool dark hiding place.

“Yummy yummy,” Jack said, holding out his hand for the worm. “Open your mouth, Twitch, there’s a good baby bird.”

Vernon handed the worm to Jack. Everyone leaned in to see if Twitch would be made to eat it. A girl called Tara Dabiri, who was stood beside Pamela, went pale. “I can’t watch,” she murmured, her hand over her mouth. “This is cruel.”

“To the worm,” Pamela laughed.

With his free hand Jack grabbed Twitch's chin and tried to prise his mouth open. Twitch shook his head from side to side.

"Vernon, hold him," Jack instructed, and Twitch felt hands lock his head into position. "Terry, sit on his legs." Jack smiled, pinching Twitch's nose and dangling the worm over his tightly closed mouth. "You're going to eat this worm, birdbrain."

"HEY!" a man's voice rang out. "What's going on?"

And like a flock of startled starlings the children scattered.

By the time Twitch had sat up, Jack, Vernon, Terry and the others were pelting away up the road. A man wearing a white tee under an open blue chequered shirt and a black leather trilby sauntered over. His knowing smile was framed by a close beard and his blue eyes twinkled. A chunky gold bracelet slid over his wrist as he reached down to help Twitch to his feet. "You all right, kid?"

Twitch nodded.

"They friends of yours?" The man had a lilt to his voice, which made Twitch think he was Scottish or Irish.

Twitch shook his head.

"Enemies?"

Twitch shrugged.

“Yeah, I got picked on at school too.” The man gave Twitch a sympathetic look. “Why the worm?”

The man was definitely Irish. Twitch heard his mum’s voice telling him not to talk to strangers. But she’d never said what to do if the stranger had saved you from having to eat a worm. He figured he should be polite.

“I like birds. I keep them.”

“Really?” The man looked surprised. “What kind?”

“Pigeons, and chickens, but others nest in my garden.” Twitch could feel himself blinking. He was uncomfortable talking about himself to grown-ups. “Right now, we’ve got a pair of blue tits in our nesting box and the swallows come back every year.”

“Really? My favourite bird is the swift,” the man said, looking interested.

“The scythe-winged flight sleeper,” Twitch said, then blushed. “That’s what I call them. Swifts. They can sleep and fly at the same time.”

“That’s the one. Lovely little birds.” The man gave him a look, as if the two of them understood something few people did. He made an exploding gesture with his hand. “They blow my mind.”

Twitch grinned.

“I’m just passing through Briddvale. I thought I

might do a bit of birdwatching whilst I'm here. Are there any good spots you'd recommend? A wood, or that sort of a thing?"

"Oh, yes." Twitch was thrilled that his saviour was a fellow birdwatcher. "You should go to the nature reserve. It's called Aves Wood. It's got a mix of habitat and a big patch of wetland. It's part of a green corridor."

"A green corridor?"

"Yeah, you know, a route for migrating birds. There's always a chance of seeing something good at Aves Wood. There are woodpeckers, bullfinches and kingfishers too."

"Great. That's great, kid. Aves Wood. I'll check it out." The man looked over his shoulder as the sound of approaching police sirens interrupted his train of thought. "Hey, a newsagent's." He pointed. "I need a paper. How about I get you something sweet to take away the flavour of worm, in exchange for a few local tips?" He extended his hand. "My name's Billy, by the way."

"I'm Twitch." He awkwardly shook Billy's hand as they crossed the road. "You don't have to get me anything. I didn't eat the worm."

Billy pushed the newsagent's door open for him. "In you go, Twitch. Unusual name that. Grab yourself

a chocolate bar, on me. Sugar is good for a shock.”

“Wasn’t a shock,” Twitch replied. “They do it all the time.”

“Even more of a reason.” Billy pointed at the rack of sweets.

Mr Bettany, the newsagent, smiled at Twitch. The kindly man who wore a flat cap, indoors and out, employed him on Saturdays to do a paper round.

Staring at the brightly coloured sweet wrappers, Twitch was torn between temptation and guilt. His mum would be cross if she found out he’d accepted sweets from a stranger. But, if he took them to his hide in the woods and ate them there, she wouldn’t need to know. And Billy seemed nice. He was a birder, like Twitch. Twitch missed having someone to talk to about birds. His grandad had taken him birdwatching when he was little, but since he’d passed away Twitch’s expeditions had all been solo.

He selected a packet of Fruit Gums because they wouldn’t melt and put them on the counter beside Billy’s newspaper. He glanced at the headline *Robber Ryan on the Rampage!* Below it was a picture of a person with a shaved head. Billy paid Mr Bettany, whilst chatting amiably about the weather and the state of the roads.

“See you tomorrow, Twitch.” Mr Bettany waved as they left.

Outside, Twitch thanked Billy for rescuing him from Jack and for the Fruit Gums.

“You going to be OK getting home?”

Twitch’s heart jumped; he knew he should be guarded about where he lived. “I’ll go home the back way. Mum’ll be looking out for me,” he lied, glancing at Billy between blinks. He wasn’t going home, but he wasn’t about to admit that to a stranger.

“Smart thinking,” Billy tapped his head. “Listen, I’m going to check out this Aves Wood – maybe take a few walks, look at the birds. I’m travelling in my camper van. I was wondering, is there somewhere nearby, out of the way, that I could park? You know” – he leaned down and said out of the side of his mouth – “somewhere I won’t have to pay.”

“There’s the bottom field of Patchem’s farm, off Briddvale Road,” Twitch replied, frowning at this furtive request. “He lets people park there sometimes.”

“Patchem’s farm. Cheers, that’s very helpful.” Billy winked conspiratorially. “See you around, Twitch. Mind you stay away from those worms.” He chuckled, lifted his hand in farewell and sauntered off down the road.

Twitch stared at Billy's back, watching him go. He felt a flash of guilt for being suspicious of the man, then grinned at the packet of Fruit Gums. The school holidays hadn't got off to a bad start. He turned, going in the opposite direction to Billy, heading straight for his secret hide in Aves Wood.



AVES WOOD

The Aves Wood Nature Reserve was built on an old fly-tipping site. Rare plants grew there because fly ash from the coal mines had made the soil alkaline. And, despite the name, not all of it was woodland. Some of it was meadow and a large part of it was wetland. It was a city for insects, a fine dining experience for birds, and Twitch's favourite place in the whole world. You never knew what bird might visit the banks of the River Bridd or choose to nest around the pond in the boggy swamp of the wetland.

Twitch entered Aves Wood through a kissing gate beside the canal, which ran almost parallel to the river. Immediately stepping off the footpath, he glanced about, checking no one had seen him, then dashed through the undergrowth, making his way towards the pond, inhaling the heady scent of pine resin and

smiling to himself as he trod carefully over tree roots and badger setts, trying not to leave footprints that might lead anyone to his hide.

As the ground became mushy and sodden, the trees thinned, and he saw the pond stretching out in front of him, its surface shimmering like a mirage in the heat. He heard the mouse-like squeak of an oystercatcher and scanned the reeds for the black and white wader with the long orange beak. But the barking of dogs broke his concentration and he dropped into a squat. Peering through a tangle of brambles, he saw two police officers being tugged along by a pair of excited Alsations on leads. They were ten or eleven metres away, off the footpath. Twitch was surprised. It was unusual to see the police in Aves Wood, and he'd never seen them with dogs. He sniffed the air, wondering if some of the college kids had started a fire, but detected no smoke, just the comforting earthy fragrance of the woods.

Circumnavigating the pond, wary of the deep pools of water around the bulrushes that masqueraded as solid ground, Twitch picked his way across a clearing towards a thicket of trees, relaxing now he knew he was hidden from the public paths by dense foliage and distance.

A bone-shakingly loud *ffffddd-ffffddd-ffffddd* drew his eyes to the sky as a police helicopter flew over, surprisingly low. Alarmed birds, flushed from their nests in the tussocks around the water's edge, called out in distress. Feeling exposed, Twitch sprinted, ducking as he pushed his way into the shadowy copse, ignoring the scratch of whip-thin branches. He glanced about nervously, his pulse galloping and his breath short. What were the police looking for? It was a shock to see people here. It was a secluded part of the reserve because of the dangers of the waterlogged land. He stood stock-still, watching the helicopter pass, waiting for the peaceful chirps and buzz of the woods to return.

Reaching down into a green mass of unfurling fronds, Twitch released a coat hanger that was attached to a thin rope looping up into a tree. As he pulled it, a flap of ferns lifted, revealing an opening low to the ground. Hooking the hanger over a branch, he dropped to all fours and crawled inside his hide.

To the left of the door was the watching window – a wide rectangular panel that could be propped open for birdwatching. Twitch opened it and peered out. On the far side of the pond he saw three sailing boats and officers in uniform aboard, wearing life jackets, poking

about in the reeds with long sticks. He thought about the headline on Billy's newspaper.

Sliding his rucksack off, Twitch sat down on a blue plastic milk crate that served as a chair or a table and waited for his eyes to adjust to the shadows. In the middle of the floor, directly below the apex of the tepee, was a fire pit encircled with flints. One of the roof sections between the apex and the tree branch lifted up and flipped over, making a hole to let smoke out. But Twitch hadn't yet dare light a fire, for fear it might attract attention.

In the beginning, Twitch's hide was just a tepee of sticks, built against an ancient beech that grew in a ring of coppiced hazel trees whose roots had woven together to make firm ground. He'd constructed it to watch the wetland birds. Last summer, the tepee had expanded into a wild fort as Twitch's building plans grew more and more ambitious. Beyond the tepee room was a second space that he'd made watertight, so he might camp out here some night. It was the shape and size of a triangular two-man tent and constructed from a sheet of plastic thrown over a bough of the beech tree. It was walled in with branches, wedged into trenches in the ground and tied where they criss-crossed at the top. He'd filled the trenches with soil, banking it up to keep

out rivulets of rain. Gaps were stuffed with leafy sticks and he'd woven fern fronds through them, plugging any holes with moss, until the hide had blended in with the forest on all sides. Unfortunately, the plants Twitch had used to camouflage his den had turned brown and crumbled. So, at the end of last summer, he'd brought his spade to Aves Wood and dug up ferns, teasels, thistles, nettles and brambles, replanting them around the hide. In the spring, as the brambles shot tendrils along the forest floor, he'd woven them into the external walls. The teasels shot up, the thistles fanned out, the nettles multiplied. Together they created a line of defence, spiky foot soldiers that kept away the curious with their arsenal of thorns and stings.

Everything appeared to be as he'd left it last Sunday. Sweeping his hands across the earth floor, he moved a layer of dirt, exposing the top of a buried storage box. He popped off the lid. Inside was his birdwatching kit and an assortment of useful objects, including a red tartan cushion, dry kindling, an umbrella, a torch, a pair of gardening gloves and a box of matches in a sealed sandwich bag. He put the Fruit Gums from Billy into the box and lifted out his most prized possession: the battered leather case that held his grandad's binoculars. The heavy spyglasses evoked

memories of quiet hours sat beside the kind old man he thought of as his dad, being taught the names of plants whilst learning to be patient. "Patience," his grandad always used to say, "is the silent call that brings the owls, the hawks and the falcons."

Twitch hung the binoculars around his neck and crawled into the triangular room. Going to the back wall, he slid aside a stumpy branch, as if shooting a bolt, revealing a hole the perfect size for his spyglasses. He slotted the binoculars into the gap and moved the dial between the lenses until the distant footpath came into focus. Something was happening in Aves Wood and he wanted to know what it was.

His view was patchy, obscured by tree trunks and thorny scrub, but there were three sections of the footpath that he could see clearly. He waited, calm and patient, and was rewarded by the sight of a woman in a suit, followed by a troop of officers in uniform. She was pointing, giving orders. The troop divided and dispersed.

Twitch felt a lurch of alarm. The police were searching for someone or something in Aves Wood. What if they came here, and discovered his hide? The summer would be ruined! He had made plans. Tomorrow he was going to begin training his squabs, Squeaker and Frazzle.

He planned to take them out on their maiden homing flight, then spend the rest of the day here, watching the wetland birds, updating his field journal and making improvements to his hide.

A flash of yellow caught his eye and he retrained his binoculars. He blinked, surprised to see two girls hiding in the undergrowth, peering over a fallen tree trunk at the footpath. The elder one had a waterfall of tight dark curls down her back and brooding elfin features. She was wearing jeans, a rainbow T-shirt, and carrying a plastic bag. The other girl, who looked a few years younger, had honey-brown curly hair scraped into a puffball ponytail on top of her head. She was wearing shorts with a yellow net skirt over the top and a pink vest under a powder-blue criss-cross cardigan. She looked frightened, huddled up against the older girl. The two girls were alike enough for Twitch to guess they were sisters. He couldn't hear what they were saying, but he could tell the older girl was reassuring the younger. Their expressions were serious, and their gestures were animated.

Could the police be after them?

There were too many people stomping about Aves Wood to watch birds, and Twitch was curious to know what was going on. Why were so many police officers,

dogs and a helicopter in the nature reserve? Keeping his binoculars around his neck, he covered the storage box, sweeping the dirt back over it to keep it hidden. Pulling on his rucksack, Twitch left the hide, making sure it was secure. He decided to make his way round to the rabbit track that wove a thin path through the nettles towards the girls' hiding place and see if he could find out what they were up to.



M. G. LEONARD is an award-winning, bestselling writer of children's books, as well as a founding member of Authors4Oceans. Her books are sold in forty countries, and there is currently a TV series in development based on her Beetle Boy series. Her first picture book, *The Tale of a Toothbrush*, is out now. She is also co-author of the critically-acclaimed Adventures on Trains series. Before becoming a writer, M. G. Leonard worked as a digital media producer for the National Theatre, The Royal Opera House and Shakespeare's Globe. She lives in Brighton with her husband, two sons and pet beetles.



#TheTwitchers
@WalkerBooksUK
@MGLnrd



Enjoyed *Twitch*?
Join the Twitchers Club!

www.TwitchersClub.com

#TheTwitchers



TWITCH has three
pet chickens, four pigeons,
swallows nesting in his bedroom
and a passion for birdwatching.

On the first day of the summer holidays
he arrives at his secret hide to find police
everywhere. A convicted robber has broken
out of prison and is hiding in Aves Wood.

Can Twitch use his talents for birdwatching
in the hunt for the dangerous prisoner
and find the missing loot?

“Enthralling from beginning to end!”

Dara McAnulty

“A winged masterpiece.”

Maz Evans

www.TWITCHERSCLUB.com

www.walker.co.uk

ISBN 978-1-4063-8937-1



9 781406 389371



9 0 1 0 0 >

eBook
Audiobook
available



£7.99
UK ONLY

COVER ILLUSTRATION BY PADDY DONNELLY