

## Emma Turner : a photographic pioneer

Emma Louisa Turner (1867-1940) was an innovative bird photographer, a highly respected ornithologist, an acclaimed author, and a popular lecturer. Her use of pioneering photographic techniques captured aspects of bird behaviour that had not previously been documented, and through her remarkable images and engaging words she enthralled countless people with her enthusiasm and love of birds.

### The early years



Emma Turner, unknown date  
BTOPP/TURN/1/2/005

Emma Turner was born on 9 June 1867 in Langton Green, near Tunbridge Wells in Kent. She was the youngest of four children born to John Turner, a grocer and draper, and his wife Emma (née Overy). John's shop and the family home were in the same building, which they shared with a series of pets including a squirrel called Frisky. Not much is known about her childhood, but it seems that the family were reasonably well-off and for a time Emma was a weekly boarder at a boarding school.

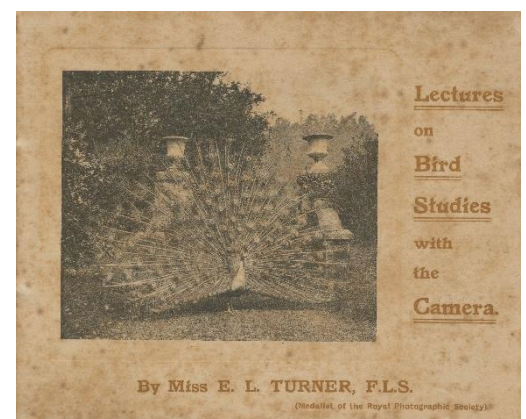
Following the death of her mother in 1880, her early life was centred around her family. Her elder sister Mary passed away in 1890, followed by her half-sister Annie in 1895, the wife of her brother Frank. With a household to run and family to support her life was very firmly based in Kent.

### A love of photography

However, at the turn of the century a chance encounter changed her life. In 1900 Emma met the eminent wildlife photographer Richard Kearton (1862-1928), who along with his brother Cherry (1871-1940) had developed innovative methods to photograph animals in the wild. The popular pictorial style of photography of the time did not interest her, but as a result of her meeting with Kearton she decided to take up bird photography. She joined the [Royal Photographic Society \(RPS\)](#) in 1901 and regularly exhibited her photographs in their annual exhibitions. In 1905 she was awarded the Royal Photographic Society's Gold Medal for her image of a Great Crested Grebe.

Emma began to use her photography to illustrate lectures and was frequently booked to talk to both specialist and general groups on ornithological topics. She was clearly an engaging and popular speaker as well as a talented photographer: a lecture she gave at the Cambridge Central Reference Library on 12 October 1930 had to be repeated the following week as the room reached capacity and people were turned away.

Perhaps inspired by Richard Kearton, she went to far greater lengths in her study of birds than many other photographers of her time. The astonishingly intimate images she was able to capture were the result of new techniques she refined over time, notably employing "Wait-and-see" or "rubbish-heap" photography. She would lie



Booklet advertising Emma's lectures, unknown date

BTOPP/TURN/7/004

completely covered by a heap of reeds or leaves for hours on end – in 1907 this proved such an effective disguise that a Snipe would frequently settle on her shoulder, on one occasion poking its bill into her ear. Later years brought further developments such as a hiding tent, where she was able to sit in relative luxury “with thermos flask and sandwiches, and sometimes a novel”.

Only scant references survive to the photographic equipment she used: by 1915 she was only using two cameras, a quarter-plate ‘Birdland’ Reflex, and a half-plate camera used for stationary subjects. She opted not to use an electric release, preferring to sit close to her feather subject(s) – she described the two essential qualifications required to be a bird photographer as patience and a thick skin.

*“Personally, I prefer to take any risks and chance any sort of exposure rather than lose an opportunity of securing a pose or depicting a mood: the bird and its psychology mean so much more to me than the perfect negative or finished print”.*

*E.L. Turner, ‘Old Experiences and Future Aspirations’, Country Life, 30 March 1918*

### Hickling and the Norfolk Broads

Emma made her first visit to the Norfolk Broads in either 1901 or 1902 on a yacht trip. Back then she “scarcely knew one wader from another”, but this was the start of a close relationship with Hickling which would last for the next 30 years. Yachts did not prove themselves to be a particularly suitable vehicle for birdwatching, so Emma designed “The Water-Rail” - a flat-bottomed houseboat which was launched at Hickling in March 1905. It had been built at nearby Sutton Staithe and transported two miles by road to Hickling, a photographic account of which can be found in the archive of her friend M.C.H. Bird. The island where “The Water-Rail” was moored bears the name Miss Turner’s Island even today, and this “one cabin, 8 feet wide, 6 feet high, and 7 feet 6 inches long, with kitchen and darkroom” formed her Norfolk base.



*Print of “The Water-Rail” at Hickling,*

*unknown date*

*BTOPP/TURN/1/1/3/001*

Not far from Hickling an extraordinary event took place in early July 1911. Emma Turner heard a report of Bitterns nesting and booming at Sutton Broad – a sound not heard in the area since the 1880s. Enlisting the help of Jim Vincent, the gamekeeper at nearby Whiteslea Lodge, the pair set out in search and after a few hours of patient watch caught sight of an adult bird flying back and forth over the marsh. They searched the reed bed and eventually found a young Bittern, with beak pointed upwards, well-camouflaged by its light and dark feathers blending completely with the reeds.

At this point it was getting too dark for photography, and with fear of their finding not being believed they made the astonishing decision to take the young Bittern back with them, and stowed him overnight in a building belonging to the land-owner. They set off at 3 a.m. the next morning by bicycle to collect their feathered companion, seemingly not too perturbed by his unusual night. Placing him back where they had found him,

Emma recorded their sighting in an extraordinary sequence of photographs. They even tried feeding him,





Glass plate negative image of the  
young Bittern, July 1911  
BTOPP/TURN/1/1/1/009

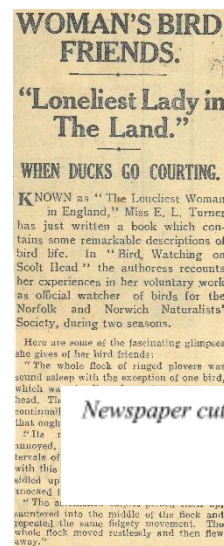
to no avail, but left him in peace when he started making noises likely to attract the attention of his parents. Ten days later, she went back with others to try and find the nest: it was located by the Reverend Bird just a few metres from where they had found the young Bittern.

Emma Turner recorded this occasion and others in her 1924 publication *Broadland Birds*. It was not intended as an ornithological textbook, but rather as a book for bird-lovers. Its chapters describe her observations on the wide variety of species found on the Broads, illustrated by 70 of her photographs. It was well-received, with letters in his archive describing it as a "continual refreshment & delight", thanking its author and praising her intimate style of writing, infinite detail, and patience. In total she wrote eight books, contributed chapters to a further five, and was the author of dozens of articles published in *Country Life* and other journals.

### Scolt Head Island

Another popular book of hers was the 1928 publication *Birdwatching on Scolt Head*. In December 1923 she had heard that a watcher was needed at Scolt Head Island, a barrier island located on the north Norfolk coast between Brancaster and Wells-next-the-Sea, which had been purchased by the National Trust to be managed as a nature reserve. The watcher would be required to look after large colonies of terns and other breeding birds such as Oystercatchers and Little Ringed Plovers. Emma volunteered for the position, and her tenure as the first-ever began on 1 April 1924.

Her appointment caught the attention of the national press who, annoyance, declared her to be "the loneliest woman in England". "The Water-Rail" had undoubtedly been good training and the accommodation on Scolt was similarly sparse, but she refuted *Birdwatching on Scolt Head* saying that she was "never lonely with a regular stream of visitors and her five Manchester Terriers for company. Her position came to an end on 9 November 1925, during which time the bird population at Scolt had increased considerably under her guardianship.



Plovers. Emma  
watcher of Scolt Head

much to her  
England". Her time on  
hut that was her  
this claim in  
and seldom alone"  
Terriers for company.

Newspaper cutting from Bristol Evening News,  
19 November 1928  
BTOPP/TURN/4/1/2/004

### Her later years

Family circumstances had kept Emma Turner in Kent, but following the death of her father in February 1913 she relocated to East Anglia, purchasing a house in Girton, near Cambridge. She moved to Cambridge proper soon after she returned from Scolt Head, and was an active member of the Cambridge Ornithological Club (now the [Cambridgeshire Bird Club](#)) and served as Vice-President and a member of the Committee. She was also a keen member of the [Norfolk & Norwich Naturalists' Society \(NNNS\)](#) where she served as President from 1921-22.

Towards the end of her life Emma's sight began to fail. She could no longer see the birds that brought her so much joy, but could still hear them and she had built up a large circle of friends who would read to her from ornithological journals. A cataract operation was unsuccessful, and she passed away not long after at her home in Cambridge on 13 August 1940, at the age of 73.

## A lasting legacy



Portrait photograph of Emma  
Turner, unknown date  
BTOPP/TURN/1/2/014

Emma Turner was highly respected for her knowledge of birds, and this was recognised as early as 1904 when she was elected to the [Linnean Society](#) as one of the society's first 15 female fellows. This was followed in 1909 by being one of only four women to be admitted to the [British Ornithologists' Union \(BOU\)](#) as an honorary member. She also played a huge role in our history, when in July 1933 she put her name to a letter published in *The Times* announcing the formation of the British Trust for Ornithology, the only woman among 11 other well-known ornithological names.

In her will she bequeathed all of her "photographic plates, slides, and other like articles to the British Trust for Ornithology", which were believed lost until a chance discovery in February 2019 of 11 glass plate negatives and 29 lantern slides in a cupboard at the BTO Headquarters in Thetford. These have now joined the rest of the Emma Turner Archive, which was kindly donated to the BTO Archives in 2011 by her great-nieces Joan Keeling and Julia Volrath. In 2024 a permanent interpretation panel about her was installed at the [Norfolk Wildlife Trust \(NWT\)](#) reserve at Hickling Broad, her base for so many years.

If you would like to find out more about Emma Turner, there is a wealth of material in the BTO Archives and Chris Mead Library:

Title	Author(s)	Date	Reference number/shelfmark
<b>Archive collection of Emma Turner</b> <i>Collection of photographic materials and diaries, correspondence, copies of articles and press cuttings</i>	E.L. Turner	1893-2024	BTOPP/TURN
<b>Archive collection of M.C.H. Bird</b> <i>The Rev. Maurice Bird's archive contains photographs and correspondence by Emma Turner</i>	M.C.H. Bird	1836-2024	BTOPP/BIRD
<b>Transactions of the Norfolk and Norwich Naturalists' Society</b> <i>Emma Turner served as President in 1921-22 and contributed articles between 1907 and 1925</i>	Various	1907-1925	Bird Reports : N/470
<b>British Birds</b> <i>Emma Turner contributed numerous articles between 1907 and 1937</i>	Various	1907-1937	Journals : B
<b>The Home-Life of Some Marsh Birds</b> <i>A study of the behaviour of a selection of marsh birds, with photographs</i>	E.L. Turner and P.H. Bahr	1907	591.55 TUR
<b>The British Bird Book</b> <i>Emma Turner contributed eight of the 48 species accounts</i>	F.B. Kirkman	1910-1913	941 KIR
<b>Broadland Birds</b> <i>Her account of living amongst the birds of the Norfolk Broads</i>	E.L. Turner	1924	942.61 TUR
<b>A Book about Birds</b> <i>A brief review of structure, habits and characteristics</i>	E.L. Turner and Robert Gurney	1924	598.25 TUR
<b>Bird Watching on Scolt Head</b>	E.L. Turner	1928	942.61 TUR

<i>An account of her 1924-25 season as watcher at Scolt</i>			
<b><i>Stray Leaves from Nature's Notebook</i></b> <i>An illustrated series of essays on different ornithological topics</i>	E.L. Turner	1929	574 TUR
<b><i>A History of the Birds of Norfolk</i></b> <i>Bernard Riviere wrote the introduction in collaboration with Emma Turner</i>	B.B. Riviere	1930	942.61 RIV
<b><i>Togo, My Squirrel</i></b> <i>An account of the pet Red Squirrels she kept</i>	E.L. Turner	1932	599.3 TUR
<b><i>My Swans, the Wyllly-Wyllys</i></b> <i>Description of a swan family she lived beside on Hickling Broad</i>	E.L. Turner	1932	598.484 TUR
<b><i>Scolt Head Island</i></b> <i>Emma Turner contributed a chapter on breeding birds</i>	J.A. Steers (ed.)	1934	942.61 STE
<b><i>Every Garden a Bird Sanctuary</i></b> <i>Contains advice on caring for and feeding wild birds in gardens</i>	E.L. Turner	1935	502.4 TUR
<b><i>The Romance of Nature</i></b> <i>Emma Turner contributed seven chapters on birds</i>	F. Pitt (ed.)	1937	574 PIT
<b><i>A Season of Birds : A Norfolk Diary, 1911</i></b> <i>Jim Vincent's diaries – contains numerous references to Emma Turner including finding the Bittern in July 1911</i>	Edwin Vincent and G.E. Lodge	1980	942.61 VIN
<b><i>Emma Turner : A Life Looking at Birds</i></b> <i>Biography of Emma Turner</i>	James Parry and Jeremy Greenwood	2020	820 PAR