

## The Nightingale's Nest

Up this green woodland ride let's softly rove  
And list the nightingale – she dwelleth here.  
Hush! let the wood gate softly clap – for fear  
The noise might drive her from her home of love;  
For here I've heard her many a merry year  
At morn and eve, nay, all the live-long day  
As though she lived on song – this very spot,  
Just where that old man's beard all wildly trails  
Rude arbours o'er the road and stops the way,  
And where that child its bluebell flowers hath got,  
Laughing and creeping through the mossy rails.  
There have I hunted like a very boy  
Creeping on hands and knees through matted thorns  
To find her nest and see her feed her young,  
And vainly did I many hours employ:  
All seemed as hidden as a thought unborn.  
And where these crimping fern leaves ramp among  
The hazel's underboughs – I've nestled down  
And watched her while she sung – and her renown  
Hath made me marvel that so famed a bird  
Should have no better dress than russet brown.  
Her wings would tremble in her ecstasy  
And feathers stand on end as 'twere with joy  
And mouth wide open to release her heart  
Of its out-sobbing songs – the happiest part  
Of Summer's fame she shared – for so to me  
Did happy fancies shapen her employ;  
But if I touched a bush or scarcely stirred  
All in a moment stopped – I watched in vain:  
The timid bird had left the hazel bush  
And at a distance hid to sing again,  
Lost in a wilderness of listening leaves.  
Rich ecstasy would pour its luscious strain  
Till envy spurred the emulating thrush  
To start less wild and scarce inferior songs,  
For cares with him for half the year remain  
To damp the ardour of his speckled breast,  
While nightingales to Summer's life belongs,  
And naked trees and Winter's nipping wrongs  
Are strangers to her music and her rest.  
Her joys are evergreen; her world is wide.  
– Hark! there she is, as usual, let's be hush,  
For in this blackthorn clump if rightly guessed  
Her curious house is hidden – part aside  
These hazel branches in a gentle way  
And stoop right cautious 'neath the rustling boughs;  
For we will have another search today  
And hunt this fern-strown thorn-clump round and round,

And where this seeded woodgrass idly bows  
We'll wade right through; it is a likely nook.  
In such-like spots and often on the ground  
They'll build where rude boys never think to look.  
Aye, as I live, her secret nest is here,  
Upon this whitethorn stulp – I've searched about  
For hours in vain – there; put that bramble by.  
Nay, trample on its branches and get near  
– How subtle is the bird; she started out  
And raised a plaintive note of danger nigh  
Ere we were past the brambles, and now near  
Her nest she sudden stops – as choking fear  
That might betray her home – so even now  
We'll leave it as we found it – safety's guard  
Of pathless solitudes shall keep it still.  
See; there she's sitting on the old oak bough,  
Mute in her fears – our presence doth retard  
Her joys and doubt turns every rapture chill.  
Sing on, sweet bird; may no worse hap befall  
Thy visions than the fear that now deceives.  
We will not plunder music of its dower  
Nor turn this spot of happiness to thrall,  
For melody seems hid in every flower  
That blossoms near thy home – these harebells all  
Seems bowing with the beautiful in song,  
And gaping cuckoo with its spotted leaves  
Seems blushing of the singing it has heard.  
How curious is the nest. No other bird  
Uses such loose materials or weaves  
Their dwellings in such spots – dead oaken leaves  
Are placed without and velvet moss within  
And little scraps of grass – and scant and spare  
Of what seems scarce materials, down and hair,  
For from man's haunts she seemeth nought to win.  
Yet nature is the builder and contrives  
Homes for her children's comfort even here  
Where solitude's disciples spend their lives  
Unseen save when a wanderer passes near  
That loves such pleasant places – Deep adown  
The nest is made an hermit's mossy cell.  
Snug lies her curious eggs, in number five,  
Of deadened green or rather olive brown  
And the old prickly thorn bush guards them well.  
And here we'll leave them still unknown to wrong  
As the old woodland's legacy of song.

Written in 1832, this poem was first published in the the newspaper *Stamford Bee*, on 30 November 1832, and was also published in the annual [\*Friendship's Offering\*, 1833, 358–60.](#)

*John Clare*. Edited by R. K. R. Thornton. London: Everyman, 1997. 47–50.  
With grateful thanks to Professor Thornton.