

It's the goldcrest that did it by Mike Parker

The day hadn't started well. The milk was off, my coffee went down the drain, I dribbled toothpaste down my shirt and the dog threw up. By the time my partner and I were ready to go to the shop for fresh milk, I was a three but it was the goldcrest that did it. I'd never seen one in the garden before yet there it was, a lively ball of green and creamy brown with that dazzling gold crown. I went to snap a picture but my phone slipped through my fingers, smacking on the drive, the screen a web of cracks. I cracked too.

There's a scale that autistic kids are taught for times like this and this was me at the top of the scale – a five – screaming, shouting, stamping on the shattered phone, leaping furiously into the car and speeding off who knows where, my partner forgotten on the roadside. Except really, we both knew where I'd go.

Though I'm invariably almost surprised to find myself here, it's always to the Head that I come. Once, thousands of years ago, it was a bustling port; today it's a reserve of nature, peace and tranquillity, broken – to my shame – by my slamming car door.

I start with an angry march down a path with fields – an ancient burial ground – to one side and the water of the harbour to the other. There's a burning, churning ache in my stomach and my chest, my heart is pounding, my breath ragged. I notice nothing until a kestrel catches my eye, hanging in the air, wings beating with an electric crackle, eyes fixed. I stop and watch until it swoops away, harried by nervous swallows. My breathing slows. My heart quietens. I'm a four.

Further on, there's the yaffling cackle of a woodpecker, the bouncing flight of green and red before it lands in a tree, clinging to the trunk, disappearing behind a bough, reappearing. Hide and seek. I'm not yet ready to laugh myself, but a knot unravels in my chest. Three.

On I walk – slower now – to the water's edge where a heron stands one-legged in the reeds listening to the prehistoric call of egrets from the woods. A redshank struts through the shallow water, carefully planting its garish legs, probing the mud with its beak. Distant terns plunge into the harbour. Minutes pass. I sigh and feel my shoulders relax. Two.

From there, my path takes me through woodland where I'm followed by an ever-amiable robin. A thrush sings loudly, dunnocks hide, tits dance among the branches and from somewhere, there's the staccato call of a chiffchaff. I pause once more. There's an almost imperceptible fluttering in a birch; a tiny bird with a dazzling gold crown perches on a twig, its head cocked, beady black eye on me. As the bird and I watch each other, a loving, forgiving hand slips into mine and I smile. I'm a one. It's the goldcrest that did it.