Field Notes on Estuarine Birds

A Season at the Salt Marsh

The tide chart governs everything here. Two hours before the ebb the mudflats begin to surface, and within minutes the first dowitchers drop in to probe the exposed silt. By the time the water has fully withdrawn the flat is a moving carpet of shorebirds, each species working a slightly different depth of mud with a slightly different bill.

This notebook collects a single season of observations from the eastern marsh, kept with a spotting scope and a waterproof pad. Counts are approximate; the point was never a census but a record of behaviour -- who arrives first, who displaces whom, and how the assembly dissolves when a harrier crosses the channel.

Where a claim can be checked against the literature I have noted it, but most of what follows is simply what the marsh showed on a given morning.

1 The Morning Assembly

Dunlin arrive in tight flocks and settle at the water's edge, running rather than walking, stitching a line of probe-holes along the retreating tide. They tolerate close neighbours and pack densely, which makes them easy to overlook against the mud.

Behind them the larger godwits stand almost motionless, driving their long bills to the hilt and pausing between strikes. A single godwit will hold a patch of flat for many minutes, and smaller birds flow around it as if around a rock.

The whole assembly is loosely sorted by leg length, and therefore by how deep each bird can wade before the falling tide strands it. Nothing enforces the order; it simply falls out of anatomy and appetite.

2 Territory and Displacement

Disputes are brief and almost entirely ritual. A bird lowers its head, spreads its tail, and runs at the intruder; the intruder yields a step and the matter is settled without contact. I saw genuine contact only twice all season, both times between godwits over an unusually rich channel edge.

Gulls complicate the picture. A single herring gull dropping onto the flat can clear a wide circle of smaller birds, not through aggression but through sheer bulk and the threat of kleptoparasitism. The shorebirds re-form behind it within a minute.

The lesson I kept relearning: the structure of the flat is not fixed but continuously renegotiated, and the negotiation is mostly bluff.