

# Into the blue

As spring dawns,  
a fleeting explosion  
of mercurial blue colours  
our world, enthuses  
**Deborah Nicholls-Lee**

**P**ICASSO'S Blue Period was a dismal affair, but ours is full of joy, more akin to Matisse's dancing cut-outs or Michelangelo's cherub-filled skies. The English bluebell is the headline act: a carpet of colour in damp, deciduous woods that lasts a month at most. It's an appearance so arresting, yet so short lived, that legends have built up around it. It's said that if you hear a bluebell ring, you are sure to die and if you wander into a patch of bluebells, you risk falling under a fairy enchantment.

Folklore aside, it's wise to keep a little distance between your boots and the bluebell, as the English variety is a protected species that can take up to seven years to flower. It is for this reason that our most ancient woodlands are among the best places to see established colonies.

‘If you wander into  
a patch of bluebells,  
you risk falling under  
a fairy enchantment’

Blue's brevity may account for its spell on us and certainly invites us to make the most of it while it lasts. It also teaches us an important lesson. In *To the Bluebell* by Emily Brontë (1818–48), for example, the bluebell's transience and fragility help the poet make peace with mortality:

Bluebell, even as all divine  
I have seen my darling shine—  
Bluebell, even as wan and frail  
I have seen my darling fail—  
Thou hast found a voice for me,  
And soothing words are breathed by thee.

Brushing up against the bluebell is the delicate forget-me-not, another blue harbinger →

**No human king could wear raiment to rival  
the vivid teal-blue of a kingfisher's feathers**











**A liminal hue: at twilight on a still evening, Loch Tay is imbued with the cobalt, cerulean, mauve and indigo shades of the sky above**

of warmer weather that enjoys moist, shady soils. Known as mouse's ear (*Myosotis*) in Greek because of its hairy, ear-shaped leaves, this prolific self-seeder has a sunshine centre surrounded by five tiny petals that release a sweet fragrance at night. The forget-me-not is a popular nectar source for the iridescent holly blue butterfly, the first of the UK's blue butterflies to take to the wing. In a few weeks, it will be joined by the common blue, a slightly larger specimen with a resplendent mauvy-blue upperwing in the male variety.

It's at this time that pairs of blue tits, in their blue overcoats, berets and scarves, can be seen scoping the garden for the best place to nest. The jay, with its natty blue swatch, also makes its presence felt as it catcalls and displays to potential breeding partners. As birds couple up, more pops of blue appear in our trees and hedgerows when clutches of beautiful turquoise eggs are laid by dunnocks, bullfinches, starlings and song thrushes, together with the majority of corvids.

It is, however, from a white egg that one of our bluest birds will emerge. 'It was the Rainbow that gave thee birth/And left thee all her lovely hues' wrote poet W. H. Davies (1871–1940) of the kingfisher, perhaps the most striking of all our blue avians. From April onwards, you have the best chance of spotting one as they emerge more frequently from their riverside nests to seek food for newly hatched chicks.

Beneath the sea, more blue is on its way. As temperatures rise, blue fish return to British waters as the blue-finned black bream

**‘From a distance, blue appears plentiful, yet it is almost entirely intangible’**



**Dull brown the dunnock may be, but its turquoise-tinted eggs are anything but**

and the tropical-looking male cuckoo wrasse, with its neon-blue markings, seek new feeding grounds; speckled blue lobsters and the formidable blue shark hold out until late May.

'Blue is the most elusive of colours,' writes art historian James Fox in *The World According to Colour: A Cultural History* (2021). 'Blue flowers are rare in Nature because very few genuine blue pigments are available to them.' As such, producing blue is a 'complicated and biologically expensive process that few plants have evolved to undertake'. Fewer than 5% of the world's plants are blue and less than 1% of animals, which explains in part why so many ancient languages functioned without a word for it.

The colour is characterised by a tantalising paradox that has captivated us for millennia. From a distance, it appears plentiful, colouring our skies and our seas, yet it is almost entirely intangible. 'It is everywhere and nowhere,' continues Dr Fox. 'This oscillation of presence and absence, this teasing existence at the margins of our world, is at the heart of blue's cultural significance.'

Given its scarcity in Nature, bottling blue was, unsurprisingly, a Sisyphean endeavour. It wasn't until the Middle Ages that woad, a yellow-flowering plant, would become the unlikely source of Europe's first homegrown blue colourant. Yet the prohibitive cost of blue dye meant that it remained the preserve of the elite and their uniformed staff, giving rise to its lasting association with royalty.

Meanwhile, the art world was running its own race for blue. The answer was found →





Lurking in the depths of the deep blue sea off Sark, a European lobster reveals a carapace of sapphire to rival the surface far above



## Throwing light on the colour blue

Earth may be known as ‘the blue planet’ due to its appearance from space and the water that covers 71% of its surface, but the colour is surprisingly rare on land. Blue’s shyness in our woodlands, marshes and meadows comes down to an intricate interplay between pigment, molecular structure and wavelengths of light.

When white light hits an object—be it mineral, feather or flower—the object appears the colour of the light that it is unable to absorb and therefore reflects back. As Nature finds absorbing the longer red and yellow wavelengths more difficult, blue is less common. Green, on the other hand, is widespread in Nature because chlorophyll, a pigment that helps plants make use of energy from the sun, cannot absorb green light and so reflects it back.

Microstructures also play a role. Some formations in feathers, for example, create red and yellow wavelengths that cancel each other out and so amplify the reflected blue light. Changes of colouration for camouflage or communication purposes can also be explained through minute structural changes.

deep in the mines of a mountainous region we now know as Afghanistan and in the form of lapis lazuli, a striking electric-blue rock that was sold to Europeans at the vibrant markets of 13th-century Venice and then ground into a pigment of unparalleled beauty, known as ultramarine. Although China and Egypt had been creating blue for centuries from copper-based compounds, nothing could match the depth and durability of gorgeous ultramarine. Other blues literally paled in comparison and, by the 17th century, it was more expensive than gold.

For centuries, the colour denoted a rare heavenly purity and, in paintings, was kept for the Virgin Mary or Jesus. Unfinished works awaiting blue paint, such as Michelangelo’s *Entombment* and the ‘Manchester Madonna’, testify to its costliness and scarcity. Blue became an obsession that would make or break artists. In the 1600s, Vermeer’s predilection for priceless blues sunk him deeper in debt, but it also imbued his oeuvre with an enduring appeal that helped make the Rijksmuseum’s survey of his work last year’s hottest ticket.

Change came in the 18th century, when Prussian blue, containing iron and cyanide, arrived in the European market and made its mark in paintings such as Gainsborough’s *The Blue Boy* and Constable’s dramatic skiescapes.

‘Given its scarcity in Nature, bottling blue was, unsurprisingly, a Sisyphean endeavour’



**Winged jewels: a common blue damselfly (above) and Adonis blue butterflies (facing page)**

However, the pigment was prone to dulling and its contemporary, cobalt blue, too expensive. The search for a better blue resumed. Prizes were offered in Paris and London and, at last, in 1828, the chemist Jean-Baptiste Guimet, whose wife was a painter, brought to market a spectacular synthetic lazurite that had the potential to democratise blue.

Despite its increased availability, the otherworldliness of the colour transfixed modern artists no less. Monet’s landscapes and lilies are awash with it; van Gogh’s skies brood and swirl with it. Even abstract artists were enthralled. ‘The deeper the blue becomes, the more strongly it calls man towards the infinite, awakening in him a desire for the pure and, finally, for the supernatural,’ wrote Wassily Kandinsky, the founding member of the Blue Rider group, in 1910.

Today, blue is still an unrivalled beauty, a symbol of wealth prized above all other colours. Blue diamonds, among the rarest and most desirable of gemstones, attract record-breaking prices at auction. Barnett Newman’s *Onement VI*, a plain blue canvas bisected by a white line, made headlines in 2013 when it sold at Sotheby’s for \$43.8 million (£34.4m).

It’s tempting to chase that burst of blue we relish in spring, pursue ownership of its most intoxicating hues and seek to hold it in our hands. Or, as poet Robert Frost (1874–1963) reminds us, we could look skyward, to the banquet of blue we can feast on all year round:

Why make so much of fragmentary blue  
In here and there a bird, or butterfly,  
Or flower, or wearing-stone, or open eye,  
When heaven presents in sheets the  
solid hue? 🦋



