

More unfolding dramas from Broadway's resident birds; March to August 2015

Mark and Christine Turner



01. Watercolour of Goshawk by Mark Turner.

Mid-March this year very typically brought the local *Buteos* (buzzards) together to eye each other up and engages in aerial disputes over territory. During a visit to a long established nest wood I observed one of the resident pair returning to a group of skeletal larches with a long whippy twig to add to an old eyrie in the canopy. However, this was not a straight forward flight in, for hanging aloft and looking on was an intruder. The resident bird, not being put off by prying eyes, entered the wood with a dramatic bounding flight culminating in a final plunge approach to the nest.

27th March had me practically in collision with a hunting male Sparrowhawk. Historically known as a Musket by Falconers, this bird was shooting along (sorry about the pun) a narrow alleyway between residences, a footpath no wider than three feet edged each side by hedging and fences. This slender stealth hunter flew at no more than a foot off the ground and had I been a second or two sooner stepping out of the gate into the alley, then I don't know what the consequences would have been.

Easter Monday 6th April was gearing up to be the warmest day of the year so far and a gentle circular walk from home heading south across the village was on the cards. Glorious weather brought out the broad-wings in their numbers, generally in groups of three to six, the first of which held two notable individuals. Uppermost in the stack was a Sparrowhawk and clearly unhappy. It circled close to the Buzzards with its white undertail coverts fully aroused then launched an attack on the nearest *Buteo*. In the middle of the stack was a distinctive Buzzard, entirely white beneath except for bold black primary tips and border to the wings' trailing edges.

Our walk of more than two hours mostly on the level was constantly punctuated by stops to watch Buzzards and Ravens, but also nest-building Nuthatches (plastering mud around their nest entrance) and seeing our first Swallows of the spring. However, our arrival at Bury End along the Snowhill Road delivered a real bonus: *Accipiters*.

This was an exercise in identification by separation of the sexes and species; yes, that's right, Sparrowhawk and Goshawk. The one in view best of all was a lovely big female Gos, gracefully circling on outstretched wings whilst a smaller male was at a lower level briefly encountering a Sparrowhawk, this enabled a comparison of size and shape to be made. The adult male Goshawk typically showed a strong head profile and distinct dark and pale head markings. The female Goshawk however, was a real revelation. Her strongly barred remiges revealed her to be a young adult with more brown than grey in the plumage. The Sparrowhawk typically showed a more pinched waistline and slender build.

Thursday 16th April was very typically an ideal raptor watching day in Broadway, being warm and sunny with cloud and thermals. Sparrowhawks, Buzzards, Ravens and a Red Kite all made appearances, but news from a friend brought an element of surprise as we discussed the local Red Kites: he'd seen three together!! No wonder they are seen so regularly around the village.

Between 15.45 and 15.55 hrs under heavy cloud cover on 27th April, I chanced upon a couple of birds in opposing flight directions. Going west away from the escarpment, but not so high over the housing estate was my first returned Hobby of the season. This was followed by a male Sparrowhawk going east in a determined fashion at a much higher altitude.

An end of week cigar-moment presented itself at 13.20 hrs on 8th May when a stunning low-level appearance by a Red Kite grabbed our attention. It patrolled slowly over our housing estate, even at one point passing directly over our home, daringly lower than we've experienced here before. This bird showing the beginnings of symmetrical moult of the inner primaries, re-appeared in the same spot doing exactly the same a little later at 15.00 hrs, but with attendant Jackdaws moving it on.

By the last week of May *Hirundines* and Swifts were firmly re-acquainted with their summer residences around our housing estate and daytime temperatures were more settled into the higher teens. Quite by chance when stepping outside to visit the dustbins at 12.55 hrs on 22nd May, a spindly-winged Hobby came streaking through from the escarpment fields, across neighbouring houses and gardens.

As storm clouds gathered and the temperature rose, from 14.00 hrs the Stormbringer displayed over his territory. A croaking Raven gave a marvellous flight over the estate and fields between me and the escarpment to the east. It comprised of half, and even once, a three-quarter barrel-roll, twisting rapidly back to the normal position, then gentle shallow dives with wings half-closed and long soaring glides with magnificent elongate pinions widely splayed.

Next up, quite literally, a wing-quivering male Kestrel was neck-strainingly right above me; had I been a menu option I really don't think I'd have seen him coming soon enough. A plain tail with terminal band and single inner primary gap in each wing identified this individual.

The following afternoon was uncomfortably humid with great black storm clouds loitering aloft, nevertheless birds circled endlessly on the rising air, including a group of two Ravens and two Kestrels embattled with local Jackdaws. A Raven exclaimed displeasure with repeated *KRA-KRA-KRA* notes. I have often thought, after countless observations, that Ravens prefer the company of raptors to their own crow relatives to the point where their lesser cousins are nothing more than a complete nuisance and that the Raven has evolved more in parallel with the raptors. It is certain fact that the lesser Corvids treat Ravens with the same distrust as any of the day-flying birds of prey.

June 2015 was dotted throughout the month with sightings of a single Kite around the village and not least on the former Council estate where Christine and I live. The bird is wide ranging, but often seen patrolling above rooftops and gardens at any time of the day.

During the afternoon of 26th June the Kite came under attack from *Hirundines* and its response was to twist over rapidly and drop like a stone away from the fly-like aggressors. This was a new behavioural observation for me and it is usually Jackdaws that pile in first, but such aerial agility is breath-taking.

Saturday 27th was hot and sunny and I was in mobile phone conversation with Christine discussing the slow patrolling Kite between her at home and me in Sandcroft Avenue (less than 100 yards apart); days of surreal birding indeed.

June 2015 has seen a pair of Kestrels turning up around the housing estate apparently on hunting expeditions which I have noted in the past normally to be more a winter habit when times are harder. I am more accustomed to eagerly looking out for either Hobby or Sparrowhawk when House Martins go into a panic, so I was a little surprised or bemused during the hot morning of 30th June when a male Kestrel swept over my head whilst I was gardening. Shortly afterwards I was treated to a trio of Buzzards rising up, their far-carrying mewing calls being my signal.

Later this same day I received excited news from a colleague that two Kites were once again at large between the Gravel Pit reserve and Little Buckland area.

At the start of July there was happy news from the Raven camp as a family of four regularly appeared passing overhead in Corvid conversation. I had little to report until month's end when, happily, I had a not so unusual encounter with a Hobby on 22nd - a pristine adult streaked by me below rooftop height in Broadway village High Street and went straight through the middle of the Hunt Kennels' yard where breeding Swallows hang out. An audible awareness also alerted us to three raptors coming towards us from over the village centre, even without binoculars it was obvious a Buzzard was caught up in the middle of two screeching Peregrines before breaking away from the rowdy falcons. A few minutes later a Kestrel passed over us heading more peacefully to farmland on the north-east side of village residences.

A little before mid-afternoon the same day whilst we were out in the garden, a Red Kite passed by heading towards the village centre. This had been a day filled with birds of prey and not least with numerous Buzzards on the wing during trips out to Evesham, Pershore and Beckford; fabulous.

By the end of the first week in August our resident breeding House Martins were in good numbers, but I'm sure productivity will have been badly affected this year with pressure on nest sites from building works to upgrade the exterior of the former Council houses. From this year on there will be a reduction in the number of suitable places to build and I'm certain that returning Swifts will have the same problem. And now with hunting Sparrowhawks, Kestrels, Hobbies and occasional Peregrines at large these are not good times for Broadway's *Hirundines*, but I am eager to stress that although our raptors are enjoying relatively relaxed times in terms of persecution, they should not be labelled the villains responsible for the decline in *Passerines*. We as much as anything are to blame for the constant disruption, degrading and destruction of living spaces so vital for nature's communities to thrive in.

Image

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