

## The Birds & the Bees & a few others. North Cotswold highlights May to August 2016

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Touring round green country lanes through idyllic Cotswold stone villages on a stormy sunny day in May soon turned into a raptor road trip with surprising encounters.

Burford was our first port of call and we quickly latched on to a Red Kite soaring above the church with at least two others more distant. These very soon paled into insignificance when a passage Harrier of indiscernible identity crossed our vision heading north. My first thoughts of Marsh Harrier somehow didn't seem quite right by the silhouetted shape I was seeing; oh the frustration!

After a couple of hours in the West Oxfordshire town we headed out through lush countryside with beautiful thick hedgerows the likes of which we rarely see in Worcestershire. These hedges abound with Yellowhammers and Whitethroats, again, on a scale we don't see in Worcestershire nowadays. However, over one of these hedges, in a field being worked by a tractor near the quaint village of Taynton, a great community of birds foraged in this big open larder. A black mass of Corvids carpeted the ground whilst numerous Red Kites swooped about in a feeding-frenzy. The two of us counted and re-counted a dozen for sure. We could only compare this scene directly with a certain Welsh feeding station.

Over the opposite side of the road a different scene played out. A Buzzard rising up from a block of woodland was attacked repeatedly by the dramatic swooping and stooping of a Lapwing, whilst nearby a Kestrel hovered serenely and calmly in the foreground. Phew!

My first Hobby of the season spectacularly arrived in off the sea at Portland Bill, Dorset on 20<sup>th</sup> April, but for my first local returner I had to wait until 11.00am on 25<sup>th</sup> May. Again spectacularly, Hobbies don't do anything else; this one pursued a distressed Starling, passing over our flats and on between two blocks of semis below roof height.

Monday 6<sup>th</sup> June by early afternoon was sunny and very warm, a perfect day for a pair of Ravens and their three youngsters of the current year to soar away from the North Cotswold escarpment and enjoy life on the wing high over Broadway village.

After this date the month of June descended into a string of wet and dreary weeks, however, one group of insects seemed to be unaffected to the point of thriving in numbers: Moths. The huge, deep, mixed species raggle-taggle hedge on the south side of our flats I'm sure was a key to their success, not least because nightly visits by Pipistrelle Bats told of this plentiful food supply as they skillfully whizzed past the living room window during high speed circuits of the adjacent grass area under the big Ash tree.

Worcestershire Record readers will know of my fondness for Scarlet Tigers and this year has proven to be particularly bounteous with their numbers. From Small Magpie and Angle Shades to Large Yellow Underwing and Swallow-tailed Moth all welcome distractions and even boundary bushes during sunny periods saw Tree Bumblebees far outnumbering any other species of their kind.

Indeed staying with this subject, there was great excitement in the neighbourhood during one particularly warm and sunny spell over two days when a mobile swarm of Honey Bees went from garden to garden causing no little concern and fascination at the same time. How curious it is that this is such an infrequent event to behold even when like ourselves who rarely miss a trick observing wildlife it's always a thrill to see a swarm.

During the start of the summer various events conspired against any opportunities for going on any raptor expeditions though I was blessed with occasional fly-bys of adult Hobby and Peregrine;

Buzzards and Ravens being always to hand for a welcome distraction.

Tuesday 26<sup>th</sup> July was pleasantly warm and sunny with a breeze and plenty of cloud banks as a backdrop presenting easy observation of high-balling Buzzards and Ravens, all highly vocal from the start. This is the season of high tension when these birds have young, whether fledged or about to fledge.

Shortly before 11.00am a shrill House Martin passed over the back yard causing me to look up instantly. A high gliding Red Kite cruised towards Willersey on widespread level wings, then two Ravens at lower level crossed at 90 degrees left to right on their way towards the escarpment. Once again my sharp-eyed little black and white friends had proved to be invaluable informants.

7.00am Thursday 28<sup>th</sup> July and it's clear from our view out of the living room window it's the day of seasonal abundance. The sky above the flats swirling with numbers of Swifts and Martins, the big Ash tree and hedgerow below it heaving with busy Sparrow families and, happily, our constantly challenged Lady Blackbird as we call her, keeper of numerous homes in the hedge, finally has a brancher fledgling to show us. Dutiful mum danced around her chick with a beakful of grub but the satiated youngster was just not interested. A bedraggled adult Blue Tit, also in the Ash, told of another frantic season of brood rearing behind it. And as we watched those manic Sparrows plundering bunches of brown Ash keys, we realise the importance of even a solitary tree within the neighbourhood, for all our feathered residents.

The first week of August kicked off the new month nicely with a shoot-through male Sparrowhawk, an overhead soaring Red Kite showing new growth tail and primary feathers, and on the 6<sup>th</sup>, a pristine Hobby terrorising local Houses Martins.

A seasonal change was in the air come 7<sup>th</sup> August, our local Swifts had gone, waves of Gulls seem to be on the move and one of this year's juvenile Blackbirds was enjoying the crop of ripe berries on the Flowering Currant bush.

By the second week of August there was a perceptible change in behaviour amongst our resident House Martins, an edginess or perhaps restlessness about them. With numbers swelled with juveniles, the birds often gathered on tv aerials and roof tiles, then in an explosion of twittering, many dozens took flight and bomb-burst across the neighbourhood. These gatherings by the morning of 18<sup>th</sup> August had progressed to the age-old tradition of perching en-masse along overhead cables, a practice I can easily recall from over forty years ago, though back then on a scale that blackened the sky when they broke ranks.

Ironically, on 16<sup>th</sup> August after a two hour morning walk around Broadway's outskirting farmland, my only two noteworthy encounters occurred during my return to the residences of the Avenues. At 10.20am a Swift launching from the eaves of the Old Police Station almost took my head off; I thought they'd all gone! Then when almost home, shrill House Martins alerted me to a low-hunting Hobby in a laboured ascent out of the Avenue; I think it got one.

Five minutes past ten, 27<sup>th</sup> August, on a certain Hawkwatcher's birthday, there came a cigar moment; or was it? Standing outside the kitchen window, binoculars round my neck, a collective panicked shrill from our little friends brought gruesome news. As I looked up an adult Hobby glided over clutching a still-wriggling House Martin and a mixture of shock, sadness and awe came over me in a wave. The helpless waif was expertly dispatched in front of my eyes, clean and quick. The hawk even held its prey head forward for reduced drag, like an Osprey with its catch. I'm still shaken by it all as I write. Whilst I marvel at the raptor's skill, I felt like I'd lost one of my friends; it's a weird scenario.