

DUSK PATROL

There is one distinct advantage when the days draw in - dusk comes sooner and is more accessible to an early bird like me. With darkness falling by late afternoon, there is the chance to enjoy one of the most fascinating parts of the day. At dusk everything seems to be on the move. This was brought home to us last week at Harrod Country Park, there were birds everywhere: gulls coming in for a last minute wash and brush up; starlings flying through on their way to Bedford for a warmer night's sleep: rooks in hundreds going north towards Sharnbrook and stopping for a quick snack - much to the annoyance of a local farmer; thrushes passing over, mysteriously silent, perhaps aware of the snow on its way down from the north; cormorants in droves hurtling down to land awkwardly, but quite securely, on the trees out on the island; and, most dramatically of all, two hundred greylag geese appearing suddenly from the south against a reddening sky to land with a rush of wings and a clamour of noise on the main lake. And people pay money to go to the Serengeti for sights like this!

There is drama enough in our own skies, and this brings back memories of two wonderful occasions in the past when last-minute lingering suddenly provided two of my top ten birdwatching spectacles. The first was at the end of a bitterly cold day by Breydon Water in Norfolk. Walking slowly home in the hope of an owl hunting the sea-wall I heard what I took to be children blowing trumpets - an eerie sound coming rapidly nearer from the direction of the sea. Without any expectation on my part there they were: fifty Bewick swans in V-formation caught in the glare of the lights shining through the roof of Yarmouth station, and then they were gone, still trumpeting loudly, into the blackness of the night. I went home rejoicing.

The second spectacular took place only a few miles inland from this spot at a site traditionally used by wild geese but which, this time, were absent. Instead, and again as I debated whether to call it a day, there began to fly in thousands of rooks and jackdaws from all directions. It was as if someone had suddenly orchestrated an air-show. Huge flocks were streaming in "cawing" and "chuking" continually and engaging in wild aerobatics before finally side-slipping down to join the black pool of birds which had begun to appear in the centre of the field, while others looked on from gateposts and telegraph wires. All this against a blood-red sky and again in bitter cold. That night I went home humbled.

Br. John

