

Food Piracy in Abbey Park

Two recent visits to an area of rough grassland on the edge of Abbey Park produced, for me, the amazing sight of a Barn Owl being robbed of its prey by a male Kestrel, possibly the same birds in each incident. It was extraordinary because I've never seen this before in over forty years of birdwatching and in the fact that it happened twice in a row.

On the first occasion, shortly after dawn, the owl was seen busily quartering the ground and making several apparently unsuccessful drops. The male Kestrel was sitting on a lower branch of a nearby oak. I then lost sight of the owl and continued walking only to see a flash of white in the grass about fifty yards away accompanied by lots of calling. It was the Kestrel attempting to take the owl's prey but still hidden by the long grass. And then the owl flew up and made a dash for the wood with a vole dangling from its bill and hotly pursued by the Kestrel. After a short flight the owl was forced to the ground up against a wire fence where it 'mantled, its prey; that is, it stretched out its wings to cover the vole. But the Kestrel continued to harry it until, with much calling, and a short struggle, it succeeded in grabbing the vole and flew off with it in its bill. The Barn Owl looked a little dazed or bemused and then flew off in the opposite direction with signs of blood still on its bill.

Four days later, on 11th February, a visit to the same place, but this time in full daylight at 1.50pm, saw the Barn Owl again quartering the same piece of ground. It soon caught a vole just on the edge of the rough grass and was immediately attacked by a male Kestrel. Once again the owl flew off, this time with the vole dangling from its feet. And once again the Kestrel followed in hot pursuit but this time with two crows in close attendance. As before, the owl was forced to the ground but in the general melee it wasn't clear what happened to the vole. Both the kestrel and the owl left 'empty-handed', one to a tree and the other to a post. The crows headed off to the wood. My guess is that one of the crows had been successful or the vole had escaped to live another day.

The technical name for this food piracy is kleptoparasitism and it's been recorded between many birds including birds of prey. Both Kestrels and Barn Owls have been known to steal prey from one another but an author on a book about the Kestrel had never actually seen it himself after many years watching. He details a couple of incidents very similar to those above but also reports Kestrels taking food from both Long and Short-eared Owls, Sparrowhawks, Merlins and even a Peregrine after it had cornered a Chaffinch in a bush. They can also, as noted, be victims as well

as aggressors losing out to not only Barn Owls but Red-footed Falcons and Short-eared Owls too. Perhaps the most amazing report of food piracy among raptors is of a Sparrowhawk robbed by a Merlin then in turn robbed by a Honey Buzzard which was then robbed by a Peregrine! By the end of this I doubt if the prey was in any state to care who was finally going to eat it.

Whether this behaviour is more normal than we expect but largely unseen, or whether the result of periods of food shortage, or abundance, is open to debate.

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