

Follow That Road

The naturalist and broadcaster Eric Simms was a keen observer of the inland migration of birds in the mid-twentieth century. He watched birds migrating overhead from many viewpoints, especially in autumn, and although he believed birds generally entered the country on a broad front, he also observed that they followed certain distinct flight lines overland guided perhaps by visible landmarks such as rivers and hills.

We've come a long way since the days of positioning cyclists at various points to prove this as we can now equip individual birds with cameras to see exactly what they are up to. And indeed there was a remarkable film a few years ago which tracked racing pigeons on their way home and found them following roads with great precision. They were even filmed turning sharp left at a roundabout and I've often wondered whether we could observe this happening locally. After all, the RAF have been doing it for years flying some very low sorties over the Turvey Abbey clock tower and seen once at least by me to turn right at the Olney church spire.



After many years now tracking the autumn migration over Turvey I'm convinced that this occasionally happens, especially when the skies are clear and the winds light. Other sorts of weather tend to push the birds all over the place but even then what we may be seeing are birds struggling back to their original flight lines and to the sight of familiar landmarks.

All this prompted by the sight of a recent movement of mainly thrushes and starlings seemingly following the general direction of the A428 from east to west and memories of this happening before, particularly on 22nd October 1995. A bird watch then by the top of the Long Belt, just below the Crown Farm road, produced a remarkable series of migrating birds in a very short period. As I looked down on the village

flock after flock of Redwing flew in from the east accompanied by smaller flocks of Fieldfare, Wood Pigeons, Linnets, Chaffinches, Skylark, Starling and a few Lapwing. All passed below me in a narrow band with none that I could see to the north or south of this movement.

On a recent walk something similar seemed to be occurring. This time the viewpoint was further to the east on Grindstonehill and the birds were fewer in number but again consisting of Redwing, Fieldfare, Starling, Chaffinch and Wood Pigeon with a flock of Black-headed Gulls and four Lapwing for good measure. Admittedly I was looking down on these birds from the south with the sun behind me but a walk to the south produced nothing similar, and so once again it looked very much as if the birds were concentrated in a narrow band following the general direction of the A428.



In other countries such flight paths can lead to some spectacular concentrations of birds. The Rift valley in Israel, for example, is followed north and south by thousands of storks, pelicans and birds of prey, and at a recently discovered hot-spot in Mexico at Vera Cruz almost a million birds of prey were recorded passing south in a single day! In Israel the

birds are concentrated between the desert and the sea. In Vera Cruz it's the narrowing of the coastal belt between the sea and the mountains which brings the birds together. In Britain it's also along the coastlines that we see our greatest concentrations of birds but inland routes have their hot-spots too and, on a very small scale, perhaps we can claim Turvey as one of them – at least occasionally.

Other recent sightings have included an Osprey flying steadily south westwards over the walled garden, and a Peregrine on a similar flight path though probably hunting, and several continental moths: a Scarce Bordered Straw, a Vestal and yesterday, on 3rd November, a Rusty-dot Pearl, making this the best year for moth migrants since 2006.



Br.John

