



THE 'WHITE NUNS' OF HARROLD

Now, you may think that this is going to be an historical treatise on the 'white Nuns' of Harrold. Well, there were nuns at Harrold, but much more recently than the ones who perhaps gave their name to Nun Wood over towards the Northants border. These 'white nuns' visited us on the 22 December at the very beginning of the icy blast which was to last for well over a month. They were a party of Smew driven west by the terrifically low temperatures on the continent and which had, no doubt, frozen them out from their normal winter venues. It is the males who have been given the title of 'white nuns' because of their beautiful white plumage, outlined in black and barred grey on the flanks. There were two present on the 22nd with four 'red-heads', which were either females or first-winter males. They are diving-duck, closely related to gooseanders, but much smaller. This party was very flighty and clearly not at ease as more and more people appeared. By 9.30 am they were off rapidly circling the main lake at Harrold, and then heading determinedly south-east, perhaps to deeper waters such as at Brogborough or even as far as the coast.

Smew, in unusual places, are a classic indicator of severe weather to come, and they were certainly right this time, for a few days later temperatures were well below freezing and most of the water at Harrold was ice-covered. This made for some fascinating birdwatching over the next few weeks as the wildfowl were all concentrated on the few open patches left, or on the river. Coot dominated the scene with over 550 at one stage, all frantically attempting to grab at the weed nearest to the edge of the ice. Tufted Duck and Pochard also appeared in larger than usual numbers, over 200 of the former and 100 of the latter present on one occasion. Many were feeding on the river and using the open patches on the lake for washing and resting, but even the river had frozen over in places by New Year's Day.

As the weather hardened so each visit produced some interesting changes. First to go were the Great Crested Grebes and Lapwing, and later there was a marked absence of wigeon and teal, and even the cormorants had largely disappeared. But if one arrived early enough there were some wonderful surprises. On one day, at dawn, a party of sixteen Bewick Swans were standing about on the ice bugling quietly before flying majestically north in a tight flock. These may well have been refugees from Welney in Norfolk. The same, or another flock of twelve, flew over on the 3 January. On another day 28 Barnacle Geese were present with hundreds of Greylags and Canadas. These Barnacles may well have been a feral flock frozen out from somewhere else locally, but who's to say that they weren't travellers from the continent, a tiny portion of the huge flocks which overwinter in Holland - it was at least exciting to think so. And, lest the fishermen imagine that this icy spell was keeping cormorants down and therefore fish numbers up, flocks of Gooseander began to appear from late December onwards, peaking at over thirty birds, and including several superb males. To rub salt in into the wound, up to five Smew also returned, though none of these was an adult male this time.

Other unusual sightings in this period included: a merlin chasing a skylark (which got away); a redshank flying south calling plaintively (they are normally only present with us in Bedfordshire on passage or in the summer); and a water rail at the river's edge

(always present but incredibly elusive). There was a bittern too reported at Harrold (a type of heron), famous for its booming call in summer, and its ability to mimic a reedbed!

As the weather began to moderate slowly so life began to return to some sort of normality. This was epitomised by the sudden 'falling out of the sky' of some 400 wigeon on the 26 January - a scene to match any painted by the late Sir Peter Scott. And now, in mid-February, the Great Crested Grebes are in summer plumage, and the herons are building their nests.

Br. John

P.S. There is one other 'white nun' to mention - Sr. Benedict on a bicycle at Harrold on the 26 December, last seen pedalling furiously south, no doubt to warmer climes.