

SIGHTS AND SOUNDS JUNE - AUGUST 1997

I haven't yet found a way of wearing a habit and carrying a pair of binoculars without feeling self-conscious - a clash of cultural ideas here - but it's a grand excuse for using all one's senses instead of relying on artificial aids. And so the midday walk - a quarter of an hour before lunch - becomes a sensory meditation.

It may begin with the sudden sharp click of a flycatcher's bill closing on an unwitting insect, or the musty smell of a fox lingering from the night before, or a thudding on the roof as the birds busy themselves removing moss, perhaps to line their nests. It may continue with the soft song of a wandering Willow or Sedge warbler still looking for a mate, or the threatening buzz of a passing Hornet. More subtle still can be the sound of wasps chewing wood or, moving further afield, the rustle of a dragonfly's wings as it lays eggs in the pondside vegetation. There is indeed no better way for calming down and breathing in the peace of the Abbey grounds: if you want to approach a butterfly close enough to see whether it's a Common or a Holly Blue, or a Small or a Green-veined White, then sudden movements and noises just have to go, especially when one is dressed in day-glow white.

It has been particularly interesting this year to see how the butterflies have come and gone in distinctive waves. One day it may be the Skippers which are dominant, dozens of Essex Skippers perhaps with a few small Small Skippers mixed in to test one's powers of observation, the difference between them depending on the colour of the underside of the antennae tips. On another day it may be Peacocks or Common Blues. At the tail end of August it has been the Whites and Small Tortoiseshells. These may be local broods all emerging together or migrants flooding in from elsewhere, or, of course, both. I vividly remember seeing a lone Camberwell Beauty flying over a Shetland Loch headed north in August, and, similarly, dozens of Small Tortoiseshells breasting the tops of the Cairngorms also in August and also still heading determinedly northwards. Where are they going at this time of year?

But it's the birds we normally associate with such movements and this area has dished up some wonderful sights and sounds in the last few days - a Buzzard soaring high over Grindstonehill, attracting the attention of a passing Hobby; a juvenile Little Ringed Plover at Harrold on a tiny island of mud and, best of all perhaps, a party of Crossbills in the garden: coming across loud and clear but maddeningly difficult to track down, especially when one is meant to be studying Canon Law.