



## If only I had a gun ...!

It seemed like a good idea at the time: one has a map, a pair of binoculars, some sense of direction and a good sense of hearing and then one enters a wood and plots the position of every bird one comes across. Easy - not on your life! But, and this is the strange bit, apart from the obvious joy of finishing any task, there is also a real sense of losing oneself to find oneself in the middle of a wood, a real sense, that is, of finding relaxation by concentrating hard on the job in hand. Far from contemplation and activity being opposed to one another they seem to help each other along.

This is what I mean. I get out of the car and am assailed by a wall of sound coming from the wood. It's cold, I'm not awake, and the confusion of noise tempts me to get back in the car and go straight home. But if monastic life is about anything it's about perseverance, so I grit my teeth, pull on my wellies and begin. It's not so bad after all because, at least at first, almost all of the sounds are coming from the span of 180 degrees before me, and as my ears - and eyes - grow acclimatised, so some sense emerges. There's a wren, a blackcap and a chaffinch singing heartily to my right and a thrush of some sort above and in front. Slightly more muffled, and presumably further in, there's a wood pigeon calling and a chaffinch "pinking". To the left there's a robin on the road which suddenly bursts into song. So all is well, nothing to worry about. But I enter the wood and confusion returns - the birds in front now become the birds behind and continue making a racket. More distressingly, they start to move around! - which is jolly unsporting for someone still half-asleep. And worse still, that thrush continues to sing louder than ever, so that it dominates the woodland chorus wherever I go for the next fifteen minutes. If only I had a gun...!

Now for the "religious" bit: instead of getting wound up about this beautiful songster, I begin to accept it for what it is - not a song thrush "out to get me", but a song thrush doing what song thrushes do best: singing their hearts out. With this acceptance I begin to relax and (this never ceases to surprise me) as I relax so I can focus more clearly. The babble of noises once again makes sense. The task doesn't become any easier, there are new birds and new bird sounds to cope with, but it does become a lot more fun. And the morning's tally is an impressive one with six new species since the last visit a week ago. Best of all perhaps, is the pair of kestrels who usher me gently; and sometimes not so gently, to the edge of the wood. There is also a garden warbler, a cuckoo and a whitethroat signalling that spring is now well under way. The other two new birds, a coal tit and a mistle thrush, were probably here before but missed by me.

"Material reality" begins to reassert itself once more towards the end of the visit when this fallible and ageing entity finds himself going up entirely the wrong path and misplotting half-a-dozen birds accordingly. It is, in fact, the path back to the

car and so an obvious signal to conclude. It has been a real treat after all, with enough spiritual sustenance to see me through a few days more - well, until tomorrow anyway.

Br. John

