

Turvey Birds of Prey



Over a ten year period, and within six miles of Turvey, I have so far come across some eight species of diurnal birds of prey (our daytime raptors), and five species of owl. We shall leave the owls for another occasion and take a brief look today at the other eight, concentrating on the ones most likely to be seen.

A count of every sighting in the past two years puts the Kestrel well ahead of the rest, with 126 sightings, for example, in 1999. This is the bird we all know from motorways and other roadside verges, with the truly wondrous ability to hover for long periods with wings and tail all over the place whilst the head remains absolutely still. One incident, in particular, remains indelibly printed on my mind. It was the occasion a young bird decided to hunt from the tree under which I was standing, fully knowing that I was there but not realising it could be in any danger. The bird was actually dropping out of the tree to my feet and scrabbling around in the undergrowth while its two parents were going absolutely bananas in the field opposite. They had good reason to be alarmed as a short while later a Sparrowhawk came straight at the youngster using a hedge for cover. It only veered away at the last moment on seeing me. This must have been the last straw for the parents as, almost immediately, one of them also attacked the young bird and drove it from the tree. Let's hope it learnt its lesson.

The second commonest raptor has been the Sparrowhawk, with 50 sightings in 1999 and 48+ in 2000 (the plus is because I also had a Goshawk last year and several more birds which could have been either species). The Sparrowhawk has made a remarkable comeback from its virtual extinction in many parts of England in the 1960s because of pesticide poisoning, this caused the eggshells to become too thin and liable to break. It is now not uncommon to see one or two or more in a day's walk and to see them frequently in our gardens. Gardens are a haven for just the sort of bird they like to eat, anything from tits to Woodpigeons. We have a bird visiting us regularly at dusk to pick off a Redwing from their roost in the holly bushes. This all seems perfectly natural to me, if there's anything unnatural about it it's because of the dearth of similar prey species in the farmed countryside generally.

Perhaps surprisingly, the third most common daytime raptor is now the Buzzard, with 34 sightings locally in 1999 and 32 last year. This is a relatively new development, as in the early nineties two or three per year was the norm, and these were invariably on the move

during passage periods. Since then increasing numbers have occurred during the winter months and, in the last three years, during the summer months also. Indeed, breeding was recorded in Bedfordshire in 1995 for the first time since the nineteenth century and there are now in the order of six to ten pairs, at least one of which is probably near Turvey. So keep your eyes peeled as these are very distinctive birds, frequently soaring on slightly raised wings and occasionally giving a far-reaching 'mewing' call. They could be the answer to our booming rabbit population.

This leaves us with the Hobby (a frequent visitor over the village in the summer), the Merlin (occasional in winter), the Peregrine (twice so far, and likely to increase), the Goshawk (already mentioned) and the Osprey (two sightings so far, one in spring going north, and one in autumn-going south), and finally three other species known to have occurred locally but not so far seen by me: the Red Kite, the Hen Harrier and the Honey Buzzard. There is surely another article in the making here too!

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