

A Mayfly Feast

One can never be quite sure what a visit to Harrold Country Park will produce. Sometimes the main lake will appear deathly quiet and then, suddenly, all hell breaks loose. At other times the lake stays quiet, and that's that! On this occasion it was busy from the start with birds, of several sorts, continually passing to and fro, as they feasted on freshly-emerged mayflies. The air was still, the day was mild and the birds were obviously quick on the uptake. At the lowest level were the terns: eighteen Common and a Marsh Tern, all executing a wonderful dance across the water surface choreographed by the insects themselves which the terns were picking off from the water or from the air just above. A first-year Blackheaded Gull soon came to join in the fun. Above these were the hirundines and Swifts, comprising some fifteen House Martin, a few Sand Martin, the odd Swallow and sixty plus Swift. These occupied the air space to several hundred feet up. But best of all, were two Hobbies - our summer falcons - which patrolled at tree-top level and were also feasting on the mayflies at the rate of one every two or three seconds. Their method seemed to be to snatch at the flies with their feet and then to transfer them to their beaks but all so quickly as to defy exact observation. One of these birds kept this up for well over half-an-hour which led to the interesting thought that, if it was catching a mayfly at least once every three seconds, in half-an-hour it must have consumed some 600, and if all the other hundred or so birds were equally successful this would mean that some 60,000 mayflies were disappearing down gullets in the same period over this one lake alone, which equates to 120,000 in the hour that I was there during which most of the birds were still actively pursuing mayflies. There are a lot of 'ifs' in this but I'd love to know what 120,000 mayflies look like, or weigh, when gathered together on the kitchen table!

If hunger ever strikes in May, and the air is still and the day is mild, you will find me, along with a few birds no doubt, at Harrold Country Park.

Br. John

