



Another Winter's Walk

About once a month I get the chance to beat the bounds of Turvey parish, and a few parishes more, in a walk that takes me from the Abbey westwards into Bucks. and then northwards, along the boundary between Beds. and Northants., to Harrold and a return via Carlton and Great Oak Farm. It's a magical walk, because it follows the high ground on either side of the River Great Ouse for much of the way and takes in a variety of habitat little visited by other people. There's a good chance, then, of being first on the scene at many wildlife dramas – even late in the day. This was certainly true of January 7th this year, aided and abetted by a bitterly cold easterly wind and the threat of snow. The excitement began even before leaving the Abbey grounds with 45 Lapwing beating steadily south-westwards; many more pass throughout the day, generally following the Ouse and Nene valleys and eventually totalling over a thousand birds. Clear conditions and bare ground make it also an ideal day for spotting Hares: eleven in all consisting of a group of four, two sets of two and three singletons.

The 'heights', overlooking both Beds. and Northants., can be a bit of a slog but usually produce something worthwhile. On this occasion it was a flock of 130 Skylark in one field and a flock of 110 Golden Plover a little further on, but both (as usual) in Northants.. The wide horizons now invite raptor watching and, sure enough, the first of three Buzzards puts in an appearance – I've had up to ten on this walk on previous occasions. A brief glance down confirms the first open flower of a Spurge Laurel, and a quiet approach through a wood produces wonderful views of a pair of Foxes following one another across a ploughed field. The female is well in front, looking back occasionally, and leaving visiting cards every so often. The male is out of sight at first but keeping in contact with short double-yaps. It gives me enormous pleasure that they come within thirty yards and fail to notice my presence.

The path leads me down towards Harrold for a brief perusal of the flooded pits and then it's the steady slog eastwards towards Carlton and home. I'm just engaging automatic when a host of birds signals another drama. Wood Pigeons and corvids by the score are flying up the valley and with good reason: a Peregrine Falcon with blue-grey back, white cheeks and powerful pointed wings is hurtling after them. It makes two attempts at the whirling mass of birds and then is lost to sight behind a hedge. Well satisfied, I engage automatic again and reach Great Oak Farm, Turvey at full pace only to be diverted once more by another wonderful sight. This time it's a large bird of prey, with a reddish tail, over a mile away – surely a Red Kite or a Marsh Harrier. It disappears, and, heart in mouth, I make a beeline for the spot. All seems lost until almost there when this enormous bird rises up and flaps leisurely away towards the wood. It's a Red Kite, after all, with deeply forked tail constantly twisting, and a mix of colours on the body and wings. It's been visiting carrion in the middle of the field. And so the journey concludes; it's been a long one with an extra hour at the end but worth every minute.

Br. John

