

## A Late Winter Walk or Early Spring?

After much rain and a dull beginning the temptation is to stay in bed but reports of a male Hen Harrier in Abbey Park draw me out - Hen Harriers are rare in these parts and males even more so. The day starts with a steady slog south through Abbey Park to Hill Spinney to the parish and county boundary at Ramacre Wood and north then at Gorwelle. The first excitement is provided by two Hare and two Chinese Water Deer near Hill Spinney - a regular site for both species. The deer are characteristically well out in the field and are pale with an upright bearing and rounded ears held erect, quite unlike the darker hunch-backed Muntjac. They sit down for a while and then amble off into cover, feet heavy with clay. Now it is the turn of the Buzzards: one towards Abbey Park, another at Pictshill Gorse and a third to the east. These are now well established around Turvey and almost every spinney seems to have one. Three are later seen sparring and calling high over the disused railway track.

There are fewer thrushes around now than a few weeks ago. Redwing total 36 and Fieldfare even less, which is unusual. The occasional Song Thrush is still holding its winter territory along the hedgerows. Mistle Thrush are pairing in Abbey Park and Blackbirds haunt the field edges and the spinneys. A few birds are singing - Chaffinch at regular intervals, several Skylark, a brief snatch from a Greenfinch, a Robin and a Great Tit, and more sustained song from several Dunnocks and a garden Song Thrush. Does the babble of House Sparrows at Gorwelle count as song? The most numerous birds are - surprise, surprise - Wood Pigeons and Rooks. They are present in their hundreds on fields of oil-seed Rape. One Rook has pale leading-edges to its wings.

And so onward, with a Kestrel in rapid display flight below Crown Farm, and two Treecreeper ascending the trunk of a pine tree in Gullet Wood. New Wood provides some shelter from the chill westerly wind and encourages a more meditative stance - a slight tapping reveals a female Great Spotted Woodpecker (no red on the head). This too then goes into a meditative stance. Is it me or the male Sparrowhawk which suddenly hurtles through the trees or perhaps the male Great Spotted Woodpecker calling close by? Is she playing hard to get?

Lastly, eighteen Lapwing fly over fast and high heading east. A local movement of birds from afar keen to be back on their Spring territories? No Hen Harrier today but excitement enough.