


'They've made it again'



This is a line from Ted Hughes' wonderful poem on Swifts. When we see them return in spring we know that all is well and 'the globe's still working'. But this is equally true of the return of our winter visitors. If it's mid-October and the night has been clear, or at least calm, it's worth standing in the garden shortly after dawn and facing east and waiting. And sure enough here they come – small flocks of finches and thrushes, often heard before seen, bounding over the tree- and rooftops, some to land in the garden itself and others to continue westward. It's always a thrill to see them, knowing that they have probably been flying non-stop from the Low-Countries through the latter part of the night or, even, perhaps, keeping pace with the sunrise. Is it too fanciful to imagine that they are in effect staying still as the earth spins below them? They remind us, then, as Ted Hughes so well observed, of larger forces at work, and all this in one's own back yard. In similar frame, Annie Dillard recommends that on an 'excellent day' you go out for a walk, and 'take huge steps, trying to feel the planet's roundness arc between your feet'. If you are with children, and it's near sunset, get them to haul on the nearest tree or make jumps to the east in order to spin the world faster, and sure enough they'll see the sun go down all the more quickly!

But I know it's facts that you are after, so here are a few more gathered some four miles further west on the Northampton-Bedford border. It's near the end of October and suddenly the ground is alive with Skylarks. These too are almost certainly newly arrived birds, perhaps a mix of local birds and continental neighbours. The initial count is of a few dozen only. They are down in the stubble and fly up in two's and three's, occasionally bursting into song or indulging in aerial dogfights, but then they are all up as first a Peregrine and then a Merlin hurtle through them. For a few minutes everything is pandemonium but there's a pattern even to this; the Skylark go high and lose themselves against the blue, the attendant Wood Pigeon scatter low to the nearest wood, and a tight flock of Starling forms up above the Merlin and escort it, and them, to safety. I walk away only to see the freshly descended Skylark flitting low over the stubble in a loosely woven carpet of birds at least 300 strong.

A few days later at the same site the proportions have changed and it's Starlings which now predominate. Their main arrival seems to be a little later than the thrushes, finches and Skylark and this day's walk produces several flocks of 300 plus Starling. In one field some 700 birds are sharing the spent corn or oilseed rape with a flock of 500 Woodpigeon and a few Crows. Like the Skylark they are difficult to count because they are rarely all up at the same time. They alternate between the stubble and the hedgerow trees. Those on the ground gradually being joined by the others who descend in pulses of a hundred at a time, those remaining in the trees urging them on in a shrill chatter. When the chatter suddenly stops then one knows that the birds are about to move. This is all very reminiscent of the huge flocks which were once a feature of both our towns and the countryside in general but are alas largely no more. *They've made it again* but the globe is no longer working quite as it should.



Br. John