

The Crow Family

Six species of the Crow family have occurred in recent years in and around Turvey. When I first came, over twenty years ago, only four of these were regular, Believe it or not Magpies were hard to come by and Ravens a distant dream. The regulars then were the Jackdaw, the Carrion Crow, the Rook and the Jay. All of these seemed to have either maintained numbers if not increased.

Jackdaws were a feature of the Abbey with several pairs nesting on the buildings themselves and many more in the surrounding trees. We have fewer on the buildings now after extensive work on the fabric and the netting of a few chimneys but they remain a feature. They are a great indicator of passing birds of prey as they advertise their presence with a sudden outburst of alarm calls and sometimes a mass flight in pursuit of the offending bird - occasionally a Sparrowhawk or a Buzzard, but more often at the moment a Crow on the lookout for eggs or young. On warm days they can rise to surprising heights freewheeling in pursuit of flies and other insects just like the Swifts, albeit in a more genteel manner.

Crows we have a-plenty. Ours are the all black version but on a recent trip to Italy we encountered the Hooded version which has a light back and breast; the two races are separated by the Alps. The dividing line in Britain is well to the north and the west- birds of mixed characteristics occur along it.

Rooks have recently taken to nesting in the Abbey grounds, an offshoot of the colony occurring just across the road, this may well reflect a fall in house values! In summer and in good light rooks are readily distinguishable from Crows, but juveniles and young birds are problematic. The old adage of a solitary bird being a Crow and a flock indicating Rooks is by no means certain, and they seem to hop or walk as well as one another. They also commonly roost together in winter. One or two thousand Rooks, Crows and Jackdaws have taken to roosting on the edge of Abbey Park in the last couple of years. They make a thrilling sight as they gather firstly on the ground and then, almost when it's too dark to see, in the trees themselves, arriving from all directions and making a terrific noise.

Jays too are now frequent. There was a completely white one present a few years ago. They become especially noticeable in autumn as they go in search of acorns to bury in nearby pasture. We sometimes receive large influxes of these birds when the nut crop fails on the Continent.

Magpies now seem to be everywhere but it was only a few years ago that I found my first nest in Turvey; an unmistakable domed bundle of twigs.

And lastly we come to that emblematic bird: the Raven. Originally an inhabitant of most of Britain but so persecuted in the nineteenth century as to disappear from most of southern, central and eastern England. Now its back but with only a tenuous hold so far on Bedfordshire. Ravens have been seen around Turvey several times in the past two years, especially in winter and early spring. They are magnificent birds, almost the size of a Buzzard with a huge bill and 'beard', a distinctive deep croak and a long wedge-shaped tail. They can also produce some surprisingly musical bell-like notes and wonderful aerobatics. Let's hope they are given the chance to remain.

Br. John