

Hen Harrier Poems

COLIN SIMMS — SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

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‘Winnowing marsh hawks’ (p.19) appeared in a different version in the author’s collection, *The American Poems* (Shearsman Books, 2005).

A range of journals, newsletters and newspapers publishing my notes and papers since 1959, mostly British and attention also from broadcasters, until about 1999, in the northern hemisphere, especially British and North American. For companionship and help in the field and for transcribing drafts, named in the texts, but most of all Margaret Hartley and Alexandra Bowman, Brian and Liz West; in the early days also (not in the text) Tom Robson, Alan Hardy, Eric and M.J. Wilson. Articles and letters in the *Yorkshire Gazette*, *Northumberland Gazette*, *Hexham Courant*, *Cumberland News*, *Westmorland Gazette*, etc.

For Alexandra Bowman

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A Preface

Colin Simms came to stay near here in the hills, and here, several times over recent years to study the hen harriers and merlins, which I was pleased he showed me... just as he was a link between me and the great poet of Northumberland his friend Basil Bunting... He read me some of his preliminary writing and the finished work I was glad to comment on; as I am now to recommend his projected books gathering these poems and other writings, like the one published a few years ago on the marten. As I have said before, he is one of the few poets... writing proper scientific stuff.

‘Hugh MacDiarmid’ (C.M. Grieve) 1975
Brownshank,
Biggar

Readers of this book, perhaps merely browsers and not readers, will perhaps have picked it up because they have heard of some fuss about harriers, hen harriers, an obscure bird of prey, needing help if they are not to become extinct in England, or Britain, and remain so. Their true status: their numbers here at any given time, a matter of controversy... To readers of this book it may be clear that pessimistic censuses or even estimates of the numbers of hen harriers must be wrong, or the author is crazy or a liar. We are, most or all of us, exposed, dominated by, the mass media's treatment of 'information' in this so-called Information Age. Misinformation is a feature of our age – where political expediency and 'publicity' reign supreme.

Recent springs have seen the spectacle of newspaper appeals for information from the public on sightings of hen harriers. That most people, the vast majority, don't recognise such birds safely seems ignored. 'The birds are coming back from their winter haunts' (they are absent from our hills in winter!). This sort of statement is quite wrong. There are more hen harriers on our hills in winter than in summer...

The RSPB must know this and so what they fed, or feed, the local media has to be propaganda; perhaps hoping 'twitchers' and other bird-aware people will concentrate on getting out early in spring to find 'returning' harriers and let the RSPB know about them...

'Early spring' in such places, regions, as the North Pennines, the Border hills, the Yorkshire moors and dales, and the Lake District fells is still winter and the harriers still are yet on winter hunting and winter social behaviour – often well into April or even May in some years. Clear-felled and newly planted new 'forests' up to several years old are often amongst their best hunting grounds, but rarely attractive to bird watchers, or indeed ramblers, in my experience. Most of my harrier watching until nesting (if any!) links such favoured areas with the usual routes they use, prospecting, between them.

Cautiously also, those least-known and least advertised (but still often threatened) havens, their roosts, approached or watched from a distance rather than visited, are sometimes used year after year and I don't just mean 'winter' after winter, for there is often a small but significant presence of non-breeding birds about throughout the 'summer'. I've noticed a tendency for some cock birds in this category to display, at least a little; and this can be confusing especially as some 'genuine' potential breeding cocks display nowadays much less, or noticeably less conspicuously, than their forebears used to – it may be that they have

learned that breeding success may have better chances if they keep a low profile.

And we must not suppose that these watchers, ‘amateur’ or ‘professional’, who see and mark the remarkable ‘sky-writing’ displays of the cock bird over or near potential breeding-sites are innocent in the critical matter of some success for the hen harrier at home. Other people watch the watchers watching for harriers, and the information passed about isn’t always ‘safe’, and so the birds aren’t. More than once in recent years, and overall some twenty times in sixty years, I’ve known bird watchers, including established scientists, wittingly or unwittingly betray harrier nest-sites to predators (and not only avian ones – egg collectors and other menaces).

§

Before their observations are lost, were lost, much information about harriers was, is, available. In the 'sixties I met Sir Herbert Read, with his long and deep knowledge of (especially) the western part of the Vale of Pickering and its tributary dales, in York and usually on the premises of the Yorkshire Philosophical Society and in the Yorkshire Museum nearby, asking him – as I had in the late 'fifties, for memories of harriers in the Vale in his youth and since. At Muscoates Grange they had been regular in winter over the fields, he couldn't say which harrier. That they nested occasionally in the Vale – he thought in the carr lands – and also about the heads of Farndale just where I'd been directed in 1961 by a landowner there, Richmond Brown. These observations, I'm sure, could be repeated over many landscapes of the North Country. But this is hearsay.

Notoriously the Hen Harrier, and other birds of prey, often afford us glimpses only, before they are gone from sight. 'Out of sight is out of mind'. I find the distant and peripheral vision of many, for example in my evening-classes, 1960s-80s, do not pick them up despite their style... These observations started in the early 'fifties, and a few of the early ones may relate to Montagu's Harrier rather than the Hen Harrier, though I believe I have now eliminated nearly or quite all notes and verses not carefully diagnosed, critically determined, of *Circus cyaneus*. Montagu's Harriers were not rare during the 'fifties and 'sixties especially, in parts of North-east England particularly. I was brought up in a hard school of disciplined ornithologists; a number of them listed in acknowledgements throughout this book, and have my own strict standards.

To some extent, these verses serve another function in reporting the presence of a little-known member of our fauna – as my previous works on Goshawk, Marten, Otter, Gyrfalcon have: a hope is that anyone reading or hearing my works will gain, if only 'accidentally', some useful knowledge of the behaviour, occurrence and distribution of these harriers. But amongst the many aspects hardly touched-on here are 'dog fights' observed, rarely but I think significantly, between hen harriers and buzzards (including Rough-legged Buzzard) and hen harrier and red kites (from introductions) in the North of England since 1970 and especially since the spread of the Common Buzzard and then of the Red Kite. Usually the buzzard or kite has repulsed, but not injured, the harrier. I doubt our so-called 'conservation' lobby has considered this factor in the current scarcity of hen-harriers... even our most-open spaces are limited...

Reginald Wagstaffe, Keeper of Zoology at Liverpool Museums and familiar with the Isle of Man and its recorded ornithology, had more reason to be surprised than I had, whose experience was limited to several visits to the island since 1947*, that no harrier was recorded in the excellent and careful Ralfe's *Birds of the Isle of Man* (1905), and we wondered why this was so. We had both seen Hen Harrier there and could not imagine they had just discovered the place since the 'thirties! Nevertheless, these are my first published observations of harriers there, 'authorities' having rejected earlier ones...

§

* For birds and the spring and autumn migrations (and motorcycle races), for finding merlin nests etc., since 1951 and insect fauna since 1953 (including *Stenobothrus stigmaticus* in the '60s (see Ragge).

'I follow my friend Basil Bunting in believing, from experience, that information is carried best by poetry, verse. We did not, do not, know why; and leave the question, with others: as poets we have enough to do; but we assert this particular advantage of poetry, verse, over prose. Often an originator in the forms of his verse, at other times an adapter of accepted shapes Bunting insisted on the "music" of his work; that it should be *heard*. My work is not poetry on his level but it is something else as new; a fresh genre of natural-history verse-making dealing with experience of a single species; a magnificent but little-known bird of prey surprisingly still frequently seen over a large part of the earth – I have watched it in fourteen countries and a range of habitats – most of them the wide open spaces the hen-harrier graces yet in an increasingly "developed" world.

Cursed by some "critics" for putting-up barriers I've put a few rough notes in better order from those years of Bunting anecdotes and stories; engaged at the time with harriers between the North Tyne and the Border bracken beds in glens, cover at forest-edges I had explored in the 'sixties and 'seventies especially Tarrasdale and the Head in the west to where the gleds hid in the Pentlands in the east and places he wanted to go, Middle" and Cheviot the Simonsides and Wannies, the heads of Coquet "where wild goats might flourish; men least". managed to find one place near enough to the road where I could show him their nest as in Wark Forest, but on untrodden bluff where *Dryas* and *Trientalis* showed their faces to the east in the morning, south at "opening time" "these are the kinds of blooms I like the best" he laughed, back in our rooms, "but do you suppose, if we had stayed, they'd have known when to close? Children at the table, he'd indulge in a mime of mother harrier preparing prey for food, tearing and offering pieces to each of her brood (several usually, like ours at "Striding Edge") "Grub up," shouted Basil, cutting each wedge of beef plate pie while I ladle gravy and greens. We'd marvelled at their wavy flight to their nests, "their mates keeping cavey".

§

Winnowing marsh hawks cleave air don't push it aside under
rounding-up ringing over migrating sandhill cranes high, ablaze on
 mornings haze
nor, with the eagled and thunderbirds are they tempted to ride thunder,
when they come to a merging with the place where fables start, the
 fluttering heart
where the white one comes-on Godlike they'll be seen as the 'best of all'
the better to learn aerodynamics from than the flattering, the tables of
 Lilienthal.

With the ease to rehearse the spring for meadowlarks and all the buzzards
by deliberate careless showing-off prancing and blowing-off sky-dancing
all the strong silent stark stalk everyone awaits the vision-trancing.

§

As if a 'comber' of the sea's surface
reached further than all other waves and,
falling back, gave a seething sound
her wing shuffles overlay all around;
chirping grasshoppers had been starting-up.

Thus at the ill-fated Knarsdale nest
that year, even low-flying has not blest
tactics; man's clumsy interference

Some years' tumbledown with their nettle, bracken
ignorance and prejudice crumble, meddling slacken

§

like other ground-birds, there in the way of being
something hidden behind the range of hill
as Margaret and I came upon them, seeing
suddenly over the crest "the blue hawk" swinging
in and away through all what had been still
and he serving two nests of young, two "ring-tails"
both in view from up here. What if he fails?

Harrowed ground

down off the Blackamoor
on the turning fields
over the magnetite mines
a single bank-vole yields
to three hours' surveillance

oatfields' smoke harvest-sparrows
as suddenly as he appears,
sodden seeds spill where he steers –
his rudders' wake parting.
No attempt at chase of those
A roe's head's up, and starting.

Weary, not expecting further encounter
this evening homing from the harriers
a sparrowhawk on an opposite saunter
almost collides head-on over the barrier
of the Lang Dyke. We stop to banter.

for Alexandra
May 17/18, 2011

§

where the plains stare, and stare back
solitary bird stirs turning their space
bird that the strong sun paints black
as crows, giving way to her greater grace;
who, like them, saw cultivation over common
to reduce her sort and all other such variety
and ‘ecology’ toward monoculture, mammon...

June, already faded of that year’s niggardly seasons
offers mainly worms, wireworms, a few finches
a proud bird of prey’s poor picking, thin rubble
we’ve reduced the surface of Mother Earth to Arable
stiff stems of poor cereals, ‘permanent pasture’,
converted the top predators into scavengers
– this one’s future: doomed, but only a parable...

§

No mower seemed the sharper
– the ring-tail we named “harper”,
her hunting no random thing
neatly as the ploughman’s skill
octaves on her passing-strings
scoring the sides of the hill
where the ling-owl is stitching.
Wind in their wings differing
to our ears. And from grasses
subsong. Notes that all *belong* –
their harmonies ring hill still
our humming begins, and passes
to the mind of each, a song
wordless, I hear you sing...

A.J. Munby of York; for a descendant, listening with me (1968)
(Munby: straightest plough lines seem curved on any hill)