

## Visions of Black - Mike Bloomfield

It seemed that every time I went out birding this spring, the weather was cold, dull, wet, windy, or a combination of any, if not all four, and certainly not the best conditions for photography. Thankfully, it was not all doom and gloom and therefore I'm able to share three of the 'darker' spring moments with you.

At the end of March, a Great Grey Shrike and a White-tailed Eagle turned up in Weardale, providing a twitching opportunity, including a drive past Langdon Beck, in Upper Teesdale, where Black Grouse can usually be observed. Around 20 distant birds were counted that morning but the weather put paid to any acceptable photos. A short drive north to Stanhope produced good views of the shrike – still dull and damp though. High ground to the south was next on the agenda but the eagle proved elusive. Not really surprising, given the weather conditions, although a Wheatear and a Little Owl sheltering on the quarry face at Bollilhope Burn gave some consolation. The weather seemed to be improving so a reverse of the morning route



Black Grouse (male) - Mike Bloomfield



Black-necked Grebe - Mike Bloomfield

On the 11th May and much nearer to home, my final 'black' offering presented itself during an evening visit, with a birding buddy, to the Swillington Ings reserve, where several pairs of Black-necked Grebes have taken up residence. I had taken pictures in the spring of 2014 and also of a single bird, still in winter plumage, earlier this year. We knew roughly where they would be but a couple of locals pointed along a water channel between a public track and reed bed where we spotted the birds disappearing into the reeds and decided to squat on the grass bank roughly opposite their point of entry and just sit and wait, cameras poised. Just a few minutes later the family appeared right in front of us, about 20 yards away, and completely oblivious of our presence. The female was carrying three chicks and the male in close attendance, diving for food. What luck and a joy to observe their behaviour for a good 10 minutes - another first for me. Even black can be enlightening!

allowed more failed opportunities for the eagle but produced closer views of grouse, this time in sunshine, especially of the hens which are rarely so accommodating, except during an early morning lek - a first ever hen view for me. It then seemed rude not to celebrate by calling in at the nearby Langdon Beck Hotel for refreshment and to thaw out beside a roaring log fire – food, coffee and ale all recommended!

An early April visit to Spurn, this time with wonderful warm sunshine, provided really close views of both male and female Black Redstarts on passage, in their stunning spring plumage. Note the males' white wing patches and lack of rusty-red on belly, signifying sub-species *gibraltariensis*, the west European form – what a treat.



Black Redstart - Mike Bloomfield