Becoming a Birder

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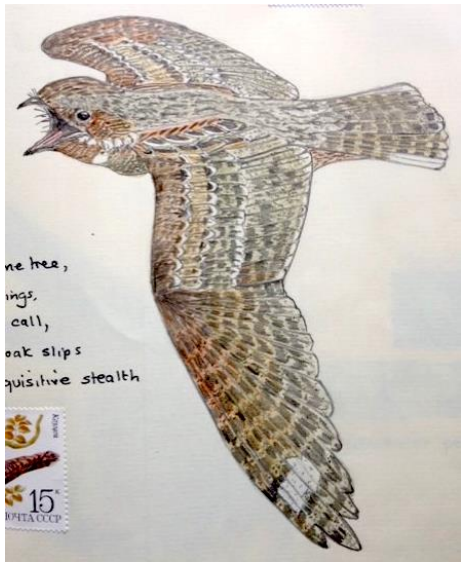
The term ‘bird watching’ first appeared in print in 1901 but by the end of the century ‘birding’ became a more widespread descriptor of our avian musings. Many folk are birders from the moment they leave the cradle; others find a route after giving up egg collecting and yet others decide to acquire some binoculars to check the fauna when out on walking jaunts. Recently the health benefits of bird watching have captured an interest. What I find in chatting to birders is how often a fortuitous encounter with a particular bird led to them to become gripped. For me, brought up with starlings, sparrows and blackbirds on the hinterland of Huddersfield, I soon lost the appetite for birding and immersed myself in the allure of football and vinyl records.

Six years ago, on a trip down Forge valley near Scarborough, I clocked what until then I imagined only existed in the pages of bird books – a nuthatch, acrobatically probing bark all flame and blue. And subsequently I’ve been hooked.

In watching and marvelling at the wonder of the avian world I was initially struck by our own inadequacies in comparison. The flight of swifts racing across the North Sea in poor weather to feed whilst their young enter a torpid state back at the nest; the agility of a merlin weaving through trees and scrub in pursuit of a skylark; the grace of a honey buzzard soaring effortlessly above our heads; the plumage of a kingfisher, a bullet of iridescence; the sonnets of song thrushes uttering over a million phrases in a season; the robustness of a grasshopper warbler weighing less than ½ oz. migrating from West Africa to reel on Baildon Moor; the strangeness of a stone curlew with it’s thick knees and large startled eyes adapted for hunting at shadowy times of day; the mass gatherings of red knot at Snettisham so pressed together they resembled a beach of grey pebbles.



Now regular birding days with Mike Bloomfield are the norm, searching for stunning wood warblers trembling in song or mystical nightjars roaming the half-light around our local area. We might roam wider perhaps for a woodchat shrike at Wykeham or even Norfolk for a spectacled warbler, a bird I never knew existed until we set the

sat nav up for Burnham Overy. Of course it's not all glamour as we comb rubbish tips for a rare gull, explore derelict building sites for a black redstart or South Gare (known as Dante's inferno by my wife) for twite, a great northern diver or an isabelline wheatear.

When I watch birds I'm forever puzzled. Why for example would a desert wheatear, a bird of the Sahara and North Arabian Peninsula, turn up at Whitby Abbey in December 2017? I try and explore the background to each bird I see, furthering an understanding of the avian world.

Kestrels hover in search of prey using their ability to detect ultraviolet light to track the urine trails of mice and voles; barn owls can hunt in the dark because they rely on acute hearing and have evolved an adjustment to wing feathers to enable them to fly in silence; and woodcock, which can see 360 degrees yet are unable to see the end of their bills, hunt for earthworms by smell having extraordinarily large olfactory lobes.

Dippers have solid bones to aid walking under water; great grey shrike can mimic songbirds to encourage them closer to make hunting easier; cuckoos incubate their eggs in the body for a long period of time so their fledglings are first to hatch in the host's nest; arctic terns may cover over a million miles in their lifetime migrating between the poles and thus experience more daylight than any other creature. Finally the bar tailed godwit's migration is quite jaw dropping. Many fly non-stop from breeding territories in the Arctic to New Zealand, a journey of 8,000 miles (over 9 days with an average speed of 35 mph), with 1 bird travelling 11,026 miles. This is the longest non-stop journey made by any bird – 'powered' flight (no gliding). They derive the required energy from absorbing organs concerned with digestion and on arrival they re-generate organs before they can eat and re-fuel for flight.

The final aspect of birding that intrigues me is how we might come to understand ourselves better. Spending a moment to reflect on how we approach birding may suggest something about our own nature. I'm certainly more aware of the presence of birds all around us – how many birds feature in logos and advertisements, football badges and as background atmosphere in films and dramas.

My patience is evident in loitering for hours in the (forlorn) hope of seeing a crag martin or great reed warbler. I can be determined though, having put in over 3,000 miles, including visits to the Hebrides and the south coast, to catch a 3 second glimpse of a storm petrel.

I'm very aware of my need for achievement and keep detail records of the birds I see including a year list. Some of the more interesting exploits are seeing 7 thrushes in a month (January 2017), all 3 woodpeckers on a morning (Santon Downham 9.3.17) and 3 egrets on the same lake (Fairburn Ings 28.8.18).

Finally through birding I have re-discovered my enthusiasm for drawing. I keep a journal in which I sketch those birds I sense a connection with – either the thrill of being in their presence or through conundrums or puzzles they present us with.

I recognise being on the path to becoming a birder. I'm grasping the unique language and organising holidays around seeing a chough, bee-eater, cirl bunting or Balearic shearwater. It's also tempting to consider I have a local patch, Ben Rhydding golf course. I'm drawn to red kites floating down the fairway, willow warblers singing from the trees, red grouse calling from the heather bank and grey herons upsetting the nesting moorhens. Acquainting my golfing partners with the birds has sparked an interest in some though they remain eager to fine me for watching a chiff chaff from the car park or disrupting a game because I set my scope up to view some waxwings on the 7th tee.