

A Sparrowhawk's Lament – How British Breeding Birds of Prey Are Faring

By David Cobham. 2014. Princeton University Press, 41 William Street, Princeton, NJ, USA, 08540-5237. 256 pages, 35.00 USD, Cloth.

There are 15 species of breeding hawks in the UK and I have seen them all, but only 13 in Britain. Exploring the plains of southern England my companion and I spotted a Montague's Harrier. As it was flying away we used the leap-frog technique (one person watching with other running to keep with the bird. When the runner stopped and had the bird in sight the second person became the runner). After a few exchanges we were close to the harrier and I had just caught up with my friend when I saw he was about to sit on an Adder (a venomous snake). I pushed him sideways and in the confusion we lost the bird, but gained a story. As a teenager I was wandering through Scotland with a good friend when we saw a large raptor. We were very excited when we realised it was an Osprey. The next day the reserve warden insisted we took a vow of secrecy to protect the eggs from collectors.

The Osprey epitomises the history of diurnal birds of prey in the British Isles. The over-rich persecuted these birds that interfered with their "sport" and added them to their egg and skin collections, so the Osprey was extirpated by 1916. It did not recolonise until 1954. Even then their recovery was hampered by the effects of organochlorine pesticides and the continual predation by egg collectors. A huge effort by many concerned people have resulted in a current population of 250 pairs. Compare this to an estimated 1500 nests and increasing in Ontario (2001). When travelling with some

birders in Assam I was mildly reproached for not showing wild enthusiasm for the daily Osprey sighting. Most summer days I am in the field I see half a dozen or more birds as I live in ideal habitat.

David Cobham describes the status of each of the 15 breeding, diurnal raptors in turn (Red Kite, White tailed Eagle, Western Marsh Harrier, Montagu's Harrier, Hen Harrier, Northern Goshawk

Eurasian Sparrowhawk, Common Buzzard, European Honey Buzzard, Golden Eagle, Osprey, Common Kestrel, Merlin, Eurasian Hobby and Peregrine). His descriptions are detailed, accurate and reveal that he is a careful observer. He often includes large chunks of someone else's text to support his own narrative. He does not need to do this as his writing is most readable. However these inserts are also well written and fit with the flow of information. The author is primarily a film and TV producer and vice-president of the Hawk and Owl Trust. This film-maker "bias" comes through from time to time, most noticeably when he details filming a Goshawks nest in the chapter on Honey Buzzard.

The author's descriptions and his personal anecdotes are charming and a pleasure to read, but the real message of the book is in the history. While all these birds go through many up and downs, seven have become good news stories, while three are still very sad. The remaining five are satisfactory, but need careful monitoring.

Of the good tales the Red Kite is representative. These birds were prevalent in the Middle Ages, but by the 1900s they were only a few pairs in Wales. With the efforts of volunteers and the reintroduction of Swedish birds the author can now report there are now 1,600 pairs in several locations. The Hobby story is similar going from a low of 100 pairs to its current 2800 pairs. The Peregrine had a little different fate. Before World War II there was about 700 pairs, despite being subject to persecution. In the war several hundred were killed to protect military pigeons carrying messages. The population did recover but plunged again to 400 pairs from effects of DDT. Now the author reports there are 1,500 pairs. The star story is the reintroduction of the White-tailed Eagle. This common bird was extirpated from the UK by 1917. From the release of the first birds in 1975 the population has grown to 64 pairs.

The Golden Eagle has 440 pairs, a stable population size for many years (for comparison the eastern Canadian population is only 200–300 pairs). This is similar to the history of Honey Buzzard and Goshawk. More distressing is the history of the two harriers, Hen and Montagu's.

Although the author reports 630 pairs of Hen Harrier for all the UK it is likely they are almost extirpated in England, although the RSPB reports three nests this year (up from zero in 2013). Raptors are still persecuted despite penalties of a six-month jail sentence or a £5,000 fine. In a 2007 infamous incident two birds were shot by someone at Sandringham, the Queen's estate. A hunting party composed of Prince Harry, a family friend and the estate gamekeeper were questioned, but nobody was prosecuted. In this atmosphere it is not surprising that in the most bird-oriented country (they have over ten times more members per capita in the RSPB than we have in Nature Canada) raptors are still being slaughtered.

David Cobham has written a very understandable biology and history of British birds of prey. It was a pleasure to read the words, but the content was, of necessity, sometimes disturbing. I would recommend this book to all who like birds, particularly raptors. British birders and those who visit (like me) will gain a lot of valuable information. It would make a great present to anyone studying hawks.

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