

The opportunity to accompany an experienced roe stalker on his early morning rounds at the beginning of May was more than enough incentive to undergo the trauma of early rising since deerstalking, about which I know absolutely nothing, has always interested me and until recently I had never been. Walking through the dew soaked woods as the dawn breaks on a glorious day when late spring slips seamlessly into early summer makes one feel glad to be alive.

We didn't see much in the way of roe, although my stalker was able to point out a great deal of evidence of their passing in the form of hoof prints and droppings. Sorry, that's slots and fewmets. In point of fact, even with binoculars I saw very little since my eyes refused to focus properly - when I managed to keep them open - until about 9am by which time we were well on our way home.

If my eyes registered very little, the assault on my ears by the dawn chorus was quite amazing. I had forgotten how spectacular the massed choir of hundreds of song birds of a dozen different species greeting the new dawn could be. Just before this feathered concert reached its crescendo with the first rays of sunlight, my ear caught a few faint and distant phrases from my favourite songster before they were overwhelmed and lost in the increasing welter of music.

As its name implies, the nightingale frequently sings at night, exploiting an ecological niche which means that cock birds can duel in song for the attention of females and the demarcation of territory without having to compete with other songbirds for broadcasting time. Quite why though, when it chooses to sing at a time when it has no other competition and its voice need be no more than a simple whistle, mother nature has equipped it with probably the most breathtaking of all bird songs is anybody's guess.

One's chances of actually seeing a nightingale are fairly slim at the best of times, even if one lives south of the line running roughly from south Wales to Yorkshire which marks the northern extent of their range in Britain. A tendency to skulk about secretively in deep cover, even serenading from the heart of a dense thicket, means they are heard more often than seen. After years of trying I've only ever seen two in the field, although I have been privileged to handle a live bird caught by the local Ringing Group.

Apart from its chestnut tail and the fact that it is slightly larger than I expected, the nightingale is a rather dull little brown bird, but were it coloured with the richness of its song it would be a deep crimson, edged with purple and shot through with cobalt blue. Beginning on a soft bubbling note its liquid 'piu, piu, piu' rises rapidly in volume and pitch until it reaches a breathtaking crescendo almost too beautiful to describe.

Its song alone betrays its presence, but through it I've noticed an interesting phenomenon. I live on a part of the coast which must be the first landfall for many a migrating nightingale yet whether they migrate in loose groups, or individually follow ancient traditional routes that converge on selected areas, I do not know. But I do know of two or three special places where, as the birds first arrive in spring it is possible to hear up to eight individuals singing within a few hundred yards of each other! This phase soon passes and the majority press on inland

until we are left with a solitary pair who have won the territory, but it is a rare privilege to be serenaded by a choir of nightingales.

Sadly, one's chances of hearing a nightingale, a bird once distributed across the greater part of south-east England, decrease every year as the bird retreats deeper into its strongholds in Kent, Sussex, Suffolk and Essex. The last national survey of its numbers was carried out by the British Trust for Ornithology in 1980 and the reasons for the contraction of its range, although suspected, have yet to be confirmed. By contrast, nightingale numbers in the Netherlands, France, Italy and Spain appear to be stable or even increasing.

Something of an opportunist in terms of its habitat requirements, showing a preference for damp scrub or woodland that has a thick undergrowth, a certain transience in the nightingale's breeding population is to be expected since many favoured areas such as coppiced

Music of the night

To be heard and not seen...

Nick Horten makes his own notes on the melodious nightingale and reveals how gamekeepers and stalkers can help rescue a species under threat.



woodlands eventually grow beyond a height that this bird finds attractive. Even so the underlying decline in numbers is deeply worrying, which is why the BTO has decided to undertake the 1999 Nightingale Survey. It is a wide ranging examination of the nightingale and its habitat in an effort to pinpoint, and hopefully reverse, the causes of its population slump.

Looking at a wide spectrum of issues, including such aspects as the effect deer browsing can have on the structure of woodland and scrub vegetation, the survey will be conducted in the main by its own members but there is plenty of room for volunteer contributors.

Gamekeepers and deer stalkers are in a unique position to assist the BTO. Abroad during those times of the day when the elusive subject is most easily located by its song and with access to large areas of habitat, areas to which ornithologists have little or no entry, the shooting community could render itself and the nightingale a valuable service by becoming involved. □

Scheduled to commence in the spring of 1999, enquiries regarding the Nightingale Survey should be addressed to The BTO, The National Centre for Ornithology, The Nunnery, Thetford, Norfolk IP24 2PU. Tel: 01842 750050.