

Elegant terror on the foreshore

Nick Horten offers an alternative view on the raptor debate.

Huddling at the foot of the low sea wall, trying to avoid the cutting January wind I was enjoying a smoke and a cup of coffee with another maner when quite unexpectedly a cock peregrine, a tiercel, flew low across the field in front of us and flicked over the wall, passing so close between us I could have touched it.

Grabbing my binoculars from the game bag I followed his leisurely and as yet undetected progress across the inland marsh. Hugging the ground, his blue back strikingly visible, he followed the unken course of a dry ditch towards the distant lagoon on the far side of the marsh.

My companion, an older man who kept racing pigeons and could remember the pre-war days when over-wintering peregrines were common on the estuary, was obviously far less enthralled than I was with our point-blank encounter with this magnificent winged destroyer. "Do you know," he muttered through his balaclava, "those things always remind me of German fighter planes. Messerschmitt 109s." I had to admit as I glassed the falcon that although exquisitely graceful, there was a certain muscular, almost thuggish brutality about it, very reminiscent of a marauding enemy raider.

On reaching the reed bed surrounding the lagoon, the peregrine seemed to throw off his early morning lethargy and the stroke of his pinions increased to the more familiar shallow, shivering beat and glide, beat and glide on bowed wings before suddenly accelerating into a rapid, near vertical climb of two hundred feet or more. At the top of which he gracefully pivoted on the tip of one wing and playfully made a grab at an unsuspecting black headed gull. Panic stricken, although I suspect in no real danger, the gull almost fell from the sky in terror. But as the gull tumbled earthwards, desperately trying to make its wings work, every other bird on the marsh from goose to dunlin rushed up to meet it.

The tiercel had triggered a full scale 'peregrine panic' and within seconds of his sudden appearance in their midst, thousands of birds had become airborne. Dunlin, knot and oystercatcher raced hither and thither in huge dense flocks, twisting and gyrating to confuse the hunter, while gulls, geese and duck in milling packs seemed to be trying to gain altitude to get above the predator where they would be relatively safe.

Apparently satisfied with the havoc he had created, the black moustached raptor, Luftwaffe fighter ace Adolph Galand or perhaps Baron Von Richtofen reincarnate, mounted on high and flew off over the distant hills, a swiftly moving blue-grey crescent on whose wingtips I fancied one could just distinguish the black German crosses, before he disappeared from sight.

My path crossed that of the peregrine perhaps half a dozen times that season and each meeting was truly memorable. On one occasion, I



watched a cock pintail fly over the sea wall and out to sea at what, for a pintail, was a fairly leisurely pace. As I looked, the duck seemed to compress itself in the air, becoming visibly longer and slimmer, at the same time increasing his wing beat to an almost frenetic rate. From out of nowhere the tiercel appeared, quite literally on the duck's tail. He had not stooped but had simply overhauled the bird in level flight.

The duck tried to climb but the peregrine stuck to him like glue, balancing in the air on bowed wings, effortlessly matching his quarry's every manoeuvre. Languidly extending a lethally taloned foot the falcon actually seized the duck by the rump! But the pintail's reaction to this manhandling was almost as spectacular as the peregrine's flying ability. Deliberately stalling in mid flight, he went into a desperate power dive. Flying full tilt vertically downwards with never a check in his wingbeat, until he literally flew headlong into the sea disappearing below the surface in a gannet-like plunge.

These early magical encounters with a peregrine took place about 10 years ago

and, at first, I could not understand my elderly companion's hostility towards such a magnificent hunter. But with the passing of time, and whilst still find them awe-inspiring to watch, my love affair with *falco peregrinus* is rapidly cooling.

Harassed by man since the advent of the gun. Poisoned, trapped, robbed and insidiously pumped full of toxic agri-chemicals, the truth is that we have absolutely no idea of the numbers and winter distribution of the peregrine before this persecution started, nor those to which they are likely to rise in its absence. But should this trouble the coastal wildfowler?

My local fowling club has been keeping highly detailed bag records for almost 20 years and they show a disturbing correlation when compared to peregrine numbers. The problem is not that they eat lots of duck, ours dine mainly on gulls and oystercatchers, but the effect they have on the daytime movement of the fowl. Once, passing the day on the high saltmarsh with hide and decoys could be very productive. Then the first peregrine arrived, to be joined a few years later by a female, and then by a young bird of the year.

To add insult to injury, this winter the resident three peregrines have been joined by an escaped lanner falcon! Predictably, the effect on the daytime shooting has been devastating with duck seemingly reluctant to fly at all unless it is too dark for the raptors to hunt.

Perhaps this superabundance of peregrines is an isolated local problem but if it is the precursor of a full scale return to pre-persecution numbers then the wildfowling community could, like the moorland gamekeepers, eventually find they too have an axe to grind with our burgeoning bird of prey population. □

It is a widely held opinion that the bird of prey is the main culprit for the decline in small bird populations. This is despite the fact that species such as the sparrowhawk have been around for thousands of years. Should raptors really take such a huge proportion of the blame?

Others, including myself, blame agrochemicals as the major cause for stripping the countryside of songbirds. Nobody knows what the true population of sparrowhawks should be because they were controlled by gamekeepers for two to three generations before the Second World War. Dieldrin and fellow organo-chlorine pesticides consequently arrived, leaving a nasty chemical taste in the mouths of small birds. Sparrowhawks swooped to eat their carcasses: some died whilst for others it affected the calcium manufacturing system in their bodies. When these birds produced eggs, the shells were so thin that the adult broke them on the nest and so failed to produce young.

Dieldrin, DDT and other nasties have been withdrawn from use, a move which has seen sparrowhawk numbers bounce back. This nimble hawk races through our gardens snatching its prey from our bird tables. You can hardly blame him.

If I was a sparrowhawk... I would zip through the gardens with bird tables creaking with goodies because I know there is a concentration of songbirds. It is far easier than flying through woodlands, weaving between the trees, not knowing where the next meal will come from. Maybe when I saw it, I would be unable to make the kill because of the profusion of branches. I know that in the Watts's garden there are always birds at the feeders, a distinct lack of branches and I will have a flying start on my prey as I come tearing around the corner of the house. At Smith's garden it is ridiculously easy because their bird table is right out in the open. Blue tits don't fly very fast - I can get one on most visits. And its all thanks to homo sapiens who consistently feed the birds...

For those of us who feed birds in our gardens we have laid a trap for them, instantly attracting the attentions of the sparrowhawk. We have lured the tit family from the relative safety of the woodlands and hedgerows where they flit from branch to branch.

The latest figures from the British Trust for Ornithology, which monitors the population of our common birds, show that it is farmland birds which are most under siege. Song thrushes, grey partridges, skylarks, corn buntings, reed buntings and tree sparrows are species in real trouble. So although blue tits and great tits are used by us as bait for sparrowhawks, their populations have not been reduced.

In 1993 I bought a farm of 110 acres in the fens with no trees. In fact, the nearest tree to any point on the farm is 300 yards distant - not really sparrowhawk country. The previous owner had run out of money, his farming had been below standard and there was a healthy population of skylarks. To try and maintain the population of skylarks, I have laid three grass strips with wild flowers measuring 20 x 400 metres. Each year hay has been made of the strips and no fertilizer applied. I have tried to produce a sward for skylarks, but in the last five years the population has dropped 30%. I have rarely seen a sparrowhawk here. Intensive farming is certainly to blame on this occasion.

Although the skylarks prefer the grass strips to the arable land five acres of grass is somehow not suitable or big enough to maintain these birds. I grow wheat every year with break crops of potatoes, peas, linseed and oilseed rape. When I look in the wheat crops there are no weeds, other than on the outside six metres where I have allowed them to grow, except cleavers. My agronomist has done a good job. The wheat crop usually yields around four tonnes per acre and is too thick for the skylark to nest in. If a skylark can nest in a thin crop of wheat, why not thick crop? We don't really know.

If our surroundings were manipulated so that my family had to live in a grain store with only simple furniture and no central heating, surrounded by concrete and steel, life would be unpleasant - we could probably live there but we might not desire or be able to raise a family. Our environment would have been altered and we could not adapt to that change. That is exactly what has happened to the skylark. They can live in their new environment but are unable to produce enough offspring to maintain numbers.

Farming has ensured these changes: now there is even a lack of food around the farmyard. And what do the birds feed on if only wheat and peas are grown?

If the environment has altered for the benefit of a species, it will be able to produce a surplus of young ensuring a population increase. This has been the case for humans and crows. Whilst reaping reward we have altered the environment so much in many parts of the world that some species have become extinct.

Scientists from the Game Conservancy Trust have been studying the decline of the grey partridge for 30 years now and have proved beyond all doubt that the lack of insects in our crops is responsible for the inability of adults to raise enough young to survive on British farms. This is remarkable when you consider that the grey partridge lays more eggs than any other wild bird in the world.

If ideal conditions were created for this species then it will flourish as it did under Joe Knickers shortly after the Second World War.

One team of six guns shot over 2,000 birds, others were able to shoot large numbers for the next few years - all from a completely wild stock of birds.

Unfortunately, to provide farms with plenty of insects in today's world would not produce farmland birds in the quantities present in the 1960s - we have done more to our environment than take out the insects.

Each year we produce thousands of tonnes of garbage which various scavengers use to good advantage whilst the body count of the motor car is well documented. Foxes, crows and gulls are extremely intelligent, like our lifestyle and are able to avoid cars, factors which are all indicative of a healthy population.

During the early summer months, a great deal of time is spent by these elusive creatures scouring the countryside for that irresistible nest of eggs. And guess what? We have made nest finding easier too. The flail mower is used far more than is needed, destroying much of the vegetation in which birds could have concealed their nests. They then have to wait a week or two before there is enough vegetation to conceal the eggs only to find that the flail mower is in full operation again before they have finished nesting in July!

How man destroys wildlife

Raptors cannot be blamed for the serial wildlife destruction which sweeps through the countryside. Lincolnshire farmer Nicholas Watts suggests we should look closer to home.