

Birdwatching, on a global scale

It's not a pair of binoculars you need for a decent day's birdwatching, it's a gun, says **Nick Horten**, who has spotted some unusual bird species on his many wildfowling trips

I've got a bit of a confession to make about my sordid and delinquent past. Though I started wildfowling as a youth, I wasn't actually born with a gun in my hand. My interest in the great outdoors came about through my overriding interest in... birds. So now you know my dark secret, I'm a closet birdwatcher.

Not that I've got much time for a certain sort of birder as a sub-species of ornithologists as a whole. I particularly resent the condescending looks they give me when our paths cross on the sea wall, with me carrying a gun and them toting their telescopes. I've worked very hard for a long time to help preserve the local estuary and I have earned my right to harvest the occasional bird. What, I am tempted to ask, have they done? Disappointingly little, on an individual basis, is the answer.

Once upon a time, with the sort of inferior quality optical equipment that I grew up with, birdwatching required a degree of fieldcraft. Nowadays, one simply purchases a telescope of immense power enabling one to examine the contents of a redshank's left nostril at a range of $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile. No fieldcraft here. No communing with nature. No belly-crawling through wet grass to shorten the range for poor quality optics. No intimate acquaintance with the quarry species.

In contrast, wildfowlers look

landscape. Birdwatchers appear to me to perch uncomfortably and temporarily upon it before flitting away like a gaudy, twittering, wind-blown charm of goldfinches.

Not that all ornithologists are superficial. I started out as a boy with a great bunch of blokes on the local marshes as a trainee bird ringer. If it wasn't for these diehards and others like them attaching a numbered metal ring to birds' legs, our knowledge of bird migration would be scant indeed. Starting with mist nets,

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I eventually graduated to the impressive and pleasingly noisy, cannon net. I note with hindsight that the hand of the novice on the electrical firing switch of a cannon net shakes with identical excitement to that of the beginner's hand on the lanyard of a punt-gun. The end result may be different but I find it reassuring to know that among the ranks of the more serious birders are those who understand the thrill of the chase.

Bird ringing — a subliminal fieldsport if ever there was one.

The more philosophical members of the 'fowling community frequently describe the sport as “armed birdwatching”, and though I've handled some fairly exotic birds when mist-netting, I've had the biggest thrill from close encounters with more mundane species that have come about when simply sitting motionless, gun in hand, on the foreshore. Ah! Sitting motionless. Now there's a concept alien to many birdwatchers.

Completely concealed in a small, grass-shrouded hide tucked in at the foot of the sea wall, eagerly waiting for the duck to move at first light on a frosty December morning with my gun held at the ready, barrels pointing skywards, I was surprised by an almost hummingbird-like whirring of tiny pinions as a blue jewelled kingfisher settled lightly upon my gun muzzle. Completely oblivious to the unusual nature of its perch it went about its morning ablutions, preening its wing feathers and deftly wiping both sides of its bill on the inside of the muzzle.

On another occasion, when concealed in a hide far out on the saltmarsh, a wild peregrine landed on my head. I'm not sure which of us was the more surprised. Her unexpected arrival made me jump, but as she pitched on my woolly hat her talons momentarily tangled in the fibres dislodging it from my head and

causing her to fly off in a startled, clumsily-flapping panic, travelling a good few hundred yards before regaining her composure.

I can think of 100 more examples, indeed, most of us have some tale of close encounters with wildlife that many a self-righteous birdwatcher could only dream about. I sometimes think that many of them would

completely at home in their natural habitat. They merge into the background and become a permanent part of the fabric of the

E. A. JAMES / NHPPA

► On a recent January punt-gunning expedition, Nick Horten spotted no less than five sandwich terns



Exotic birds are appearing more frequently in the UK's waters — could we see flamingos next?



benefit from trading their binoculars for a gun. I'm not sorry that I did.

If the average 'fowler has a closer relationship and understanding of the birds with whom he shares his natural habitat, then he can't have failed to notice that curious things are happening in the world of birds. Perhaps because I shoot mainly on the south coast, where an already mild climate grows ever warmer by the year, these phenomena are more obvious.

Once, one would have had to travel to Scotland to see an osprey. Today, odd birds overwinter in the harbours. Flocks of once rare avocets through the mudflats. Snow-white little egrets stand shoulder to shoulder along the creek edge.

Colonies of Mediterranean gulls nest on the islands and the soundtrack of the breaking dawn is punctuated by the harsh, explosive calling of warblers. Recently, on a early January punt-gunning expedition, was completely amazed, nay, stunned to see no less than five sandwich terns. Incredibly, these birds have very recently begun to overwinter in the south coast harbours. One really needs to stop for a moment to consider what the future implications for 'fowling are as changes in birds' habits of this magnitude become increasingly apparent.

So, is global warming a threat or an opportunity? Ever the optimist, I vote for the latter. Where can I buy a sackful of flamingo decoys? ■

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