

Wildlife Diary 38 for 27 May (bumper edition)



Now you see them, now you don't....

Inspired by the ease with which I watched up to 80 **hobbies** in Somerset hawking insects over Shapwick's reedbeds early in May (Diary 35), I set about trying to find my local birds - and quickly ran into trouble. Seeing this elusive species on its breeding territory is a different matter altogether! In Derbyshire, as elsewhere, hobbies have quietly built up their numbers in the last twenty years. From a handful of pairs in the mid 1980s, there are now some **40 pairs** in the county.



Most nest in rather nondescript farmland. They take over the nests of **carrion crows**, often in small groups of trees along a hedgerow. Rarely they will perch openly on a dead branch but more often they sit among the leaves and are very hard to see. As with **peregrines**, they spend hours just sitting about.....making finding them a slow process.

Hobby © John Miller.

This classy little falcon has long wings, heavily streaked underparts, red thighs and white on its face.....

After several blank outings, I felt like giving up. But hobbies are a favourite bird and May undoubtedly my favourite month, so I determined to persevere.

Armed with the knowledge that this species is often active at dusk, I've been out as late as 10.30but so far, with no joy. My only success has been in the morning:

My first hobby flew low and fast straight past me as I stood at a field gate ...it was gone in seconds. My second, an hour later, circled low over my head as I loitered on a hilltop. Effortlessly gaining height in the thermals, it drifted off to the south. Then a few days later, I sat under an oak tree for an hour in mid-morning, seeing only **buzzards**, **sparrowhawks** and a **kestrel**. Then suddenly there were two scimitar-winged hobbies soaring high above a huge field of oilseed rape. Their effortless flight perfectly demonstrated their complete aerial mastery. After ten minutes, the birds disappeared over the horizon in opposite directions.....

Hobbies breed late and won't lay their eggs until June. Their young fledge at the end of July or early in August, timed to coincide with an abundance of young **swallows** and **martins** newly on the wing.

Meanwhile, my attempts to watch these special birds continue.....



Note: If you should come across nesting hobbies please keep their locations to yourself. Like peregrines, hobbies are Schedule One birds and it is illegal to go near their nests.

Maybug flies in – quite literally!

The other evening, a **maybug** or **cockchafer** flew in through the open window. Judging by the size of its antennae, this was a male. Both sexes are drawn to light...but this is only the second we have seen here in 20 years though a moth-man tells me he had five come to his light trap recently.

Maybug larvae are pests of the roots of cereals. Insecticides have greatly reduced their numbers.

cc Nick Brown

Chicks large and small

Fledged chicks are visible all over the place just now. This young lapwing was photographed at a **Sheffield Wildlife Trust** reserve in Rotherham. The mottled and white fluff break up the bird's shape, making it hard to see until you are close.

Meanwhile, the **Cathedral peregrines** have lost two of their chicks to some unknown illness or physical problem. As each one became visibly ill, concern for its welfare resulted in over **600 comments** to the project blog so far this month. Many asked us to intervene and get the chicks to a vet. We resisted these calls though we did apply to Natural England to allow us to collect the corpses so they could be post mortemed. Even this was refused for reasons we quite understood. More on the vexed question of intervention at a later date. Meanwhile the two remaining chicks are growing amazingly fast and their feathers are starting to emerge. Fledging is not far off!



Lapwing chick © Phil Spamer

Ilkeston's famous bird

A **great reed warbler**, the first in the county, that has been singing its heart out in a tiny patch of **Phragmites** in Ilkeston for over a week, has attracted crowds of admiring bird watchers. This warbler is not uncommon in southern Europe. A few individuals such as this one overshoot as they migrate north in spring. It has a truly clamorous song, belted out as it grips a reed stem. There's a photo below as part of this week's bumper diary edition. I must confess that I'm not keen on 'twitches' such as this and it's very rare that I'll charge off to jostle with the assembled throng.



Apart from that excitement, **DWT reserves** continue to attract some interesting birds:

Willington had visits from both a **black tern** and a handsome male **garganey**, a migrant duck. In addition, a **marsh harrier**, **wood sandpiper** and **grey plover** were seen and early in the month, a **sandwich tern** and a **Mediterranean gull** appeared. **Carr Vale** recorded a **marsh harrier** and a **little egret**.

Great reed warbler © Paul Shaw

Last week's mystery feathers

The feathers in the photo last week were from a male **mandarin duck**. This bird, now rare in its Chinese homeland, has increased in numbers in the county in winter and breeds along many small streams. It nests in holes in trees.

I'm not aware of any evidence that it is causing problems.

Upland meadows bloom



Some unimproved fields high up in the Peak District have been very colourful recently. My photos show one full of **marsh marigolds** (left) and another covered with **mayflowers**, also known as **cuckoo flowers** (right).

Talking of cuckoos

I saw my first cuckoo by the side of a moorland lane last weekend.

Sitting on a line of fence posts, it was dropping down into the heather, catching big **hairy caterpillars** which are a favourite food.



It's a pity this species is now so scarce. Also on the moors were **curlews**, **redpolls**, **tree pipits** and my first **spotted flycatcher** of the year, sitting at the very top of a conifer.

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