

Wildlife Diary 17 for 3rd December 2009



How much wood can a woodcock (hide in)?

Woodcock are nocturnal. They hide in woods by day, flying out after dark to feed in marshy ground where they probe for earthworms and the like. This makes seeing one a tad difficult. Your best chance is in summer when they display over woodland just before dusk. If you know where they breed, you can watch them make their strange, crepuscular 'roding' flights – and hear them grunt as they fly by! Come April, try Carvers Rocks Nature Reserve.



Adult woodcock © Malcolm Hobbs

But in winter, when their numbers are greatly augmented by immigrants, they are silent and rarely move before it's pitch black. Their superb camouflage makes it nigh impossible to see them among the leaf litter.

You're only hope is to accidentally disturb one as you walk among the trees. Reserves staff tell me they have recently done just this at Hillbridge, Long Clough and Priestcliffe Lees Nature Reserves, all in the north of the county.

The main arrival of immigrant woodcock takes place in October, the birds coming from Russia and Scandinavia. Last spring, Roy Dennis of The Highland Foundation for Wildlife, fitted satellite transmitters to two woodcock wintering on Islay. One of them (named Askaig) was then tracked flying back to its Russian nest site, over 2500 miles away. You can see Askaig's route and read about it [here](#).

Migrating woodcock sometimes land by accident in a garden or fly into an office window, especially after overnight rain or fog. They are regularly taken by the Derby Cathedral peregrines as they fly over the city by night – perhaps disoriented or blinded by the city's floodlights.

This photo, looking down on the peregrine nest platform in winter, shows the brown wings of two woodcock. As it happens, Nick Moyes went up the tower this week to remove the corpse of a woodcock which a peregrine had unceremoniously dumped in front of the web camera lens that looks across the gargoyles!

In the early 1980s, [research work](#) on woodcock was undertaken in Whitwell Wood in north east Derbyshire. In order to catch birds for ringing, the researchers developed a very unusual technique. They threw a brown bantam hen high into the air along the woodland rides over which the males were roding. Thinking that they had found a female, the males swooped low enough to get caught in mist nets set up in the rides below!

The fate of the poor bantam is anyone's guess....



Peregrine nest tray with prey remains © Nick Moyes

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[By the way (and in case you are still having sleepless nights), the answer to the tree silhouette quiz two weeks ago was crab apple. The other tree to the left was an oak.]

I got the blues.....

Walking round the National Trust's parkland at Kedleston at the weekend, I found both species of blewit.



Wood blewits have a lovely bluish lilac colour on their gills when fresh, though, as you can see on the larger specimens, the colour fades with age.

This fungus is very common and widespread, growing in woods and under hedgerows and lasting into December.

Its close relative, the field blewit (below), grows on old, unimproved pastureland. The vibrant lilac colouration in this species is restricted mainly to the stem. The gills are a pale flesh colour.

Wood blewits cc Nick Brown

Until the 1970s, field blewits could regularly be found on sale in Midlands greengrocers and vegetable markets in late autumn – and they fetched a high price too.



Now, with the demise of old pasture, they are much rarer and no longer sold commercially. Apparently, a Sicilian family who live locally visit Kedleston each autumn and collect as much edible fungus they can find to take home and dry for the winter.

The big ring of field blewits I found had over sixty fruit bodies so I felt justified in picking a few for my breakfast...and very good they were too!

Each fruiting body sheds millions of spores as soon as it opens, so most mycologists feel that picking (some) fungi has no effect on their survival or dispersal.

Field blewits cc Nick Brown

Harried to extinction?

Only six pairs of hen harriers nested successfully in England last summer, an all-time low. The main reason for this is undoubtedly their persecution on grouse-shooting moorland estates. Harriers eat red grouse chicks which makes them enemy number one - even though they are totally protected by law. In Derbyshire a pair tried to nest on the Goyt Moors a few years ago and two females laid eggs in the far north of the county in 2008, sharing the same male. Despite 24 hour nest guarding, the males 'went missing' in each case – and it is they that hunt to feed the young. Little wonder that none was reared. No one was caught or charged.....

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