

Walk on the wild side

August 2019

Biodiversity

While areas of the midlands and north have been inundated by copious rainfall, we have been experiencing a further drought. Springs are now generally drier than they used to be and April showers are no more than a distant memory. There were a few muddy puddles when the House Martins first appeared, but these soon dried up leaving the birds unable to complete their nests.

6 years ago, there were 23 pairs of House Martins nesting along the eaves of our house. This year, we had 3 and of these, only one was able to fledge an early brood. The others failed to lay in the spring and are only now showing interest in breeding, prompted by a few welcome summer showers. There will be fewer Martins to winter in Africa this year and even less to return next year. The unfortunate fact is that the general environment for birds in the UK has deteriorated and insect numbers have fallen by a massive percentage. Some studies are pointing towards a 70% decline and this, together with a warming climate and the loss of mixed farming, will inevitably seriously impact upon these charming birds.

Some weeks ago, a long day's hay making found me checking the young grasses and legumes in an undersown crop of Spring Barley. Twilight was fast approaching and the scents of a warm and humid evening hung in the shadow of the long hedgerow that borders the field. Walking carefully along the edge of the crop, I inhaled the astringent smell of crushed nettle and the pungent, heavy aroma of Elderflower. Evening was settling upon a soporific and drowsy landscape with the sun dragging the waning light behind it. A pensive hush fell over the fields with the final jangle of a fleeing Blackbird and the gentle stridulation of Crickets, lulling the pastures to peace. Hedge and field were now fading into anonymity; a Barn Owl, stark white, floated softly along a hedgerow that was hardly discernible from the darkness of the field beside it. It was at this moment of quietude that a candle gleamed from the margin of rough grass bordering the field; bright and constant, a blueish light, tiny but radiant. Then others appeared, glowing, a necklace of fairy lights in the darkness.

Simultaneously, large moths with shimmering silver wings and a swaying flight rose and fell over the same spot with gently vibrating wings. These were Ghost Swifts, a primitive species of Lepidoptera with larvae that feed on the roots of docks and nettles and live possibly as long as 3 years in a subterranean state. Now the males have emerged and with this curious ballet, hope to attract a female. These are larger than the males having yellow wings with some brownish markings. The males lure the females with a combination of their flickering silver wings and a goatish smell as they hover in scores over the expanse of the pasture. Occasionally, a male would suddenly disappear, struck by a love-lorn female and falling together into the grass to complete the breeding cycle. After pairing, the females fly over the field, randomly scattering their eggs and thus procreate a generation of Swifts perhaps 3 years hence.

A magical summer evening; a wildlife spectacle in miniature, of Barn Owls, of Glow Worms; and of the dance of the ghosts.

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