

**Birds of Prey (B.O.P.)** This month I am going to focus on some of the more sinister yet beautiful birds that raid our gardens and clean up our countryside whilst hunting and scavenging. Many of you will have seen our local Sparrowhawks in action, taking birds from your feeders etc. This can be a brutal and distressing scene and I don't enjoy seeing it but I know, that this is life outside of our world, whereby creatures need fellow creatures for food.

The bird breeding season has started and soon many B.O.P. will have growing chicks to feed. Its important that they time the arrival of their young to coincide with the egg laying and hatching of many of our garden and farmland birds. Interestingly at this time of year other birds that you may not expect, take the chicks of others to feed their young. Some of you may have seen on TV's 'Spring Watch' program where they filmed a Greater Spotted Woodpecker taking a whole family of Bluetits one by one to feed its hungry, growing brood. Jays and even squirrels do the same.

Below is a list of B.O.P. that I have seen locally. So, what's to like you may ask. Well for me each individual has its merits and character that has always fascinated me, as follows. (All photos have been taken by me).

**Kestrels** hover and hang in the wind to drop onto a grass hopper, beetle, lizard or rodent.



Female Kestrel



Male Kestrel (Grey head and jacket)

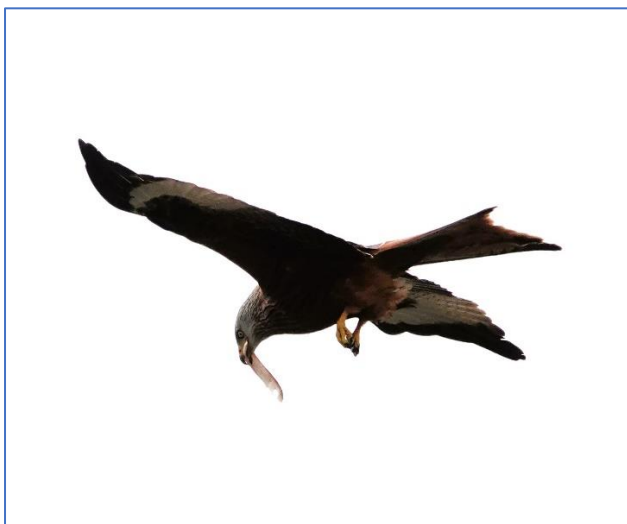
**Sparrowhawks** Twist and turn thru branches and over hedges with speed and agility. As you may have seen, they often eat where they catch and leave only a pile of feathers as evidence. The Female (left) has a brown coat while the Male (right) who is actually smaller has a grey coat.



**Buzzards** are one of the few B.O.P. that call to each other while soaring and often this is the first clue to help you find them. They may be circling up above and cavorting past each other with Legs and Talons extended as they perform their pairing rituals. Did you know that these birds can almost dive as fast as a Peregrine Falcon. I have seen them dive bombing each other from great heights down to their partner in the tree tops below. Recordings of their call are often used in Western films where eagles circle overhead but in truth these Eagles don't call when they are soaring so they play recorded Buzzard calls for effect. Interestingly there is a local Starling that mimics the buzzards call and has me looking to the sky only to discover its cheeky impersonation.



**Red Kite** personally I find this bird the most interesting. It is very colourful and its slow, low-level circling and soaring flight is a treat to watch. The colour of the background skies and amount and direction of sunlight can make it tricky to photograph without getting a dark silhouette. Better shots are achieved when the bird is turning with some sun on its back. These birds are in fact scavengers. I have seen them take live prey like ducklings or young chicks but they don't like anything that is going to fight back. Below are photos that I took in Sarcel, of a soaring Red Kite flying off with a crust of bread and another soaring above me.



**Peregrine Falcon** I have had the privilege of filming a pair of these birds breeding locally and feeding on Pidgeon, Partridge and young pheasants. The young Peregrine (seen below) had just started flight when I got to see them and its parents went screaming thru the skies above at ridiculous speeds and performing acrobatics that alas my camera could not keep up with. Fortunately for me they eventually did land with food and I took some reasonable photos albeit at a distance. This is Britain's fastest bird and has special adaptations like nostrils that can close to restrict fast flowing air as it dives at up to 200mph thus allowing it to breath during the dive. The force of them hitting their prey at this speed is enough to kill a bird like a Pidgeon for example.





**Hobby** (No photos of this one). This is a falcon- like bird that is sleeker than a Kestrel and has thinner wings and it is not such a common site. Having said that I did see one down by our river as they tend to prey on dragon flies, damselflies and flying insects. They are very fast and acrobatic and can often be seen feeding on the wing too.

**Owls** We are lucky enough to have 3 types of Owls that can be found locally.



**Tawny Owl**



**Barn Owl**



**Little Owl**

**Tawny owl** is more likely to be heard rather than seen as they are nocturnal but in the summer months when they have young, they will occasionally hunt for chicks during the day. It is these Owls that you will hear calling in the evening and night. The 'twit twoo' call is most likely the Male calling the female. The female makes a loud 'Kee-wick' reply. Rats, Mice, and roosting birds are their main prey.

**Barn Owl** Often seen at dusk, down on the river flood plain. Seen hunting voles along the river too. I also saw one hunting over Chicken Meadow before it became the fenced horse paddock. They appear to glow in the dark as they have an algae from trees on their wings which glows in the light of a torch or car headlight.

**Little Owl** This adorable little bird can be seen hunting and roosting during the day. It has a curious habit of bobbing its head up and down and it loves to eat beetles, earthworms and grasshoppers. I have seen and photographed one in the oak trees by the white gates as you leave back lane heading towards Greenstead Green. It liked to sit on the telephone wire poles too and I guess it would also take a mouse or vole if the opportunity presented itself.

**Food for thought.** So, as you can see our local wild bird population have a lot to contend with. They do produce a lot of young so that at least one or two survive and fledge but the dangers of predation continue throughout their lives. Our wild and garden bird population has been in the decline during the last decade whilst predators like Sparrowhawks, Buzzards and Red Kites have recovered from record low numbers. There is a lot more carrion for the larger birds to feed on. Motorway and roadside kills of rabbits, pheasant,

muntjac etc provide a regular food source for many BOP and live prey like rabbit and squirrels are still available too. I am not sure that the falling number of our birds is entirely due to predation. So until informed bodies like the Essex and Suffolk Wildlife trusts, or the RSPB advise otherwise, I will continue to feed my beloved garden birds and help keep up their numbers. This will in turn feed the predators and I live in hope that nature will balance itself out and my bird feeding will serve both predator and prey. There are of course other predators that will happily eat birds or their eggs. Locally we have Mink, Stoats, Rats, Badgers, Hedgehogs, Grey squirrel, Jays, Magpies and even domestic cats. So, as you can see, nature has to balance out to keep healthy numbers of all of our local animals and birds. We can help in various ways I suppose. Feeding Hedgehogs, general garden and woodland birds, may reduce hunger and the need for predation amongst each other. For our BOP like Sparrowhawks there is only one choice but Buzzards and Kites will clean up the dead, sick, accidentally killed prey and keep our countryside cleaner. In fact Red Kites were introduced into London back in the days of the plague and they helped clean up the streets.

### **Tweak of the week**

I keep my hanging bird feeders on a 4 to 6'' link of fishing line so that the feeder both swings and spins. This makes it just a little more difficult for a hawk to time its strike and may contribute to them missing, or do they just enjoy the challenge?

That's it from me this month. I hope that you continue to enjoy the wonderful wildlife that is available in and around Stisted but for those less able I hope that you enjoy my articles and photos and that you keep an eye out of your windows and 'watch the birdies'.

Kind regards

Graham Holloway CANS Wildlife Rep.