

NatureNotes

Rupert Evershed's monthly diary of the natural world

Twitter @rupertevershed

Blog: www.notingnature.wordpress.com



Turn your eyes to the skies...

It's always at this time of year that I begin to look up again. Winter somehow forces us to look down, maybe at our feet to make sure we're avoiding the worst of the mud, but maybe also because the overcast skies have a way of dampening our gaze if not our spirits.

But there is more to it than that for I find my eyes are actually drawn upwards, first by the skylark, rising higher and higher from the ground, pouring out its cascade of song, and then by a host of other natural forms.

Blossom catches our breath and draws our vision along avenues of white-dusted blackthorn, inviting our eyes upwards to bees and butterflies emerging in the new warmth. Chiffchaffs and blackcaps hop up through the hawthorns, their strident songs seeming to trip over each other in their exuberance to declare their arrival. Skulking blackbirds, wrens and song thrushes all exchange the thick cover of the undergrowth for lofty boughs to make their vocal contributions, ensuring the air is now filled with a chorus of avian music. It's as if nature has literally risen up from the earth, with the sap, and we are no longer tramping over a thin downtrodden winter-worn landscape, but swimming in a rich, abundant sea of life.

And so I find my eyes drawn higher and higher as the clouds give way to blue sky and I begin to scan the skies for further signs of spring arriving. Already the first swallows have appeared, feeding on the rising aerial plankton and occasionally dipping down to remind us of their own twittering songs should we have forgotten in their absence. Buzzards soar on the thermals forming spiraling groups of five or more birds. Occasionally they plummet back to earth like stones, displaying their agility in dramatic courtship dances, only pulling up at the last minute to land in a tree.

The skies are busy places in spring and become the great highways of migrating birds either leaving us or joining us for the summer. Some are rare vagrants just passing through, maybe off their usual course, and it is these that keep birdwatchers' eyes on the distant skies. Every soaring buzzard requires a closer look should it prove to be an osprey making its way north. Distant flapping herons demand a second look incase they are actually a stork or crane, drifting over from the Continent. Such birds



An osprey.

Picture: STEVE ROUND

appear every year over Hertfordshire and are observed by the lucky few.

Of course many, if not most birds pass overhead at night, unobserved and unhindered in their journeys, feeding on the wing and only occasionally pausing to drink. All this changes however, should the weather take a turn for the worse. Spring is known for sudden heavy showers and these can empty the skies of whatever is flying over at the time, pushing birds down to the ground where they will be forced to take a break. It's in these moments that one of the most exciting bird watching experiences can be had as you find yourself standing amidst a carpet of birds, all feeding and drying off as the clouds break and the sun returns.

Moments like these last only a couple of hours before the birds fly on but can provide some of the richest and most rewarding experiences of bird watching. Birdwatchers call this phenomenon a 'fall' of migrants and it is often in these moments that rarities are found. In April 2013, at one of the St Albans gravel pit complexes, one such 'fall' of migrants contained an exotic hoopoe feeding nervously on the ground and looking very out of place!

Whether you are one of these hopeful rarity hunters or simply enjoy the return of life to our skies one bird to look out for is the swift whose shrill screams and trills will hopefully grace our St Albans skies again this summer. So make sure you look up this spring and maybe catch a glimpse of the busy world that perhaps often simply passes over our heads!