



Introduction

The Loop

Sunday 22nd March, my wife Suzanne's birthday, dawned bright, sunny and warm, so after I and my three teenage children had given her presents and sung the ritual song, she and I went for a walk. As always, we went round what we have come to call 'the loop': a three-mile route out and back from where we live, on the northern edge of the Somerset Levels. Shaped more or less like a letter Q, it begins with a stroll down the lane, followed by four sides of a rough square, then back up the lane to our home.

Our dog, Rosie, was with us, running gleefully ahead before stopping, turning and checking that we were still there. This is by far her favourite walk; and indeed ours, for although this flat, open 'moor' is not conventionally scenic, it does provide a series of views away from our home towards the high points of the Mendips to the north, the Wells telecommunications mast to the east and Brent Knoll

Skylarks with Rosie

to the west. Finally, as we return, we glimpse the reassuring presence of our village church tower to the south, guiding us back home.

Soon after we took the first turning on the square, a low-flying raptor appeared, heading away from us. Immediately both Suzanne and I realised that this was not a buzzard: the dark plumage, long, raised wings and determined flight marked it out as a female marsh harrier. I presumed that this was not one of the birds that breed down on the Avalon Marshes a few miles to the south, but a migrant, heading north-east on what may be the final leg of its journey from north-west Africa, where some of our birds spend the winter.

A good start, soon followed by a nicely varied collection of birds: a late fieldfare, also heading north; a chiffchaff – the first I had heard here this spring – endlessly repeating the two syllables of its name; and a female kestrel, hovering on wimpling wings in the fresh breeze.

We also came across two species that would have been unknown here even twenty years ago. The first was a Persil-white little egret, feeding in one of the deep-sided rhynes (the network of drainage ditches that criss-cross the whole of the Somerset Levels). The second was the exact opposite, colour-wise: two ravens flying overhead, uttering their characteristic ‘cronking’ call. More about both these charismatic birds later.

Returning home, an hour after we set out, we felt that self-satisfied glow of having done our daily exercise, walked the dog and spent this part of the weekend as it should be spent: outdoors, in each other’s company – something we

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rarely get the chance to do in this increasingly frantic world. Little did we know that, within just twenty-four hours, all this was about to change.

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Normal life for us, as for so many people, is always just that little bit too busy. Weeks are filled with the usual routine: work, for me mostly at home but with weekly trips to the university where I teach; and for Suzanne, the peripatetic life of a health visitor, helping new mums and their infants in the community.

The days begin early, when we wake at 6.30 to get the children ready for school, and end late, as we finish the chores before flopping down in front of the television. Weekends, which should be a time of rest and recuperation, are even busier, as we catch up on washing and ironing, cooking and cleaning, and ferrying the children to distant parts of the county to play rugby and football. There seems to be no time to stop and stare; nor, indeed, to stop and do anything.

Things did begin to change back in January when, after forty years in the NHS, Suzanne retired. I say ‘retired’, but with her active approach to life, coupled with a desire to do something different, she had already planned a new and exciting venture involving health, well-being and nature. When the crisis struck, however, she was still in the planning stage, and so we were enjoying the many benefits of her being at home all day long.

Soon afterwards, the children were home too, as school

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was shut until further notice. Their response to this unprecedented situation reflected their very different personalities: sixteen-year-old Charlie, who had been studying surprisingly hard for his GCSEs, was understandably delighted that the exams had been cancelled; George, aged fifteen, was relieved that school was over, as he prefers studying at home; while Daisy, his twin sister, was temporarily hysterical at the thought of being cooped up with her parents and brothers for what seemed like a lifetime. I could sympathise, but as I pointed out, we all had to adapt. She and I, shall we say, agreed to differ.

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I work at home much of the time anyway, mostly in the office in our garden, and so am used to a partly solitary life. Nevertheless, because I have what is now called a portfolio career – combining writing, teaching, leading bird tours and giving talks – I do get out and about from time to time. Now all that was over, at least for a while.

In late April 2020, at the very epicentre of the lockdown period, I would be turning sixty. It felt like a bigger milestone than previous ‘big birthdays’, perhaps because it sounds so ridiculously old. At least having teenage children keeps me feeling younger than many of my contemporaries, many of whom who are embracing retirement with what, to me, seems like excessive enthusiasm.

Last New Year’s Eve, a time of year when I usually reflect on how I might improve my hectic work/life situation, I turned to Suzanne and told her that, as I would be reaching

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that special milestone this year, I would start to slow down a little.

To be fair, she did her best to conceal her scepticism, but I could see that she did not really believe me. She had a point. I had already taken on an extra day a week teaching at the university. I had one book about to come out and a tight deadline for the next one. Two days later, I would travel to South Africa to observe swallows at their million-strong roost; and I was already committed to a number of talks and birding tours in the coming year, as well as trips to Japan, Turkey and Australia. In what way was I planning on slowing down?

And then, on Monday 23rd March, came the lockdown. First, the talks were cancelled, then the local bird tours, then the foreign trips, then Birdfair – the annual event that brings together bird and wildlife enthusiasts from all over the world. Domestically, school was closed, the children's sporting seasons brought to an abrupt end, Suzanne's new project put on hold, and any kind of social life – including my own long-planned birthday party – postponed for goodness knows how long.

My family and I – and the majority of people here in Britain and around the world – were on a kind of indefinite leave of absence from our usual lives. My work did go on – I could at least write and teach (online) when self-isolating – but everything else was turned upside-down for what felt like an indefinite period.

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After the initial shock, we all fell into a comfortable – and rather comforting – routine. Suzanne and I got up a little later than usual, and after breakfast I would usually take my daily exercise by cycling around the loop. I have been doing this for almost a decade now, but I had only started keeping a proper list of the birds I saw there the previous January.

Before the lockdown began, I had already tallied almost fifty species on what I was beginning to regard as my ‘home patch’, compared with just over sixty during the whole of the previous year. I like a challenge and so, as the lockdown commenced, I focused on methodically recording what I saw and heard, either during the early-morning ride or on a more leisurely afternoon walk with Rosie.

At the same time, of course, I could hardly ignore what was happening in our garden. Spring is always the most exciting time of year here, as it is anywhere, but in recent years I have often been away at the critical time, missing the one or two weeks of the year when everything kicks off.

Being here every single day reminded me of when we first moved to Somerset back in 2006. For the first few years – until I found other, more distant locations – my garden was where I did the vast majority of my bird- and wildlife-watching.

The children were then just toddlers, and so inevitably we were confined to home and garden for much of the time. I documented our first full calendar year here in my book *A Sky Full of Starlings*, and a few years later extended my scope to the whole of our parish with *Wild Hares and Hummingbirds* (the latter a reference to the hummingbird hawkmoth, not its avian namesake). It now struck me as

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ironic that I had deliberately chosen to confine myself to my parish for those two books; with the lockdown, I was being forced to do so.

I also realised that, during the intervening decade or so, I had begun to neglect what was immediately on my doorstep, or at least take it for granted. Instead of sitting quietly outside, waiting to see what flew overhead, or listening out for birdsong from the surrounding hedges, shrubs and trees, I would spend any spare time I did have at my two 'local patches': one a hidden corner of the Avalon Marshes, the other where three rivers meet – the Huntspill, Parrett and Brue – at what passes for coastline here in Somerset.

I had totted up an impressive total of birds at each of these locations: a round one hundred species at the inland patch, including bearded tit, cattle and great white egrets and ten species of warbler; and over one hundred and twenty-five species along the coast, the highlights being grey phalarope, Mediterranean gull and my best ever discovery, a splendid male red-backed shrike, perched alongside a flock of linnets on a sunny July morning.

All these made my garden sightings feel somehow less significant in comparison. Yet as it dawned on me that my garden and the moor behind my home were now the boundaries of my life for the foreseeable future, I again realised what I have always known: that birding isn't about the rare and unusual – exciting though they are – but the reassuringly regular and commonplace. In any case, this was what I would be seeing and hearing during this particular spring, and so, I decided, I had better start to enjoy it.