Bradway Birds

So June, July and August continued the weather misery of April and May, breaking records for wetness, coolness and cloudiness. The swifts left in early August, having raised few young. Martins and swallows are still around as I write after one week of September, the former at Laverdene, Dore and Beauchief, and Totley Hall, the latter at Tinker's Corner, around Dyson's bricks and where Standall Tools used to be. Both are at Totley Bents and Strawberry Lea.

However, numbers are way down on last year, with none of the usual twittering as they line up on wires, a few inches apart. More likely there was one brood only, or two small ones, where eggs hatched but the parents could find too few aerial insects to fatten nestlings. Perhaps, as so often seen with a range of species on "Springwatch", the more vigorous of the chicks pushes forwards and ate nearly all the food, and the weaker ones entered a fatal vicious circle of failing to grab food and so lacking the energy to push themselves next time.

Alternatively, the parents might have been unable to feed one brood at all, because they have to ensure they themselves eat or the young have no chance anyway, and neither could another clutch be laid.

Blackbirds have not been hit to anything like the same extent. Aerial prey means little to them. Worms, small snails, slugs and other crawlers at or just below the surface are what their beady eyes seek. Cool wet conditions benefit the blackbird's food so the young are well placed. From July, there has been a succession of juveniles learning their trade, though for as long as they can get away with it they tread on the parental heels, begging, wheedling, fluttering their wings in mock helplessness.

The same circumstances should fit song and mistle thrushes, although since the singing season ended I have seen very few of them. They tend to prefer woods to gardens. My impression is that local numbers have held up well in a period of pronounced national decline going back twenty years.

Owls will not have had an easy time, perhaps falling between swallows and blackbirds in stress. Barn owls tend to be hedgerow and field haunters, and are easily bedraggled by heavy rain, so losing some of the floating nature of their flight. Of particular value to them are mice and voles, which run in pastureland; but being small they are hidden from view, so barn owls have developed a wonderful ability to locate by sound. Prolonged heavy rain makes successful listening very difficult, since it baffles the sounds of scuttering rodents.

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Tawny owls are found widely in Bradway, and are much more a woodland hunter, though once again, targeting the rodents that rustle through fallen leaves and twigs. Birds are also on the prey list, but are less important. Again, pinpointing scurrying mice by sound is the key, even though a tawny's night vision is much better than ours. A motionless mouse is unlikely to be perceived. Without a doubt, the sound of raindrops crackling into leaf litter has been only too frequent, and will have caused hungry nights for tawnies and short rations for their hatchlings.

Haunting the upper Sheaf Valley are little owls. They give a cat-like cry, very plaintive. Their diet is surprisingly like that of blackbirds, and they share a heavy reliance on worms. This doesn't sound very heroic for an owl, but it has allowed them to be less stressed by frontal weather.

From June to August's end, gardens locally have been sadly wanting in the larger and more obvious insects. March was, you might remember, glorious and greenfly mobs were abroad. The summer made them decline to winter proportions, and bees and those magical aeronauts the hover-flies were scarce. September arrived, and so did a few more butterflies, the large and small whites, a scattering of gatekeepers and meadow browns, speckled wings catching the light in Poynton Wood clearings.

Such a lack of insects made the survival of juvenile birds into adulthood a tricky business. Underweight youngsters in October have a greatly reduced chance of making it through to next year's breeding season.

We put up a fine new bird-table to replace the weather-wrecked skeleton. It has a curved roof and an enclosed and almost intimate feeding space, designed presumably to exclude large birds. All the birds ignored it for a week, a sensible enough attitude to the new and unknown. Let it bide a while, show its intentions.

Predictably, the wood pigeons were the first to have a go. They ate seeds off the roof, but it is smooth and slippy, and seeds were gleaned only with indignity. Two months later, and they can't get into the area under the roof; not for lack of effort, but they cannot twist in slow flight or hover in the manner required.

Encouraged, the smalls soon fed freely; tits, robin, dunnocks, chaffinch, nuthatch. The collared doves are much smaller than wood pigeons. Experiencing fewer roof problems, they seemed to find the smooth roof curves provoking, for I several times saw them mating there, quite unabashed to be observed. After, they sat side by side and preened companionably.

Getting into the table they have found perfectly manageable. The space is confined, but they cooperate well, being careful with their tails when turning round, and sharing the seed equitably. Altogether, collareds are civilised birds.

Feral pigeons are between collareds and wood pigeons in size. After some practice, they managed the downwards semi-circular flip from roof to tray; size seems to be the key to aerial skill in tight corners. They too are remarkably amiable and cooperative. Four will cram together and feed without mutual annoyance, squabbling or pecking.

Despite this agreeable character within the species (?), and a total absence of bullying of smaller birds, ferals are no soft push-over. They are routinely despised and regarded almost as litter rather than living beings; even keen watchers prefer to ignore them, refuse to accept their existence, deny that they are actually birds. Few records are kept of them, and local guides include hardly any breeding information, yet I think they are well worth watching.

For example, just occasionally a burly wood pigeon will try to throw its weight a feral's way. This happens on top of our table. The usual glares, standing tall, head-bobbings and beak jabbings always remove an equally large but lower status wood pigeon.

Not so the ferals. They retreat a few inches, but hold their roof corner, matching woodies glare – woodie persists, but feral is unyielding, and woodie, after several series of escalating moves, lets it go and pecks seed. If a feral shares table-space with a collared dove, on the other hand it never uses its size advantage to hog all the food for itself, though it will try to swallow the food more quickly than seems possible.

Next time the ferals are in your garden, instead of thinking, "oh, there's nothing around," watch them awhile. You won't find it a waste of time.

John Kirkman