

## **Parish Magazine Article August 2021**

### **The Good, The Bad and The Hairy** by Michael Blencowe of the Sussex Wildlife Trust

Once upon a time in the West Country. Dartmoor. August. High noon. A young boy wanders away from a family picnic. The sun beats down, buzzards cry and circle overhead. He is startled by a short, snappy rattle like bullets spinning in a revolver. Suddenly he is face to face with an amazing creature. A fly. But a fly like no other. The boy reaches for his camera - but he's too slow. With a rattle the fly launches itself into the air and is gone.

That first encounter with the hornet robberfly is one of my earliest and most vivid wildlife memories and had a huge impact on me. I searched through all my 'I-Spy' and 'Spotter's Guide' books but couldn't find anything that looked remotely like the beast I had seen. For years I believed I had encountered some weird, mythical beast and I vowed to hunt one down and photograph it to prove its existence. And they don't come much weirder than the hornet robberfly. There are 28 species of robberfly in Britain and the hornet robberfly is the leader of this wild bunch. At up to 28mm long, it's Britain's biggest fly with a dusty yellow abdomen giving it a hornet-like resemblance. It has huge oval black eyes and a big ginger beard, the overall appearance lying somewhere between an alien and Yosemite Sam. The rootin', tootin' robberfly is a ferocious critter, although they never bother humans. But a grasshopper's knees start knocking at the mere mention of its name.

Like all good western bandits, they'll wait on a high point in their long grass landscape until an unfortunate grasshopper wanders into their valley. Then, with their rattling, buzzing war-cry, they'll swoop down and snatch up their victim in their hairy legs. Hornet robberflies dispatch their prey with a lethal weapon - a sharp beak which pierces a grasshopper's tough armour and drains the very life from them. They lay their eggs on cowpats and their young bury into the soil where they hunt underground for three years before emerging as adults in late summer. Hornet robberflies are extremely rare and getting rarer; a vanishing memory of a bygone age when our countryside was truly wild and not sterilised by insecticides. I had to wait decades to see another hornet robberfly. I was drifting through the high plains of Sussex when I heard a rattle from behind me and I was instantly transported back to that little boy on Dartmoor. But this time I was ready. My hand tightened around my camera. Ready to draw, point and shoot as I turned to face an old friend. This August, organise a posse and head out into them-thar South Downs hills for a wildlife walk and see what varmints you can find.

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**Sussex Wildlife Trust is an independent charity caring for wildlife and habitats throughout Sussex. Founded in 1961, we have worked with local people for over half a century to make Sussex richer in wildlife.**

**We rely on the support of our members to help protect our rich natural heritage. Please consider supporting our work. As a member you will be invited to join Michael Blencowe on our regular wildlife walks and also enjoy free events, discounts on wildlife courses, *Wildlife* magazine and our Sussex guide book, *Discovering Wildlife*. It's easy to join online at [sussexwildlifetrust.org.uk/join](https://sussexwildlifetrust.org.uk/join)**