

Parish Magazine Article July 2022

Hobby by Michael Blencowe of the Sussex Wildlife Trust

Recently I've spent a lot of time on the beautiful West Sussex heaths, where I've been lucky to encounter an animal which always gets my heart beating as it speeds past; the Hobby. Around about now, high in a twiggy tree-top nest, two eggs will be laid. The proud parents have flown all the way from the Congo Basin to raise their family in the Sussex countryside.

Hobbies look debonair and dashing. With their black 'eye mask' and drooping 'moustache' there's a touch of Zorro about them. And, like that enigmatic swordsman, Hobbies are famed for their speed and dexterity. Superficially the Hobby looks similar to the Peregrine, which along with the Kestrel makes up the trio of falcons that breed in Sussex. But Peregrines are very different birds. They started raising their families way back in April and adult Peregrines are up to four times heavier than a Hobby. Peregrines hunt by putting their weight behind their attack, whereas Hobbies use aerial agility and acceleration; the ninja to the Peregrine's sumo. The Hobby's slender scimitar wings slice the air as they twist, turn and tumble to pluck their victims from the sky in their talons.

These victims are the reason for the Hobby's 4,000 mile journey from Africa, and for their late egg-laying. The birth of the hungry Hobby chicks is perfectly synchronised with their food supply, which is most abundant in Sussex skies in July and August. Hobbies specialise in catching the uncatchable; swallows, martins, swifts and dragonflies - all accomplished aviators themselves, who probably thought they were invincible whilst airborne. Watching a Hobby hunting is watching an accomplished predator at work.

If you've been on a wildlife walk with me you've probably already heard my favourite piece of Hobby trivia. In 1946 Mr Adolph of Langton Green, Kent had an idea. Presumably, with a name like that, the preceding seven years had been a tough time for Mr Adolph, but now he was free to unleash his incredible invention upon the world; a game which involved flicking wobbly model footballers up and down a tabletop. This game, he insisted, would be a great hobby for boys and he named his invention just that: 'Hobby'. But when it came to registering the name, the Patents Office said that 'Hobby' was too general a term. Instead, Mr Adolph took the scientific name from his favourite falcon. And so the agile Hobby (*Falco subbuteo*) became forever linked to wet Saturday afternoons flicking headless Crystal Palace midfielders around the dining room.

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. 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. It's easy to join online at sussexwildlifetrust.org.uk/join