

January – a moving experience

After several years of early nights on New Year's Eve in order to rise before dawn for my usual birding drive to Norfolk, I promised my wife Nessie a traditional evening of festivity. Of course, this would involve enough alcohol to preclude driving anywhere the following morning (and longer than that if I had my way), but logic suggested there were no birds to be seen on that day that would not wait for the next. Ten o'clock on the 1st of January 2002 found me helping with scrub clearance on the local nature reserve at Batford Springs, near Harpenden, with my friend Richard Bromilow. The hard physical labour was good for my hangover, and I felt in fine spirits in doing something worthwhile. During a break from our toils, we ate some very welcome sausage sandwiches, and a Kingfisher delighted us with a sapphire and ochre fly-past. All was well in a world that would change dramatically for me over the coming months. Nessie not only got her traditional New Year's Eve but also a very jolly New Year's Day – the merriment lubricated by the oils of Harpenden's Cross Keys pub. Consequently, my car, an L-reg. Ford Escort, which I sentimentally nicknamed The Enterprise, sat lonely in space dock until the 3rd of January. This was clearly not a good way to start a birding year after telling everyone that I was going to try to win the annual competition to see the most species. Like Mohammad Ali, I was talking up a good fight; unlike him, I was not coming up with the goods.

By the 11th of January we were living in Sculthorpe, a small village on the outskirts of Fakenham, Norfolk. (On entering Sculthorpe, one can see the result of some wag's sense of humour who has made the 'c' into an 'o' which now reads 'Soulthorpe'. Does this mean a searching of the soul, I wondered?). Very quickly it became clear that Norfolk is a long way from many of the local sites that I used to frequent. It would be necessary to adjust my birding schedule to accommodate the fact that for the first week or so I would be based in Hertfordshire but not thereafter. Consequently, it would be financially astute to visit places around my present home before moving – not to mention those in Wales and the south-west of England. The journey to the Welsh choughs of Strumble Head, about five miles north-west of Fishguard, was simple from Harpenden, yet a long and awkward way from Sculthorpe. Moreover, there was the small matter of a Redhead (duck, not lady) on the way.

Kenfig, in south Wales, is a place I had never visited before, and what a shame the weather on the 3rd of January was so appalling. The wind that day was truly lazy and very rude. It barged its way straight through you, rather than having the good manners to go around. How much more cruel it was for my long-standing birding pal Jason Chapman who missed seeing the Redhead despite enduring the conditions for longer

than was civilized. The bird was uncivilized too, as it seemed to possess the pagan ability to make itself slim enough to hide behind a single reed stem. Maybe this is why it was only the second one of its kind ever recorded in Britain. Although Nessie and I saw the dastardly duck, we hoped to have time to call back on our return journey to give Jason another chance; alas, it was not to be.

I respect Jason's abilities as a birder but, more importantly, I admire his eminently sensible attitude. Unlike one birder that I once met who sulked all the way home because he missed a bird and consequently ruined the day for everyone, Jason simply shrugs his shoulders and in his deep Welsh brogue makes his disappointment known – and then moves on efficiently and happily to the next bird. What good company he is, and how I wish that more were just like him. On this occasion, his perseverance was rewarded by a lugubrious Bittern, which I did not see, sailing over the reeds. Perhaps like the Bittern, I wish that I could say I enjoyed Kenfig but cannot, as the weather made it an altogether unpleasant experience. Unlike the bird, though, we had hot coffee and warm transport to escape that foreboding place. As I looked into my rear-view mirror I half expected to see it, sitting beside Jason on the back seat but, for reasons known only to bitterns, it preferred to stay behind. Did it too miss seeing the Redhead and needed to stay a little longer? One day I may go back and gain more favourable impressions but I doubt it as the desire is not there. Jason and I still argue about the merits of Kenfig, as he loves the place. It is the only thing we have ever argued about, and I suspect he will win in the end.

Strumble Head was altogether different. Instead of a skulking duck we were treated to Choughs, performing aerobatics amid a sunlit wind and below them the animated sea swarmed with gulls, auks and even the occasional stately Gannet. A Rock Pipit provided small brown interest. The journey home offered a Lesser Yellowlegs and an Iceland Gull, but fatigue amongst my travelling companions overcame my personal needs and ambitions. True, neither bird had been recorded for a few days and they may well have left, yet I felt sure this decision would be rued. Much later in the year it was, but at the time the welfare of my passengers had to come first. Jason and Nessie are not ones for birding regrets, and at that stage neither was I. How things were to change.

Looking back at my diary, I find it was several days before my next birding trip. My short-term memory never serves me well, yet if pressed, I'm sure I could find a convincing excuse for this lapse, and perhaps the impending move to Norfolk will satisfy the reader. Those of you who know Lee Evans will doubtless be aware of his boundless enthusiasm and energy. For several years I had been bewildered and bewitched by this and, when we met on the 11th for a day's 'local birding', even I was surprised by his intensity. We raced (as fast as The Enterprise could race) from site to site, gathering one 'year tick' after another; Hertfordshire one minute, Essex the next..., then into Suffolk. By the end of the day I was almost dizzy, but my notebook was full. At Lea Valley Park in

Hertfordshire we saw two Bitterns and a Water Rail from the now famous bittern watchpoint, and at Abberton Reservoir in Essex there was yet another Bittern, Tundra Bean Geese and Bewick's and Whooper Swans.

Lee wasn't letting on at the time but he obviously had a specific goal in mind that day. For anyone present, it was a salutary lesson in how to achieve it, and I was a willing pupil. The roles of Master and Underling were clearly defined, and so I was very pleased to find a Ring-billed Gull that had eluded Lee in Suffolk. It was my only contribution aside from driving to exhaustion. Whilst at the Lea Valley Park, I watched Lee play with the Mute Swans that were begging for food, and it was obvious to me how much he loved birds. On that day I firmly believed that this is his major motivation in seeking birds and not the mindless acquisition of ticks of which he is often accused. The hungry white swans did not appreciate his games and they went away for the want of some bread.

Bedfordshire, Middlesex and Hertfordshire provided Nessie and me with their usual delights before our own personal migration to Norfolk. The Ring-necked Parakeets were particularly quarrelsome at Wraysbury in Middlesex; perhaps it was the fog, which was ever present that day and which also grounded several Red-crested Pochards, Smews and Goosanders at the Herts. and Middlesex Wildlife Trust reserve at Stocker's Lake. The latter three birds were not reported again as they presumably moved on. I wonder if our parakeets found peace too? Somehow I doubt it. These birds are maligned and mocked by many birders, particularly those who, with some justification, dislike the introduction of foreign species. To a degree I fall into this category myself: I particularly loathe introduced predators such as mink and domestic cats and also those huge submarine-like carp which now patrol so many of our lakes, canals and rivers. Small mammals, amphibians, birds and many of our native fish, such as Roach and Rudd, cannot cope with the predation and competition that these aliens bring upon them. However, perhaps hypocritically, I must say that I love the parakeets. They have a silliness about them which is similar to puffins but without the pathos of that species. They are comedians in the mould of the late Tommy Cooper (1922-1984) who would try so hard to be taken seriously but inevitably fail in the most hilarious way. They always make me smile on a chill January afternoon – 'Just like that!'

I hate shopping, especially when it involves indecision and parting with large amounts of money. A visit to a pine furniture shop with Nessie seemed destined for misery. We had by now moved to Norfolk, and domestic responsibilities were surely cramping my style. We had a house, but to create a home would involve the complete attention of both my bank manager and me. My patience was guaranteed; the bank manager's was not. Eventually, I ended up with a 'nice' kitchen and the sight of a few Bramblings at the same time. Nessie and I discussed our latest purchase over a stale cup of coffee and a fag in the shop's car park. Those Bramblings were certainly the most expensive tick of

the year. As if to comfort me, a Lesser-spotted Woodpecker flew alongside the car on our homeward journey – homeward to Sculthorpe, not to Harpenden.

This new route was going to take some getting used to. Over the next few weeks, the adjustment became easier with sightings of all the winter specialities Norfolk had to offer that year. Taiga Bean Geese, Ross's Goose, a chip-eating Rose-coloured Starling and a Rough-legged Buzzard were now close to home and saved me a fortune in petrol. Shorelarks, Common Cranes, Snow Buntings and Barn Owls were by now becoming almost daily pleasures, and a King Eider at Wells-next-the-Sea provided an enigmatic diversion.

Of course, after living in Harpenden for nearly twenty-five years, homesickness and doubt were inevitably going to raise their ugly heads and I would be deluding myself if I said I was entirely happy at that time. I missed my local pub – The Cross Keys – and all its characters and I missed the relationships that had evolved over so many years. In birding terms, Lee had once suggested that I was 'The Boss' in Harpenden. I was not The Boss but there was now no doubt in my mind that I was 'The Catalyst'. One telephone call put things into perspective. I had just returned from a visit to a raptor-roosting point on Norfolk's north coast where I was delighted by Hen and Marsh Harriers, a Peregrine and a Merlin. I called Jason to relate my tale, and he was enthralled. On hearing the site was only fifteen minutes from my house, I believe there was uncharacteristic envy in his sigh. Few of my friends from Hertfordshire saw these birds as they no longer had someone to urge them to make the trip. Their 'Catalyst' had gone.

I am something of a 'technophobe' and pay little attention to the ever-shrinking world of electronic communication. Of course, I am aware of the Internet but, until recently, I thought it was a fancy piece of fishing equipment. I was equally certain the Worldwide Web was something to do with large spiders and that 'Dot Com' was a character in the TV programme EastEnders.

One phenomenon that did intrigue me though, was the Internet league table for year-listers on 'Surfbirds'. Apparently, my total for the year 2001 exceeded that of the top twitcher in the aforementioned league. If this year I was to 'go for it', should I take part in the public circus? The answer from Jason was blunt, persuasive and difficult to deny. Hence, I suddenly appeared on the scene as if a newcomer. From now on, Jason was to keep me updated with the entire 'going-on's' in what I was to discover to be a minefield of intrigue and egotism. At least I found out what had driven Lee so hard on our last day out. He claimed to have broken the calendar month record for the UK with 221 species in the first 31 days of the year. This was an astonishing achievement, which I doubt will ever be beaten and is testament to Lee's determination. Some doubted his integrity and, in return, he doubted theirs. In my naivety I was determined to remain friends with everyone – including him. Either way, it did little for my confidence and, for the first time, I was aware that I was playing with the big, bad boys. No more hiding behind the bike

sheds with a crafty fag; no more lunchtime beers; it was 'game on'. My score for the month was a poor 164. I was 'the weakest link'.