

Parish Birds-Seventy Years Of Change-Common Buzzard

We continue this series including some more recollections from Paul Marten and Clive Poole.

The bird we commonly call “Buzzard” is properly named Common Buzzard (*Buteo buteo*) to distinguish it from several much rarer members of the buzzard family occasionally found in Britain.

The Buzzard is now a familiar bird in Danehill, Chelwood Gate and Pippingford, soaring and circling above farm fields, woodland, heaths and valleys. But it was not always so. This buzzard species, like so many other raptors, was heavily persecuted almost to extinction by farmers and especially by gamekeepers in southern and eastern England in the 19th and 20th centuries. Botanist, William Borrer recorded only 7 birds in Sussex in the period from 1841 to 1877, 6 of which were shot!! That says it all. The last known breeding pair in Sussex was on Ashdown Forest in 1882. They then became extinct locally.

The natural habitat of the Buzzard is a mosaic of deciduous woodland, fields, heaths and valleys; an undulating countryside so typical of East Sussex, not least this parish. These birds tolerate a damp or dry climate. They had been absent from our skies, not because of climate change or loss of suitable habitat, but because of the intolerance of some farmers, and from the 1840s when large-scale pheasant shooting on estates became fashionable until around the 1990s when more enlightened attitudes to birds of prey started to emerge.

Buzzards have a slow digestive system, like Kites and Vultures, and unlike hawks and falcons will often eat, at their leisure, carrion, dead or discarded shot pheasants as well as sick or injured small mammals. Whilst they can cope with live young



rabbits they find it difficult to handle full grown ones or adult pheasants so are rarely a threat to game-keeping activities. Their beaks are not sufficiently powerful to break open the skin of large mammals. Buzzards in England do not migrate due to our (relatively) mild winters, but when food is scarce they will be forced into scouring the ground for earthworms etc.

Until the 1950s the nearest population of Buzzards was in the New Forest with a very few pairs in the extremes of West Sussex. Paul Marten remembers the re-introduction of Buzzards in Pippingford Park, Ashdown Forest, which ran through the 1970s and 1980s with just 1 pair hanging on till around 1987. These died out to be followed by a second re-introduction scheme on the Forest between 1994 and 1998. At the same time, due to more enlightened attitudes by increasingly more shooting estates coinciding with an increase in the rabbit population after mixomatosis and reduced use of organochlorides the natural population of Buzzards in Dorset & Hampshire was able quickly to reoccupy its old territories in Sussex. Paul recollects Buzzards re-colonising suitable woodland and farmland in the parish between 2010 and 2012.

On his arrival in Chelwood Gate in 2006 Clive Poole recalls seeing no Buzzards whatsoever in the parish. Yet within a few years these majestic birds of prey could be seen on warm days soaring and wheeling high on thermals above fields and village gardens, emitting their evocative eerie flight call. What a wonderful success story for nature when left to itself.

Clive Poole