

## To sound like a demented mouse?

I was walking from work one glorious summer evening, along the seafront between Newhaven and Seaford - a nature reserve called Tide Mills. Skylarks were singing on the Downs side, when I was stopped in my tracks, seeing a huge bird gliding over this terrain. From a distance, I could see it came to rest on a post, half a mile further on! I quickly deduced that if I discreetly passed it by, I could quietly run along the lower end of a sand dune type embankment, before popping up adjacent to it. So, I dropped the briefcase (there were not many people around in this land/sea margin), bent over nearly double and 'voila' the bird of prey! I was however initially disappointed, as it was an owl, when I was expecting a Hen Harrier or something of that ilk, but it was an owl I had not seen before. On researching at my 'digs' I discovered it was a short-eared owl Asio flammeus. I was quite pleased with my field study skills though, which were being rehoned after being dormant for many years while being immersed in young family life. I was also in a reflective mood, between moving counties - Kent to Sussex. This other journey I was reluctantly contemplating was as an 'absent father', the legal term for the parent who lives away, which I hated, even though it was physically right. So, I was grateful for nature's solace.

Eventually, I bought a small farm labourer's terrace house, in a hamlet, in the Ouse Valley just south of the county town of Lewes. I learned more about these owls 'overwintering' (they nest in moorlands further north in the UK), and their distant relatives the barn owls Tyto alba, on my patch of the valley. They would only appear in the Ouse Valley when one of their main food sources - the field, or short tailed vole - was not abundant in other valleys. Rising early at the weekend, on a very wintery morning, was the best way to see them. If you walked to the scruffy grass edges near the river, stood as stationary as a fence pole, or even leant against one to blend in, with binoculars at the ready, you could be rewarded with this owl focussing on the grass as it nearly stalled in flight, like a giant moth. Eventually big yellow eyes would stare up at you, rapidly 'turning on a sixpence', it continues quartering vole territory, with it's beautiful brown striated feathering beating into the distance.

I shared many a wildlife encounter like this one, with a Church Warden friend, who though a builder/roofer by trade, was a very knowledgeable mature countryman. One day when discussing owls, he said "If you hold your fist to your mouth and make a kissing sound, like a demented mouse, the owl will fly towards you." Later on, I was having a solitary walk, in particularly high spirits having had something to celebrate but there was not a lot to see. I had only gone about three quarters of a mile when, wow! a short-eared owl silently appeared close by! I had not seen one so far from the river before. I remembered the conversation with the warden and immediately started kissing the back of my hand, straight away the owl reacted by kinking its flight towards me! It actually flew right over looking down, before turning and coming back again. On return it even made a mock lunge at me, that was when I thought how wise is this? By pretending to have a mouse as bait, to a creature that had all that arsenal at its disposal, in the form of a pair of talons, it was not without risk. Instinctively I stopped and the owl, by this time quite confused, came to rest across a small dyke in a field about 10 metres away. Still looking at me, it ruffled its feathers information gathering, before departing on its quest for some real prey.

Occasionally I find a pellet on a post or a stile. A pellet is just the regurgitated dry remains that the Owl or other Bird of Prey could not digest - bits of feathers, small bones, etc. I find them fascinating as they are a little capsule of evidence into what the creature has been eating, but I am aware not everyone is enthusiastic about them. They don't smell and children love to take them apart, with tweezers in a tray with some hot water. If you find any miniscule bones or even a small skull, you can have great fun identifying which vole, mouse or small bird it has had for supper.

There is a sequel to the above close encounter with a short-eared owl. I have lived in the same house for over 20 years and 'dandered' around my patch while volunteering for the BTO's survey - Bird Atlas 2007-2011 - covering an area of 16 square kilometres. I was aware that I veered off the beaten track or public rights of way. I have met a few tenant farmers and even hunters, and believe good communication and honesty are best. A symbiotic relationship can be formed, where I have reported any beasts in trouble, like cattle stuck in the dyke, and they put up with my trespassing. However, there are

limits: the hunters have been generous in their offerings to me - a semi-vegetarian - by saying, "help yourself to a 'brace of wood pigeon' for supper, stacked at the end of the lane." We share an interest in the same species, however I would not go as far as telling them where I had seen the last snipe! This particular winter, there were reports that about 6 short-eared owls were patrolling regularly in the valley. They had been seen nearly every evening in the area of the next village, so I thought I would have an extra walk on 'my patch'. There were more Owls than I had ever seen before. Though the Owls were not close, I started the hand kissing gestures, which if anything had the opposite effect! I was in the middle of disturbing them, when something made me turn my binoculars towards the village. My solitude evaporated as I saw an array of telescopes all trained in my direction. The spotter had become the spotted.