



## Mentmore Parish Council

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### Wildlife 2012

## Autumn 2012

*Words and Photos By Steve Thomas*

Sometime you just get lucky. I'd been wondering what to write about in this seasonal update, as it seems to have been a busy period for me which hasn't left much time to keep an eye on the local wildlife, and nagging myself that I must get down to it this weekend. Today was the day to get on with it, and inspiration hadn't come. Then we came into the house after a short walk, made a pot of tea, and what should we see sitting on a tree stump on our patio some 2-3 metres from the house but a beautiful female sparrowhawk.

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Female Sparrowhawk

Now sparrowhawks aren't exactly regular denizens of patios, so perhaps a word of explanation is in order. Our patio isn't exactly typical – you won't find a barbecue, for starters, and there's a corner of it in which the paving stones have long since vanished under rotting logs, moss and overhanging greenery. Or at least, the greenery used to overhang. I've cleared it recently, and opened up visibility to the peanut feeders and water dishes which attract a regular crew of garden birds as well as a thriving family of bank voles. It would seem the sparrowhawk's beady eye has spotted the source of potential prey, and she must have come down to suss it out. She didn't seem to have caught anything – she was sitting nicely posed when we first saw her, but I can attest that there seemed to be no blood on beak or claws (and what claws!) so the fact that she stayed for several minutes seemed to indicate more a desire to case the joint than a serious attempt at a meal.



Bank Vole

This whole incident brings into sharp focus (pun slightly intended) the whole debate around how we humans view predators. Indeed, broadening it a little, how we view animals generally. It's generally acknowledged to be a fine thing to put food out for garden birds, and indeed there's a whole supply industry providing peanuts, sunflower kernels, fat puddings, and more types of feeder than you could shake a stick at. That's OK for our feathered friends who eat vegetable matter. Those same supply organisations will sell you live bait too, typically mealworms which are, for example, much-loved by robins. So it's OK to feed the live young of one species to another, then – heck, they're 'only' insects.

Take it up a level and the whole feeding station exercise for garden birds becomes, equally, a feeding station for their predators. By definition, feeding stations attract garden birds. And guess what a congregation of small garden birds attracts. Yup, their predators. But are you comfortable watching the blue tits, dunnocks, robins etc. which you have attracted to your garden, at some level as an act of kindness, being killed and eaten by a sparrowhawk? I suggest probably not. But does the sight of a top predator generate a stronger "wow" reaction than the sight of a whole squadron of, say, blue tits? I suggest it does. In this case it certainly left my better half practically shaking with excitement.

It seems to me that we do, as a species, imbue members of other species with our own characteristics. It's particularly acute with predators – foxes are thought of as "sly", birds of prey often cold ("hawk-eyed" isn't a warming

description), while robins, for example are "cheeky". In fact that doesn't begin to describe how aggressive they are – they appear warm and companionable to humans simply because to them we represent a source of food and they are mean and aggressive enough to be the first to get it. But now I'm falling into the same trap myself by calling them "mean"; in reality few wild animals show what we would recognise as emotion and certainly none have any sense of moral values. It's just about instinct and survival.



Female Sparrowhawk

At this point, in fairness I have to acknowledge that I have heard and seen these arguments better presented than I ever could, and if you're interested in looking at the issue in more detail I can do no better than recommend this [book](#), a signed copy of which graces our own shelves. It was written about five years ago now but the arguments haven't changed and the accompanying photography is, quite simply, first class. And no, I'm not on commission!

So I invite you, as you think about putting out food for birds (or indeed other animals) over the coming winter to give a moment's thought to whether you are also, directly or indirectly, also helping those which prey upon them, and whether you think that's a good or a bad thing. After all, an ecosystem's health

is by one measure at its best when there is room for its top predators (and I exclude man!). Whether that be sparrowhawks, buzzards, red kites (scavengers rather than predators, but it's a fine line), tawny owls – all in and around the parish in good numbers – their very presence is encouragement that something is working along the food chain. Your peanut feeders are a small part of that chain and maybe something we can all give back. I for one will celebrate seeing small birds taken by hawks as a good and healthy thing for the whole ecosystem, even though we know it's not pretty and it is of course terminal for those preyed upon.

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