



# She swoops, she scores

In the first of a weekly series exploring our birds of prey, **Mark Cocker** examines the hobby, a falcon of elegance and rapacity that can snatch swallows in flight and catch bats after dusk

**H**OBBY is a rather strange name for this wonderful bird, although it apparently bears no relationship to the human sort of 'hobby'—the personal pastime. Yet those of us of a particular vintage may recognise sporting connotations in the falcon's scientific name, *Falco subbuteo*, because it was once a popular children's board game based on football, the creator of which was said to love this particular bird of prey.

Subbuteo may now be unfamiliar, but hobbies themselves go from strength to strength. The British breeding population has increased at least 20-fold since 2000 and this almost certainly underestimates the total, which ranges from Cornwall to Co Durham. Some suggest the figure could be as high as 5,000 pairs, which is astonishing when you realise that, in 1970, the national total was put at 81 pairs.

## 'A hobby's life could entail 24 journeys back and forth to Africa'

The bird shares some of the peregrine's swept-back, scythe-like wing-shape, as well as the deep-grey upperparts and black 'hangman's hood' over the face. However, hobbies are smaller, with rich rusty undertail coverts that distinguish them from all other British falcons. As with almost all raptors, the males are substantially smaller than their mates and it is larger females that probably account for some of the more impressive prey items. These include woodcock, cuckoos, great spotted woodpeckers and, in Europe, young hoopoes.

It is a suite of smaller birds that speaks most eloquently of the species' hunting prowess. The hobby will readily take meadow pipits or skylarks amid their song-fighting displays, but it is also among a global elite of raptors that is able to snatch swifts and swallows in flight. Equally impressive—and reflective of a crepuscular lifestyle—is the hobby's habit of catching bats after dusk.

A factor that may help to explain the bird's range expansion is a willingness to feed on large invertebrates, especially dragonflies, which have themselves spread widely as a consequence of climate change. Watching



Look out below: the hobby will glide beneath its prey, stop in mid air and strike upwards


a hobby chase these insects is an absolute joy. The birds are long-winged and their flight action lithe and easy. They can soar in slow, widening circles, creating a sense of effortlessness, which can shift in an instant to murderous intent. It is that almost paradoxical blend of elegance and rapacity that is the signature quality of the species.

The technique commonly deployed to catch dragonflies or large day-flying moths involves a hobby gliding down at speed. Suddenly, with a chopping wing beat, the falcon stalls and throws its undercarriage forward, so that, in the moment of contact, the bird comes from below, seizing the insect feet first as it rises. The only brief inelegance occurs as the prey is transferred from talon to beak.

The hobby then rows away with renewed deep beats, when all grace is restored and the discarded wings of the insect tumble earthwards as glittering flakes. At places such as the RSPB's Lakenheath reserve in Suffolk, up to 20 hobbies will gather to feed like this on spring and autumn migrations.

Traditionally, it favoured heathland or open farming country in the Home Counties and Midlands, but the bird has recently adapted to life in the heather-dominated uplands of northern England. Breeding pairs always

require tall trees in which to nest and a major prerequisite in any habitat is the presence of abandoned crows' nests. Hobbies don't build a structure of their own, as they need a pre-made platform on which to lay their eggs. One intriguing consequence of this dependence on crows is the hobby's willingness to nest in the semi-suburban landscapes to which the corvids are attracted.

The bird's reliance upon insects may partly account for its migratory lifestyle. Come October, the entire British population, as well as that breeding across a swathe of Eurasia, drains down into sub-Saharan Africa. One of the strategies used by these formidable aerial predators is to follow rainstorms as they circulate through that continent. In turn, seasonal downpours unleash the nuptial flights involving billions of termites, a mainstay of hobby survival. The species has been proven to survive up to 12 years, which would entail 24 journeys back and forth over Europe and Africa, as well as a lifetime's odyssey spanning hundreds of thousands of miles. 

Mark Cocker is a naturalist and multi-award-winning author of creative non-fiction. His latest book, *'One Midsummer's Day: Swifts and the Story of Life on Earth'*, is out in paperback (Vintage)