



Throwing caution to the wind

Spring is the time to see the muscular and noble goshawk, usually as elusive as a ghost circling and swooping through the sky

FEW of our birds of prey are more difficult to see than the goshawk (*Accipiter gentilis*). Part of this challenge is simply being able to separate it from the more numerous, but smaller sparrowhawk. On paper, the two look radically different. Big female goshawks can weigh more than 4lb (2kg) and have a wingspan of 5ft (1.6m), which is longer even than a common buzzard's. They can be as much as 10 times the weight of a small male sparrowhawk.

On average, all goshawks are bigger, broader-winged birds with thickset bodies. They possess a heavy, rounded chest that reinforces the impression of muscularity and power. Yet closer inspection can be necessary: the two species overlap and the largest female sparrowhawks are actually larger than some goshawk males.

‘Goshawks were valued because they combined fierceness with tractability’

What really makes a goshawk hard to see is its blend of sheer speed and inherent caution. They are widespread in Britain, particularly north and west of a line from the River Severn to the Tweed, where there are an estimated 1,200 breeding pairs. In all places, they are lovers of deep woods and spend most of their time within the canopy, dashing along rides or weaving through the trees, using shock tactics to flush and catch prey. In Europe, goshawks can sometimes occupy heavily urbanised places, but remain invisible to the public. There is a celebrated colony in downtown Berlin, Germany, and, although it might be the scourge of the city's pigeon flocks, its human neighbours remain blithely unaware.

The species is particularly partial to pigeon flesh, with some studies putting it as high as 60% of the entire diet. Yet goshawks have the power to overwhelm larger birds. Partidges, coots, mallards and even capercaillie—the latter three times the weight of its assailant—have all been recorded. I once saw a female retrieving an egret from a dyke, where the prey had fallen after the raptor



Check mates: the adult male goshawk (above) is about one-third smaller than the female

had struck. They will also adjust to more modest fare: squirrels, starlings, sparrows and beetles are fair game for males, which have only two-thirds the bulk of their mates.


For all their fondness for deep cover, goshawks will forgo their ghost status during the pre-breeding period. For a few spring weeks, especially on sunlit March mornings, they sail high over their territories, circling and swooping. The climax of these nuptial displays is when a male and female fly together, bonding in a deep-winged, slow-motion butterfly action that they alternate with passages of effortless soaring.

A mystery attaching to Britain's population centres on the precise nature of its origins. The word goshawk is a contraction of 'goose hawk', a title bestowed by medieval falconers. The name honoured the birds' formidable predatory powers, but goshawks were also valued because they combined fierceness with tractability. Even now, the scientific name is *Accipiter gentilis*: among falconers, it was the 'gentle' or 'noble' hawk.

There is no certain proof that those goshawks were sourced from wild stock and falconers could have imported them from the Continent. What we do know is that the species is hugely catholic in choice of habitat and has a wide range across three continents: Europe, Asia and North America. It is hard to believe

that these islands were not part of that hemispheric territory. We also know that, when the gun replaced the hawk as weapon of choice among the sporting fraternity, the species was widely persecuted and, by the late 19th century, it was indisputably extinct.

It seems likely that their recent restoration to these islands involved a combination of wild goshawks immigrating from Europe and local falconers' birds escaping from captivity. By the late 1960s, despite the scourge of DDT pesticides, egg collectors and illegal shooting, they had established embryonic breeding colonies.

This was especially so in south and central Wales, across the Breckland of Suffolk and Norfolk and in the Kielder Forest of Northumberland, where they benefited from the extensive conifer plantations established by the Forestry Commission. It is a mark of the goshawk's permanent place in our cultural life that, at those sites, they are now openly celebrated as special, if rather elusive residents. There are designated viewing spots where the public can go and try to catch a glimpse of goshawks in spring display.  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, £10.99)