

MARSH HARRIERS NEST AT SWINEHAM FOR THE FIRST TIME IN OVER 50 YEARS

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Harriers; I freely admit that I've always been hugely attracted by them - my wife and children would say obsessed, addicted even. I've watched the three British-nesting harrier species at length over many, many years and in all seasons, captivated by their stunning appearance, their deceptively effortless elegance in flight and their ruthless hunting efficiency. Mind you, to paraphrase a disingenuous Donald Watson reference to Hen Harriers that could arguably apply to the genus as a whole, they're slow moving and often easy to see for long periods, i.e., perfect for a lazy raptor watcher. His tongue was firmly in his cheek, of course, and the chances are that we've all marvelled at how a passing harrier can act as the drawn-out centre piece of the moment as it inches along a field margin or across a reedbed. And so, with all the above in mind, a Poole Harbour Marsh Harrier nest in summer 2013, the first there in over 50 years, proved irresistible and I watched it from start to finish.

My local harrier watching usually takes place from a high point overlooking the west end of the Harbour in order to enable panoramic views of the reedbeds. It's a long way from, say, Keyworth or Holton Heath, but it's surprising how quickly one comes to recognise individual harriers at considerable distance from their plumage characteristics or their behavioural traits. During summer 2013, of course, there were only two Marsh Harriers present for much of the breeding cycle so that distinguishing individuals was easy. I visited as often as I could, always at first light – weather permitting – and then again during the day, generally for between two and three hours.

So, what happened?

Despite distinctly chilly spring conditions the 2012/2013 wintering Marsh Harrier cohort had vacated the area early and sightings had become disappointingly spasmodic by early March with the west Harbour roosts fizzling out altogether by the middle of the month. And even when a one year old female settled in during early April to rekindle hopes of a prolonged summering presence it was initially assumed that this was the kind of solitary, immature non-breeder that had been a typical feature of the previous two years. As in 2012, this newly arrived individual quickly set about building a nest near the Frome outflow and then even began a second nearby – all without a male presence. That was about to change, however, as both a young male and a second female arrived as April morphed into May and things livened up at once, combative lunges and aggressive chasing becoming the order of the females' day as they competed for the male's attention. Appropriation of the newer nest by the insurgent female followed remarkably quickly and though the original bird attempted to stand her ground for a few days she then began to become more and more peripheral and was barely seen in the nesting area after the first week of May. That left two.

So far so good, but a crucial bonding indicator would be prey delivery to the female and, sure enough, on May 11th the young male arrived along Arne Moors with food that was shown at length to his potential partner before being passed to her on the ground at Swineham. Food drops directly into the general nest area then became regular with the arrival of prey items often followed by the pair disappearing below reedtop level for 30 seconds or more when it was assumed that copulation was taking place. Around the weekend of the 18th / 19th May the female suddenly started to become significantly less showy so that it seemed likely that she was beginning to lay eggs. Indeed, seeing her every day over the following few weeks whilst she incubated needed perseverance since the male continued to prefer to drop prey in to her rather than call her off the nest for an aerial food pass. She'd rise for a brief exercise circuit every few hours though the first bona fide pass wasn't seen until May 23rd – a clumsy affair that ended with the item retrieved from the ground. But practice makes perfect and the pair were soon faultless during the exchange process, the male proving himself to be a committed, skilful hunter throughout the cycle.

At the very beginning of June the male began to show signs of flight feather moult, its early onset suggesting a one year old bird – according to Dick Forsman rules – whilst the less-seen female's age had to remain more ambiguous. Her splashy cream frontage didn't necessarily denote a mature bird; in fact, her underwing seemed to show a remnant pale crescent at the base of her unmoulted upper primary flight feathers that would denote

another very young bird (see Aidan Brown's photograph below) – if so, it's all the more remarkable that purely instinctive nesting behaviour was to eventually produce a positive result.



Many of the prey items brought in by the male bird during the initial incubation period were small and held right back in his talons so that it was impossible to see what he was carrying from where I was watching though larger items dangled conspicuously below him as he flapped in towards the nest - long, trailing legs suggesting water birds found in a ditch or at the side of the Channel. At this stage the male rarely seemed to need to move far from the Arne Moors – Swineham – Keyworth curve where, apart from young nestlings and fledglings, other amphibian or mammal prey species must have been readily available and, with no competition from rival pairs, the early nesting scenario couldn't really have worked out better for them.

It seemed probable that June 21st – 23rd would be an odds-on bet for the onset of hatching since incubation of the first-laid egg generally lasts just under five weeks in good conditions ... but without access to the nest how would we know for sure? The answer would come once the female began to take food deliveries directly into the hatched young and this was duly observed for the first time on the afternoon of the 21st before becoming a routine feature until the chicks fledged. A great many local kills were seen over the course of the summer and, sometimes when this occurred at the early nestling phase, the male would feed himself briefly before passing to his mate who might or might not then feed further, the youngsters sometimes only receiving as a third option. As they grew, of course, they needed more and more so that the male – his sequenced flight feather gaps now suspended as he entered the most active section of the cycle – gradually moved further afield to hunt as demands on his provision rates grew. With his absences from the immediate area sometimes significantly longer than before, it was reassuring to recall both a John Day research project in the 1980s that had similarly recorded Norfolk-based Marsh Harrier males expanding their hunting areas hugely during the nestling phase and Henning Weis's extraordinary, prescient observations of the same from his studies in early 20th Century Denmark.

But rewind ... the female had continued to brood the vulnerable youngsters in their first week of life and, perhaps understandably, began to appear much more reluctant to rise and accept prey when the male arrived

– several passes only completed after he'd waited on for more than a minute above the nest – so that he briefly adapted to dropping food directly in to her for a while. By the 28th the female was seen to be hunting from time to time although she was forced to resume temporary brooding duty as the weather cooled noticeably at the beginning of July. Then, with the temperature warming again on the 4th, she disappeared up the Piddle valley for half an hour, her longest absence yet. Nor was it long before she felt sufficiently confident to be away for an hour or more, her own hunting sorties tending to produce bigger prey items than those caught by the male – I even saw her hook a Black-headed Gull off the water at Keyworth on one occasion! But that's not to decry the efforts of her partner, the sheer consistency of his continuing provision providing ongoing evidence, if any was needed, of a stellar hunting ability.

I'd pencilled in the last few days of July as likely first flight dates but had booked in my annual week on the Isle of Man to work with the local Hen Harriers there until the 26th, normally a high point in my harrier year. However, wonderful as that week turned out to be, I found myself continually thinking about how the Poole Harbour youngsters were developing and, on my return, although there was still no sign of fluttering wings above the reed top parapet, I immediately detected a development in that, sometimes, the adult birds wouldn't necessarily drop food straight in to the nest as before. Instead, they would fly to and fro above the young for some time with the item prominently displayed from lowered talons. I've seen this behaviour before at nests of all three UK harriers, its purpose presumably being to lure the nestlings up into the air. And this is precisely what happened early on the morning of the 28th when the female was met above the reeds by a pristinely-plumaged juvenile who received the package and crashed back into cover. For the next week or so single juveniles continued to be seen flapping and fluttering in the vicinity of the nest, the radius of activity inching wider by the day, although two weren't absolutely definite until August 3rd. Their playful chasing and diving was then to become a heart-warming daily feature, confidence growing by the hour, before they were joined in the air by a third fledgling from the 8th. As group flights dispersed further and further from Swineham over the following days and the birds began to make a tentative transition from dependency to self-reliance, it was heartening to look back on this local success story whilst, at the same time, recognising that the trio were now about to enter a new phase, a critical learning period during which a significant proportion of newly independent harrier juveniles die, either through starvation or accident – both the result of a lack of experience. Estimates from various research projects vary but as many as half of the year's young may not make it through to the following spring. However, let's not dwell overlong on the negative; let's trust instead that all three are already well on the way to adulthood.

In conclusion, thanks must go to Rod Brummitt who watched the nesting birds several times a week throughout, to Paul Morton who visited and reported back whenever his schedule allowed and to Aidan Brown for allowing me to use one of the always excellent photographs from his website. Perhaps it should also be recorded that debate regarding exactly when to circulate news of the unfolding event had revolved around understandable concern, not so much regarding pressure from birdwatchers but rather from other ill-informed or malicious parties – Marsh Harriers can be viewed as a threat to farmland game shoots since they will take young Pheasants and Partridges, for example, and there are several records in recent years of poisoned birds being found in the breeding season near to such areas elsewhere in the UK. Close to home, there had even been reports of a shot-damaged Marsh Harrier on the Somerset Levels during spring 2013. Enough said. But, for the moment, thankfully, the species continues its upward national trajectory with breeding numbers in the eastern UK almost at saturation point and nesting success now recorded as far north as Orkney. Whilst colonisation of the west has been slow to take effect, Dorset breeding success at Weymouth, and now Poole Harbour, must be seen as a significant step in establishing a bridgehead for the further expansion of the species. In the meantime, whilst the Marsh Harriers inch west, let's all hope that this highly attractive, most elegant hunter is about to become a regular breeding fixture within the wide Poole Harbour confines once again. The place is perfect for them and, all being well, there's no reason to doubt that we should be seeing several local pairs nesting together again within a very few years.