ONE HEN HARRIER`S WINTER IN POOLE HARBOUR

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I`ve watched Hen Harrier roosts within the Poole Harbour area since the early 1980s – admittedly on an occasional, visiting-the-in-laws basis to start with since we then lived elsewhere in the UK – but always with the assistance and kind support of Tasie Russell and, from further afield, of my friend and frequent field companion, the late Roger Clarke, who set up and then organised the national Hen Harrier Winter Roost Surveys. At that time Poole Harbour hosted greater numbers of the birds than anything seen in recent years and many of those historical roost sites have since fallen into disuse, or, at best, remain very fitfully occupied. Whilst the specific locations of those that remain are rightly kept confidential and as free from intrusion as possible, monitoring harrier roosts remains the best way to keep tabs on the relative health of a local population and, taking all due care to avoid disturbing them, I never tire of turning out, irrespective of weather, to watch these magnificent birds gather together at night and then set out on their day`s work in the morning.

In common with some other bird of prey species, Hen Harriers roost together in their winter quarters. There are various theories put forward to explain this communal behaviour, of which safety from night-time predation would appear to be the most obvious. The choice of ground cover that will protect them from, say, foxes is crucial of course, but the fact that they often settle close together is an added advantage, whereby an alarm call at perceived danger – a loud guttural chatter that can carry for long distances – raises group awareness at once. There may be a benefit too from information sharing with newly arrived individuals following experienced birds either in to the roost in the evening, or out of it towards proven hunting areas in the morning, as suggested by Donald Watson in his pioneering monograph on the species. For what it`s worth, I think that there can also be a social element to such gatherings. The Hen Harrier is a nomadic, usually solitary species by day in winter, so would it be too anthropomorphic to suggest that association prior to roosting is a necessary species-affirming feature, what Richard Mabey once memorably called “tribal cement”?

I had intended intensive cover of one particular Poole Harbour roost site during winter 2014/15 but, within a short time of it being occupied in autumn, my watching became still more polarised when I found myself following the fortunes of a specific bird, little realising at the time what an extraordinary, almost unique local status it would attain during the course of its stay. I first came across the harrier in question on September 25th; it`s always good to kick off the *cyaneus* season early and, with passage birds only irregularly recorded in the Harbour during the month, a dashing male ringtail – a bird of the year – was a welcome find as he careered over a bog in late afternoon sunshine. He opted to stay and roost there that evening although I half expected him to have moved on within 24 hours. Not so. He was still present as September morphed into October and he then

became an iconic late afternoon presence, his dashing, Sparrowhawk-like entries to the roost area often accompanied by one or two autumn Merlins buzzing around him, the falcons looking to pursue passerines disturbed by the approaching harrier. And catch they both did with the young harrier successful on no less than four post-sunset occasions during the month, hence his "borrowed" moniker in my notes – Attila the Hen, on account of his ruthlessness even so late in the day. An unusual roosting companion for the ringtail at this stage was a juvenile female Marsh Harrier that, for a week or so, preferred wet bog cover to the more typically used reedbed growth of Wareham Channel. Marsh Harriers do occasionally roost away from the Harbour edges for a night or two during passage periods but this was the first time that I`d recorded longer settling in this particular mire during winter. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the bird was back amongst her own peers by the 13th but, within 24 hours, Attila had been joined instead by an adult female Hen Harrier with the pair – suspected the previous evening – first proven together as they lifted at dawn on the 14th. They then remained to settle alongside each other for the rest of the month.

How does one recognise a young male against other ringtails? Certainly the slighter body, the shorter wings and the faster wingbeats can be valuable pointers though these are not always easy to detect in the field. However – and without wishing to suggest that this is necessarily a general feature – Attila could always be separated by his distinctive underwing when seen reasonably well. Compare the relative boldness of the wing barring of a female bird at Middlebere (seen above) with the fainter, more imprecise pattern of Attila (below & later). This lightness became increasingly apparent as the winter progressed and the male`s first, juvenile plumage grew more worn, so that I wondered whether it was reasonable to assume that his (generally) more animated flight action, with its implied greater wing usage, was likely to cause this depreciation in definition more quickly than in a slower, less energetic female? His rufous-tinged belly, such an obvious pointer to his youth in September and October, disappeared as a diagnostic tool relatively quickly though – conversely – a wintering juvenile female companion retained a definite reddish tinge to her underside, even relatively late in the winter. It was pertinent too that there happened to be just a single juvenile male on show in the Harbour throughout. Had there been two it might have been difficult to separate them.

But, back to the events of November, a month that proved busier with no less than four different harriers recorded at the roost alongside Attila, one of these being a dark-backed sub-adult male whose presence was occasional – a spell of a few days at the roost followed by a week or so away – this stop-start occupancy suggesting a rangy nature that included Poole Harbour, perhaps even Purbeck, as just part of a wider tour of duty. Happily, Attila didn`t share the same wanderlust and routine sightings continued on a daily basis as he forged around local nooks and crannies on either side of the Wareham Channel and its outlying heathland.

There was a significant development in the middle of December when I received an intriguing e-mail from Aidan Brown containing an attachment detailing the blown-up section of a photograph taken by him at Middlebere on the 20th that showed what he took to be a juvenile male ringtail with clear metal rings on both legs. Since Attila was the only bird fitting that gender description, it had to be him. A further selection of photographs taken a few days later was then found to display letters on the left ring that might be traceable (see the first photograph of the article). Various channels were alerted but nothing concrete came back to start with; there were rumours that he might be a continental bird and then the BTO suggested that he could have originated from Langholm, in southern Scotland. When I contacted Natural England`s Stephen Murphy, the go-to man regarding tagged Hen Harriers in the UK, his contacts were able to confirm that Attila had originated from a nest near Cowal in Argyllshire – just north of the Clyde – where five young had been ringed on July 1st 2014. So, he`d arrived in late September aged little more than three months!

He hadn`t been the first ringed Hen Harrier to be seen in the Harbour, however. Local ringing expert Kevin Sayer pointed me in the direction of a BTO recovery website that catalogued a juvenile male from a nest near Ballater in Aberdeenshire, found dead on Wytch Heath in November 1992, whilst another juvenile male from a one-off 2002 nest in Cornwall, presumably either wing-tagged or colour-ringed, was seen alive at Bestwall in May of the following year. Add to that a well-publicised satellite-tagged juvenile male from Bowland in Lancashire that flirted with the peripheries of Poole Harbour, e.g, Affpuddle, on a couple of occasions during winter 2010-11 and you have a clean sweep of local recoveries originating from the UK. Only four admittedly – including Attila – and not enough to make definitive judgements about the origins of all of our Harbour visitors, but you`d probably expect most wintering Hen Harriers from northern Europe to remain further east along the North Sea coast, again as proposed by Donald Watson in 1977.

As we approached Christmas it became increasingly obvious that Attila was maturing as a hunter. You`ll recall that he`d arrived as a furiously intense, bird-chasing dasher with few effective alternative strategies in the experience locker so that it was an education to watch him calming down and developing different approaches to finding prey as he matured over the course of the winter. Yes, he could still turn on the afterburners if they were required for a bird chase but by late

January he would regularly be seen quartering Arne Moors or Hartland Moor with a more restrained, measured tread during daytime hours, scouring the grasses to see what lurked hidden within. His success rate remained high too since he would often arrive to roost at night with a full, or fullish, crop – a bulge behind the throat that signified storage of a recent catch, prior to digestion.

Having survived the bass tremor of an all-night New Year`s Eve rave in an adjacent field, the local Hen Harriers began 2015 with no less than five birds roosting loosely together on the 1st. But there was a change in the air. Whereas, thus far, Attila had been able to settle as part of a small group, there was now a larger cohort involved and he began to roost either by himself or with a similarly youthful female, well away from the older birds. One theory that might explain this detachment involved the notion of juveniles being elbowed out of prime slots by birds higher up in the wintering hierarchy. It`s also worth bearing in mind that males have low status at the business end of a roost anyway, the larger females frequently seen displacing them from the ground and then taking their settling spot. If adult males are targets for muscling away, then it`s conceivable that inexperienced males may be still lower in the pecking order. So much for "tribal cement"!

February began in freezing conditions and Attila woke to thick snow for the first time in his young life on the 3rd although it scarcely seemed to matter to him as he set out for the killing fields as usual in determined flap-glide transit mode. By now he was settling consistently on his own, even to the extent of overflying gathering harrier groups on his way to a remote section of bog grass in the evening. He was also regularly leaving west in the morning and arriving back from the same direction so that it seemed likely that he was spending much of his day hunting around the Purbeck army ranges or down the Frome valley rather than around the Harbour as he`d done earlier in his tenancy.

Attila photographed by Aidan Brown at Middlebere (note again the poorly marked barring of his underwing)

But then came the inevitable seasonal coda, elegiac and wistful, as the roost began to thin out during March and the older harriers` more northerly nesting instincts kicked in, another winter survived. It wasn`t quite curtains for Attila, however, since inexperienced younger individuals will often stay a little longer once the adults leave – one juvenile male remained around the Harbour until May in 2013 – and, sure enough, he was still present when I returned from a few days in north Norfolk in mid-month, his now-distinctively bleached shoulders further evidence of ongoing feather wear prior to the onset of his first moult in early summer.

It looked as if the inevitable had happened on the morning of March 15th. Attila rose to preen and ready himself for the day on a post adjacent to his roost spot and, just before sunrise, he lifted and moved off west in methodical flap-glide mode. He didn`t return either that night or the following one so that I assumed that he`d gone. Wrong. Twenty minutes before dawn on the 20th he was rediscovered back on the same post-roost perch. Now reunited with the juvenile female at roost time, the pair continued to settle either together or within sight of each other until she left early in April to establish a neat symmetry to the Hen Harrier winter with Attila seeing out the final days of occupation on his own – just as he`d begun it back in September. His departure was finally confirmed on the 14th, a stay at an end after no less than 202 days. Let`s hope that he that made it back to Scotland – or wherever he chose – safely and that he`ll remember the winter pickings in Poole Harbour if he moves this far south again.

“But what`s the attraction of concentrating so intensively on one bird or even a single species over such a long period?”, some will ask, “Why? What`s it all about?” Let Mark Cocker explain; he put the attraction of such focused watching far more eloquently than I could:

“To have a relationship with a single species is different; you`re coming from left field. It is to experience an evolving narrative, each observation enabling a slight modification of a highly detailed schema; it will at best be an addition to the data bank; at worst, it will simply be consolidation of what is already learnt, further – though not incontrovertible – confirmation of an ongoing hypothesis. Gains are cumulative, built brick by brick at the birds` behest. You win some, you lose some. The process continues day to day, week to week, year to year; there is no end point. Nor does there have to be a “meaningful” moment to enliven a watch when each and every tiny aspect of behaviour is of interest in one way or another.”

Finally, I`m indebted to Aidan Brown whose outstanding photographs illustrate the piece, to Stephen Murphy and Dave Anderson, Attila`s ringer, who jointly provided the information that traced him back to Argyllshire, to Kevin Sayer for providing historical data and to my forbearing wife whose tolerance of my harrier-watching beggars belief. But, first and foremost, thanks to the bird himself. An absolute star.