



WHAT IS URBAN BIRDING?

It's Monday, early afternoon August Bank Holiday, 2002. I am at home in Notting Hill, a fabled district of west London beloved by the ladies that lunch and the Versace pram-pushing yummy mummy set, shrine to the worshippers of 'Notting Hill' the film and the general home to cool meedja luvvies. The sun is blazing and the temperature is tipping into the hotter side of hot. It had been that way for the previous week, which is unusual for England these days. During my infancy, we had proper scorching summers that lasted, well, the whole summer. The only spoiler to this afternoon's urban bliss was a small matter known as the Notting Hill Carnival that is making its presence felt literally through the very foundations of the building. The parade is outside noisily stampeding, albeit in slow motion, down my street. This sluggish, cacophonous river is dragging with it the associated litter, bad music and a crowd of jovial humans, some semi-dressed in questionable costumes. Elements within this baying, swaying mass seemed hell-bent on relieving themselves outside my front door. Yes, welcome to my August Bank Holiday world. Surely, this doesn't happen in Rio de Janeiro?



Call me a hater and you would probably be right. Living in the middle of its route usually drives me to escape for the weekend south to the Sussex coast to look for migrant Ring Ouzels. I had left those arrangements far too late this year, hence my presence within the mayhem. #badplanning.

I slink into the back of the house as the walls begin to reverberate with the particularly intrusive bassline of some nameless dodgy dance track. I gaze despondently through the French windows into the garden; a tiny walled affair, butting tightly onto the neighbours', covered throughout with patio slabs. You would be hard pressed to find a lick of green, but a movement caught my eye.

A male Grey Wagtail was busying itself feeding on small insects around the cracks of the slabs. As I gasped in shock at the sight of an essentially riverine bird happily feeding in my sterile inner city concrete garden, my eyes settled on yet another avian visitor. Perched on the upturned edge of one of the mini football goal posts was a Wheatear!

To the uninitiated, the Northern Wheatear, to give it its full name, is a summer visitor to the UK that is normally associated with wilder, more desolate terrain. And even though they regularly turn up on municipal grasslands and football pitches in urban areas on migration, this one was stretching even my broad expectations. It took one look at me and flew over the wall into a neighbour's yard.

Finding a species like a Wheatear in the middle of nowhere is the accepted norm, but to find one in the middle of somewhere in a place where you would least expect them? What other amazing birds await discovery right under our noses in our towns and cities?

I was born in Park Royal in West London, not a million miles away from Notting Hill, with an inbuilt fascination for natural history. Anything with a pulse and with the ability to move caught my attention. This fascination has grown within me with each passing day. I began to focus on birds by the time I was five and after being repeatedly told that wildlife is only to be found in the countryside, and with nobody willing to take me there, I had no choice but to become an urban birder. One of the main things that I learnt (but did not fully realize until much later) was that, in the main, birds don't turn up in our cities by accident. They are there because of the habitat that is available within our growing metropolises, as



Wheatear (male)



Nature can be nurtured anywhere.

these provide a haven, albeit an often disturbed and temporary one, that is forever under the omnipresent dark cloud of development.

Birds are everywhere – something I came to realize very early on. This is a phrase, and the idea, that will be repeated regularly within the pages of this book. We must remember that the notion of birds living in urban areas is by no means a recent thing. They have hopped and fluttered amongst us ever since the first societies were formed, the first brick laid, the first parking meter anchored and the first X-Factor audition held. My message is very simple: we all need to appreciate that wildlife not only occurs in our cities but it is here to stay. There is fabulous wildlife all around us and we need to encourage and conserve it in the places where it exists. Whether this be nurturing invertebrates within a tiny window box on the fifth floor of a block of flats, promoting small wild areas in our gardens, creating areas specifically for wildlife in our local parks, watching over a forgotten wild corner of our local neighbourhood or starting a green roof project. If we can learn about the importance of wildlife conservation in our cities then we will understand its connection in the general web of life on this planet, enabling us to reach out and strive to protect the rest of the world's fauna and flora and, ultimately, ourselves.

If we were to jump into Dr Who's Tardis and zip back in time we would discover that the early birders were upper class Victorian collectors who strolled the countryside in their tweeds brandishing guns and birch walking sticks. In those days the term 'birding' did not exist. People indulged in bird collecting – they 'procured' birds. This either meant shooting them in order to have them mounted and displayed in their country mansions or, if you were part of the poorer underclass, collecting finches effectively for the pet trade. Egg collecting was also rife and an accepted pastime that did not fall out of public favour until the 1970s. Thankfully, the creation of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds during the late 1800s paved the way for effective protection of our birds, eventually changing the face of birding forever.

During my lifetime birding has now become quite a fashionable pastime enjoyed by people from all walks of life up and down the country. Several contemporary celebrities have been outed and exposed by the media as bird watchers – or more usually as 'twitchers' – as the press like to call almost anyone wielding binoculars. People like Jarvis Cocker, Damon Albarn,



Goldfinch

Alex Zane and Guy Garvey from the band Elbow have all been mentioned, along with more expected suspects like comedian Bill Bailey and politician Kenneth Clarke. Notice that there are no women mentioned. Perhaps this illustrates the media's outdated perception that it is still a male-orientated pastime. Regardless, birding is no longer seen as the hobby of choice for weirdos. It has gone from exponents being called bird spotters, bird enthusiasts and bird lovers, phrases that I have little love for, to birdwatchers, twitchers and birders. The latter term being the sexiest title if you ask me.

My Icelandic birding friends have gone a stage further and call themselves Finders. I love that. But whatever you want to label yourself at the end of the day, watching birds has got to be about the enjoyment. If you just want to watch the birds coming to your feeders that's great. If you want to build up a list and learn as much as you can, well that is great too. There is no standard to reach, no target number of species to be seen, no standardized rulebook to follow, no level of knowledge to attain and examination to pass. Birding should be about sharing knowledge and enthusing others and not just about having the best bird lists or indulging in constant one-upmanship. That said, there is nothing wrong with listing, as the act of compiling all the species that you see is popularly called. I will cover that art later in this book. Regardless, it is all about improving your ability to see, hear and enjoy more birds in urban areas than you ever expected.

Birding has journeyed a long way since the first time our prehistoric ancestors gazed up to witness groups of birds flying over. Birds have graced our planet for a very long time: scientists have found evidence of their existence since the Mesozoic Era, a geological period some 252 to 66 million years ago. That was way before the creatures that were eventually to give birth to our kind crawled, flopped or perhaps even walked out of the sea. Back then the British Isles did not exist and life in general was very different. Fast-forward to the early days of human development and birds are already featuring in our lives. Not just as menu items



but also as objects of wonderment, praise and, dare I say, enjoyment. The humble universal chicken has the distinction of being the first bird to be domesticated by man. The next species to be tamed by our hand is one of the most recognized and loathed of all urban birds: the Feral or Street Pigeon, perhaps better known by its most affectionate name, the Flying Rat!

Some of you picking up this book may be new to birding. Others amongst you may watch the birds in your back garden but consider yourselves not worthy of being called a birder. You might even occasionally go out in the countryside to watch birds on designated day trips or maybe notice birds when visiting friends or relatives in rural areas. Some of you may live in a city, town or village in the UK and perhaps never really gave watching for birds within the heart of your hometown much thought before. Well, this book could be for you. To pinch an old hackneyed cliché, I would like to take you on a journey of discovery or, to be more exact, a journey of rediscovery. It is



Feral Pigeons

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a journey that might help you to connect more with the nature that is right under your nose and above your head. In this book I will be covering all the expected steps to becoming a birder – with a particular emphasis, of course, on city dwellers.

I would like to introduce you to the notion that to notice birds you just have to look up! Birds and other wildlife are all around us even in the heart of the most concrete of jungles. Whether you live in London, Aberdeen, Port Talbot or Newcastle, if you open a window, step out of your front door, or just stop for five minutes to listen while in town doing the shopping run, you might be surprised as to what you may discover. Very recently, I was walking in the heart of Soho in central London on my way to a meeting. It was a delightfully sunny springtime afternoon and people were out in force. Soho is the media hub of the UK and there is always frenetic activity on the streets; hardly a place to be noticing birds you might think. It is also not usually a place where you find tourists wandering its labyrinth of streets or general shoppers eking out a bargain, as they all tend to inhabit Oxford Street farther to the north. The day that I chose to stroll the streets was a classic one. There were young runners busily going about their errands for the masses of media companies based in the area, with parcels under their arms or pushing hand trolleys. Runners are easily recognizable as they tend to wear an unofficial uniform that features fashionably ‘distressed’ jeans and worn-looking t-shirts, regardless of what company they work for. The good media folk were out of their offices early, garrulously drinking outside the trendy bars in Golden Square in the heart of Soho. People were in the tiny park at the centre of the square variously catching the last rays of the sun or playing table tennis on the public tables.





Common Buzzard

Whilst soaking up this bustling scene I was aware of a slight movement in my peripheral vision above my head. Looking up I was delighted to witness a Common Buzzard drifting south fairly low. I stopped and just stood in the middle of the street marvelling at the majestic raptor as it slowly headed over. To think that just minutes earlier it might have been soaring in the skies over the Hertfordshire countryside to the north but was now over the centre of my city on its way to who knows where. I was spellbound. Of course, no one around me took a blind bit of notice until I produced a camera to take shots of my find. Even then they were looking at me probably assuming that I was shooting location pictures for some new movie. Nobody looked up to witness my buzzard. Although currently being our most common bird of prey in the UK they are still deemed as country birds. But they quite clearly traverse our cities and are even breeding on the outskirts of the capital. This kind of moment happens far more regularly than is reported and that is because we don't look up often enough in the expectation of this kind of thing happening.

I suppose what I am saying is that when it comes to urban birding you have to expect the unexpected, regard the unexpected as expected. Get to know the usual birds very well and then start looking for the unusual amongst the usual. That way you will always be open to seeing interesting birds and your radar will always be switched on.

Many would-be birders are put off by the idea of referring to themselves as birders for fear of being singled out for being a fake or not being knowledgeable. Certainly, when I was a kid I had the impression that anyone with a pair of binoculars lashed around their neck knew what they were talking about and, as a consequence, knew far more about birds than I ever would in a thousand lifetimes. I was a little intimidated, that had to be said, but as a super-inquisitive child I also sought out those birders to pick their brains and to learn from them. I began to realize that not everyone I approached was who I thought they were. In later life I found out that some people used an armoury of expensive optics and cameras to give the impression of great knowledge. So do not be put off. Coming across as not being

knowledgeable and therefore looking like an idiot is an innate fear that simply should not exist. Nobody knows everything about anything. The more mistakes you make the more you learn and nobody makes more mistakes than the real experts.

My hope is that after reading this book you will realize that it is so easy to enjoy urban birds, whether you just watch them from the kitchen window or feel the need to rush out to be the next major ornithologist. The key thing to take away is that birding is relaxing, fulfilling, enlightening and most of all fun!

So get out there and don't forget to look up!

