

Summer of the Hobbies

Monitoring a Hobby family on Severnside, from territory establishment to return migration

by Chris Newton

I can't claim to be an experienced birder, although I've been devoted to wildlife since I was big enough to hold a caterpillar, but the events of the summer of 2020 have given me a passionate interest in one particular bird – the beautiful Hobby.

It started on a routine dog walk from my Severnside home on the evening of May 22. A southerly gale was blowing, and as we skirted a newly-planted maize field a sharp-winged vision in dark grey suddenly shot out of the east and landed in an oak tree in the middle of the field some 150m away. My first instinct from the shape and style of flight was that it was a Peregrine, but I had no binoculars with me to check. However I was carrying a camera, and later examination of some very distant snapshots revealed the orange 'Y fronts' of the Hobby. I reported the sighting to Mike King at the Gloster Birder and to Richard Baatsen, County Recorder, who responded, "That will be a male, and he may be setting up a territory. I need you to pay special attention to these birds." Thank you Richard – I was only too pleased to do so.

I read up on Hobbies. I had briefly seen them on two occasions before in the area and had assumed they were just passing through, but I soon learned that although this stunning falcon's traditional British home is the heathland of southern England with Scots pines, they are also very happy to breed in lowland pasture with isolated mature oaks – plenty of that in Gloucestershire – and are almost certainly under-recorded in such areas.

The 20-acre maize field, which I nicknamed 'Hobbiton' for the purposes of my diary notes, is only a short walk from home, so I was able to visit it almost every day right through the spring and summer, often twice – a rare benefit of the Covid lockdown, as we hardly left home for the next few months. I was able to spot my Hobby on many of these visits, usually perched high on one particular oak on the edge of the field.



My first portrait of the male bird

New excitement came on June 4 when I looked across the field to see not one Hobby but two, sitting a few feet apart in a big oak near the centre of the field. It looked as if Hal (as I had dubbed him) had found a mate. I saw the pair again over the next couple of days, but after that Hal seemed to be on his own again. I assumed that laying had begun, and 'Harriet' was now sitting. Hobbies start sitting after the second of their 2-4 eggs is laidⁱ, so I felt I now had a timetable. I did not know where the nest was but assumed it was in the group of big old oaks close together in the middle of the field where I had most often seen the birds (one study showed that some 90% of Hobbies use former Crows' nestsⁱⁱ). I did not of course attempt to approach close enough to find out as this is a Schedule 1 protected bird, and the heavy leaf canopy would have made it impossible to see into the trees anyway.

On June 10 I saw my first food pass. Hal shot in from the east uttering his Hobby alarm call, like a stuck burglar alarm, with a small brownish parcel in his talons. Harriet then appeared from nowhere in the middle of the field, and I was astonished to see her fly towards him upside down. As the two hovered together for a moment, she took the parcel and flew back into the oaks with it.

This was one of only four food passes I clearly saw, and sometimes during this period I would spend as much as two hours in the field without seeing, or hearing, any sign that the Hobbies were present, reflecting a comment in the recently-published County Bird Report for 2014-16 about how difficult the birds are to find during the nesting period. During incubation the female's needs are relatively modest and food deliveries must be infrequent. It did emerge that early mornings were the most active time and that afternoons were scarcely worth bothering with.



Hal, the male Hobby, on 'Ragged Oak'

Once the female was incubating, the male changed his favourite perch to a different oak (which I called Ragged Oak) about 100m from the presumed nest trees. It emerged clearly that stag-headed oaks must be very important to Hobbies in this type of habitat. I never saw either bird perch on any other species of tree, or on fence posts, telegraph poles etc, of which there were plenty. Nor did I see one in a younger, fully-

foliated oak; bare branches appeared to be an absolute must. This applied both to adults and to the young, when they later appeared, right through the season. I am in no doubt that to find breeding hobbies in this part of the world, you need to look in open pasture with mature, stag-headed oaks. We have plenty of it.

Several times over these weeks the male very noisily saw off a Crow or Jackdaw, and on one occasion I watched it frogmarch a Buzzard out of the area; it was like watching a Spitfire buzzing a jumbo jet.



Cooling off on a hot day



The birds often shared their trees with Woodpigeons and Stock Doves, and a degree of symbiosis has been suggested between themⁱⁱⁱ

For most of June and the whole of July – the incubation period and the four weeks or so between hatching and fledging – Hobbiton was quiet. I never clearly saw both birds except on July 21, when

Chairman Gordon Kirk came to see my Hobbies – I think they must have known a VIP was coming! We spotted them sitting on Ragged Oak and Gordon could see through his telescope that one of them was tearing up a small bird.



Both Hobbies showed up for the Chairman on July 21

During the early summer I had kept to the edges of the field, but as the maize grew I realised that it offered the perfect cover to get a little closer. I placed a folding seat within long-lens range of Ragged Oak and found that if I sat on it wearing a floppy bush hat and covered myself and the camera with the piece of green netting I keep in my bag for camouflage, the birds did not appear to see me. In this way I was able to take pictures without them showing any sign of being aware of my presence, though Hal would sometimes stare down the barrel of the lens (most of these pictures were taken with a 500mm Nikon plus 1.4 or 1.7 converter, although they still had to be heavily cropped). I could even sneak along the rows of maize to and from my seat without him reacting in any way. I continued to keep well away from the area of the nest.

I calculated that if the eggs had hatched in the first week of July, the young should be appearing by the second week of August at the latest. I was disappointed therefore when that week passed with no sign of fledged young and no reappearance by the female, and began to fear something had gone horribly wrong. However, on the miserably wet morning of Sunday 16th I spotted three Hobbies on Ragged Oak; a lone adult on one side and two fluffy juveniles huddled together on the other. That was a thrilling moment.

There are five oaks in the central area of the field, and at this stage I still had no clear idea which of them contained the nest. The birds' appearance on Ragged Oak had thrown me. Because I had seen the female fly out of Big Oak, the biggest of the trees, I had assumed it was there, but now the juveniles had made their first appearance over 100m away. Gordon's comment was 'I told you they were sneaky!' Later when nesting was over I examined the ground under all the trees without finding pellets, bones, feathers or any other detritus from a nest; I found only pigeon eggshells and a Little Owl pellet^{iv}. At the time of writing I still don't know where the nest is, or was – it may be possible to identify it when the leaves fall.



The two juveniles on August 20, aged 6-7 weeks



One of the young birds takes off

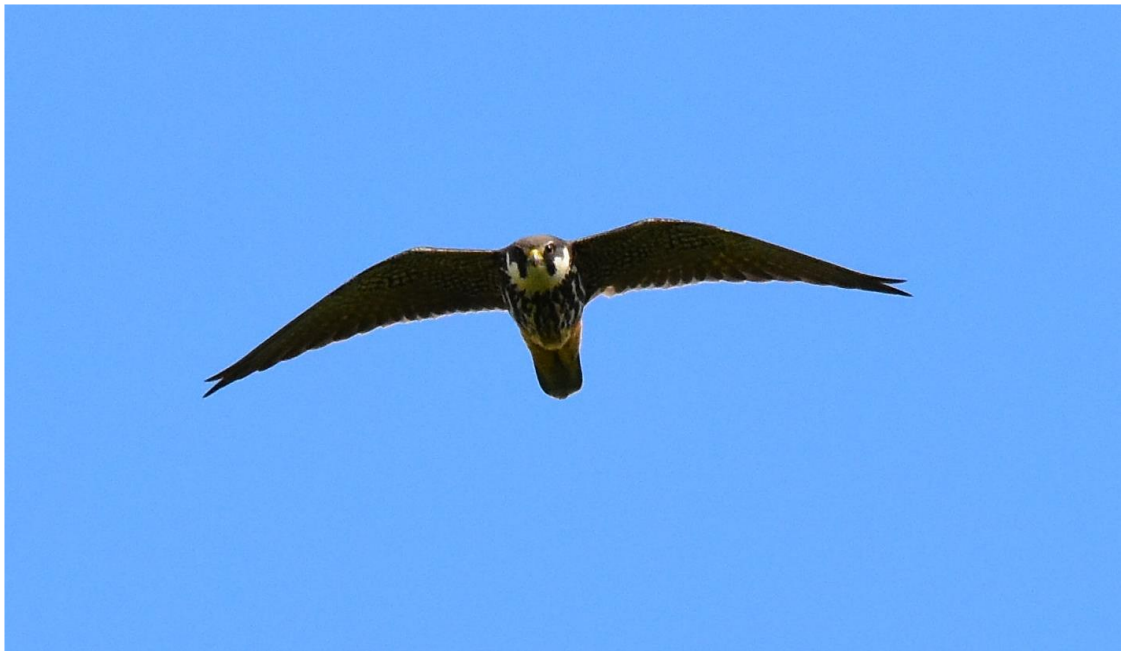


The two youngsters appeared to revel in aerobatics and by late August they were spending long periods on the wing together. The family were easy to spot during this period.

From then on Ragged Oak became Hobby HQ, and for the next three weeks or so I saw one or more of the family perched there on almost every visit. It is not easy to sex Hobbies in the field, but after a bit of practice I felt able to distinguish them most of the time. The female is larger and slightly plumper, though this is not always obvious as it depends on comparison and angle of view. The very dark grey and white colour scheme of the male is slightly softened in the female. Occasionally it is possible to see the striations on the undertail coverts which (at all ages) typically mark the bird as a female^v.



The female Hobby on July 24



The male hunting on August 23: riding the wind (above) and diving after prey



Occasionally the young would take off and shoot around the field before returning, showing that some 7 weeks after hatching and less than 3 weeks after fledging they were already athletic flyers. I sometimes saw a parent with them, but increasingly the association seemed to weaken. On September 9 I was reminded that they had not forgotten their charges by a thrilling food pass, when one of the adults flew in burglar-alarming and appeared to transfer a small bird to one of the young in the sky almost over my head (trees partially obscured my view). The bird was brownish with a white breast and might possibly have been a Spotted Flycatcher (they have done well in my area this summer). I did get the impression that the adults were hunting hedgerow birds rather than the Swallows, House Martins and Swifts associated with them, which were around only occasionally, though it would have taken the Hobbies only a couple of

minutes to fly to the Sharpness Canal and the Severn, where Swallows and Martins flock. The male spent many hours on his sentinel trees very alert and apparently watching for quarry, and several times I saw him apparently spot something and dive away after it, but I never saw the outcome.

Incidentally it has been observed in Holland that their favourite prey species during breeding is the Skylark^{vi}, and perhaps it is the same elsewhere on the Continent – the Italian name for the Hobby is 'Lodolaio', which means something like 'skylarker'.

My young birds spent an increasing amount of time on the wing, looking for all the world as if they were chasing each other around the sky for the sheer joy of it – a marvellous sight. I did not clearly see them hunting, but it is likely that at this stage they were learning to catch insects. As soon as they landed their fluffy chick appearance returned, and they always seemed to perch together exactly the same distance apart, around 25cm. This habit made it easy to see that one was significantly larger than the other, making them almost certainly male and female.



This was taken on September 5 when the juveniles were about 8 weeks old. They appeared to have a close relationship. The presumed female is on the right.



The young Hobbies on September 14, aged 9-10 weeks



**The female bird (I think) made an unexpected final appearance on September 17,
the last time I saw either of the adults.**

The adults now seemed to be living away from the field and visiting it less and less often, and by the first week of September the young appeared to have Hobbton almost to themselves. However on the evening of September 17 the female suddenly appeared low in an oak in a neighbouring field and posed beautifully in glowing sunshine – it seemed almost like a curtain call.

All day on the 21st the area rang with the roar of machinery as the maize was cut. I thought that would put the lid on my Hobby summer, but the following day I glimpsed two familiar little bumps silhouetted side by side on a bare oak branch two fields away; the young birds had moved away, but not very far, yet. That was the last I saw of my Hobbies. I'm fervently hoping they'll be back in 2021.

ⁱ British Birds of Prey, Leslie Brown, Collins New Naturalist series

ⁱⁱ Birds of Prey of the British Isles, Brian Martin

ⁱⁱⁱ Woodpigeons nesting in association with hobby falcons: advantages and choice rules, Giuseppe Bogliani, Fabrizio Sergio & Giacomo Tavecchia, Università di Pavia, 1998

^{iv} As advised by Gordon Kirk, based on its contents of beetle fragments

^v raptormonitoring.org, advice for field workers

^{vi} British Birds of Prey, RSPB, quoting Niko Tinbergen; also <http://europeanraptors.org/eurasian-hobby/>