

Nature note:

Summer falcon

Most of our birds of prey – kestrel, sparrow hawk, buzzard, peregrine and red kite – are resident in Britain throughout the year, but we have one that is a summer visitor, a small dashing falcon called a hobby. Why only in summer? Well, that's the only season when its favourite prey is available here: swallows, martins and swifts, so it tracks these migrants and follows them here each spring. And it's the only raptor with the specialist skills to support such a habit. It's the most aerial of all our birds of prey, fast and agile enough to catch these birds on the wing. Swifts and swallows are pretty nifty fliers themselves, of course, but they are no match for a hunting hobby, which is capable of breath-taking twists and turns at high speed to chase them down. Hobbies also take dragonflies in large numbers, which they do with almost nonchalant ease, plucking them from the sky as they cruise along and then nearly stalling in mid-air to strip out the parts they want and consume the soft bodies in flight, letting the indigestible casings float down to the ground. So, a good place to see hobbies is over marshes or wetlands where dragonflies abound. They are quite regular visitors to Shingle St and over Hollesley Heath, but the most reliable place to find them locally is probably at the North Warren reserve just north of Aldeburgh, where I have often seen several in the air together. Even larger numbers gather over the marshes in the Lakenheath Reserve to the west of the county, where I have seen up to fifty zooming round the skies early in May before they disperse to breed.



Contributed

Hobby in flight

Hobbies are quite easy to distinguish in flight. Unlike a kestrel they never really hover, but scythe around, alternately soaring and diving on sharply angled wings, rather like huge swifts. They are much smaller than, say, buzzards. Indeed, the Latin name is *Falco subbuteo*; a buzzard is a *buteo*, so this literally means 'a falcon one size down from a buzzard'. And herein lies an etymological curiosity. Do you remember the table-football game called Subbuteo, which was very popular in the last century? The inventor of that game, one Peter Adolph, wanted to call it 'Hobby', partly because it was a hobby in the other sense and partly because the hobby had always been his favourite bird. But when he tried to register it as a trade-mark under that name in 1948, the Patents Office refused him for some reason, so he called it by its Latin name instead and they approved that. Just one more reason for learning Latin.

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