

Two wonders of the natural world

You may know that Peterborough Cathedral was recently voted the second of seven wonders of the UK, behind Hadrian's Wall, but ahead of York Minister and the White Cliffs of Dover.

If there was a vote on wonders of the local natural world, then I would put my money very firmly on two birds that I heard and saw today, before writing this article. And then we need to think why there are those who would still ask us to destroy those wonders.



First wonder – the skylark

First wonder – the sound of the skylark. This morning at Etton Maxey nature reserve, I was struck by two signs of spring: 1) the glorious yellow of coltsfoot blooming vigorously across the banks of the reserve. This is one of the first flowers to appear in the early spring. And 2) above those banks of yellow, high in the sky, was the sound of the skylark. There can be no more evocative sound than the skylark – and that's not just my opinion, why otherwise would Vaughan Williams have written such wonderful music to celebrate it.



Second wonder of our local natural world – the kite

Second wonder – the red kite. I spent three separate weeks in the 1980s guarding red kite nests in Wales and I remember vividly seeing 15 kites in the sky at one time – a huge 20% of the entire population of the country at that time. And yet today as I drove over to Uppingham I saw five hunting over the roadside verges, and that is probably only 5% of our local population. This is a truly beautiful bird. Big, majestic, full of colour and a true master of the sky – watch it as it hunts, seldom moving its wings, but using instead its ruddy tail to hold it in position over its prey.

So why are there those who are now saying there are too many birds of prey – including the kite. There is even a songbird alliance, calling for a cull of certain birds of prey in order to protect songbirds, serving up spurious science to tell us that it is the increased numbers of raptors that is causing the decrease in our songbird population.

This just isn't true! First of all, kites feed largely on carrion, not generally on live prey and they are just way too big to hunt songbirds. Secondly the natural world doesn't work that way – birds of prey have to stay in balance with their prey – unlike man, they can't simply destroy their food sources, that isn't how it works. And thirdly this simply ignores the fact that it is changes to our agricultural landscape that has caused the decline in songbirds. Take out the hedges, the ponds and the flower rich meadows and you will see a huge decline in not only birds, but also bees, insects and bats.

Fortunately many farmers locally and nationally recognise this and are doing a lot to manage their land to support wild bird populations. Simply by leaving small un-seeded squares of land within wheat fields, the skylark population can be substantially boosted. Peter Kendall, President of the NFU champions skylark plots, acknowledging that they increase chick numbers by 50%.

And for those that suggest there are too many red kites around, I have nothing more to say than simply to refer them to the photo. They cause no damage and are truly a wonder of nature. Enough said.

Richard Astle