

# Nature Notes

Rupert Evershed's monthly diary of the natural world

Twitter @rupertvershed Blog: [www.notingnature.wordpress.com](http://www.notingnature.wordpress.com)



Born and bred in St Albans, Rupert has enjoyed observing and recording local wildlife for over 30 years. Drawing inspiration and insight from the sights and sounds that accompany the seasons throughout the year, he invites you to tune in to the often overlooked natural world all around us.

## Feel the call of the wild

Autumn has not chilled us and I did begin to wonder if my corporeal senses could recall that crisp winter bite of frozen days and frosty ground. Lulled into extended comfort I have found myself out walking without a coat amongst trees, still with their full foliage, and buzzed by complacent bees enjoying the lingering warmth of the low sun.

However, today an icy blast from the north reminded my startled frame that cold still does exist and that it will be summer warmth that finds itself but a memory and not winter chill. The seasonal shift to winter may be late but the denizens of the wild are not beguiled by the delay even if we are.

Wildness demands an impulse for survival – something that we have perhaps lost or temporarily replaced with an impulse for comfort!

Wild creatures cannot afford any other impulse and winter raises the stakes as far as wildness is concerned. The exposed fields and woods demand constant alertness and watchfulness if food is to be found and predation avoided.

For me, this state of high alert is an essential part of what it means to

experience the wild.

It is connected to a sense of not being fully in control and being aware of elements that are bigger than and potentially threatening to oneself.

In our comfortable lives, we ourselves may rarely get to experience this 'smallness' but for animals and birds in the wild this is their everyday experience.

If they are not fully awake and alive to the world around them then they may well find themselves the next meal in the food chain.

This primitive urgency to survive touches at longings deep within us too and could be described as the 'call of the wild'.

Perhaps this is why increasingly many of us seek out extreme experiences of the great outdoors, even if it is only from the safety of our TV sofa!

However, wildness is only ever a walk away and one of the great developments in St Albans of recent is the marking out and planting of Heartwood Forest by The Woodland Trust.

A forest in its nascent form, Heartwood at the moment is largely rough grassland with small saplings, little more than bushes, forming low lying scrub. Walking to the top of the

hill from the main car park and looking around can sometimes feel more akin to surveying a small patch of Dartmoor laid over the surrounding neatness and greenery of freshly planted farmland all around.

On a dull day it is bleak, exposed and often windswept, and you may only see a few skylarks and meadow pipits darting up into the breeze before retreating to the shelter of the long grass.

However, on a still, clear afternoon, when the sun is low in the sky, the grassland is transformed into a patchwork of golden brown hues, alive with small flocks of birds feeding on the abundance of berries and seeds.

Yesterday I counted a flock of over one hundred fieldfares feeding on the hawthorn berries – winter visitors escaping the harshness of the Scandinavian winter. Perfectly camouflaged flocks of lesser redpoll and goldfinches strip the thistle heads, only their quiet twittering giving away their presence.

In this scene of abundance it is not long before a predator appears seeking out his part in the feast. Previously I had watched the steely blue wings of a male sparrowhawk bear down on a tiny stonechat swaying astride a jaunty twig. The stone-



■ A short-eared owl

Picture: STEVE ROUND

chat ducked and dived in the last second leaving the sparrowhawk empty-clawed, its power and grace diminished as it stood amongst the long grass on the ground.

Today however, I am privileged to witness one of Heartwood's winter specialities – a short-eared owl – hunting over the grassland. These are big, day-flying owls, best seen an hour or so before dusk when they come out to quarter the fields, occasionally diving on some unsuspecting victim.

This year there have been up to

five birds hunting at any one time affording great views of this truly wild bird.

I have learned that if you stay still the owls will pass very close and it is then that the owl's pale, piercing yellow eyes can be seen. To look into those cool yellow eyes is to see the wild and simultaneously know that the wild has seen you too!

■ For more information on Heartwood Forest please visit this site: [www.heartwoodforest.wordpress.com](http://www.heartwoodforest.wordpress.com)