

## WILDLIFE IN THE VALE OF LORTON: WILDLIFE IN SURROUNDING FELLS

Written by Alan Gane

Plant life among the surrounding fells varies greatly with altitude, exposure and soil acidity. In the lower reaches, tormentil and the diminutive heath milkwort are particularly common, as is, to a lesser extent, lady's bedstraw, while one low felltop to the west of the area sports a mass of heartease or wild pansy. Heather extends across some fellsides and provides a heavy perfume when in full flower. There are also areas of small shrubs such as bilberry and cowberry and, of course, bracken and gorse and often the gnarled and clearly ancient juniper.



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The ghylls and runnels higher up provide a degree of shelter and water which combine to give a habitat suitable for sub-alpines such as starry saxifrage and mountain yellow saxifrage. There is alpine lady's mantle, orpine or livelong, and, among the non-flowering species, maidenhair spleenwort and parsley fern of rock bracken. Sea campion is to be found below the summit on the western slope of Grasmoor, for example, while there is cranberry around Highnoon Tarn.



In the upper areas, sedges and mosses survive the harsh conditions; alpine clubmoss, fur clubmoss and stag's horn lichen abound. All these and many more species provide

the enthusiast with a host of "discoveries" to be seen, studied and photographed - but not picked - adding to the interest of every walk.



There are birds too associated with the fells, notably the peregrine, ring ouzel, buzzard and wheatear. The peregrine is the ultimate raptor, renowned for its incredible speed and manoeuvrability. Sometimes seen "watching on" from a crag and then launching itself into its or "stoop" upon some prey far below, with such ferocity that it can decapitate a pigeon in flight. Perhaps the most spectacular is the food pass. While the female (the falcon) is brooding the young (the eyasses), the male (the tiercel) is often away hunting. As he returns towards the eyrie, giving his excited "kek-kek-kek" call, the falcon will fly out to meet

him. They approach each other on a collision course and, on meeting, rear up and the prey is deftly passed from the talons of the tiercel to those of the falcon, who then flies back to the nest site to feed the young. It is an extraordinary spectacle. It is a bird which has been the subject of intense study, reported in Derek Ratcliffe's book "The Peregrine Falcon".



The raven, another large bird, and probably the one most commonly associated with the fells is exuberant, renowned for turning turtle in flight, closing its wings and plummeting for short distances, as if purely for fun. Primarily, a scavenger, the raven tackles carcasses of sheep and other animals and birds unfortunate



enough to perish in the open. The deep-throated "craak" of the raven is another exciting sound. This bird, like the peregrine, is crag-nesting and competition between raven and peregrine is not uncommon. Unlike the peregrine, however, the raven builds a nest, rather than utilising a scrape or ledge.

The far less common ring ouzel or mountain blackbird, a summer visitor, also nests among crags and crevices. A shy and rather secretive bird, dark brown but with a distinct white collar, whose diet is largely similar to that of the common blackbird, it is probably true to say that its prime claim to fame is its beautiful song. Although flute-like, the notes carry well among the crags, but the bird is often difficult to spot. Like the peregrine, it does have favourite haunts and, once these have been identified, they can serve to allow repeated sightings.



The buzzard, one of our best known birds of prey, floating with its broad wings and extended primary feathers, like fingers silhouetted against the sky in what appears to be an effortless flight, taking full advantage of the thermals, but, like its larger cousin, the golden eagle, it has a remarkable turn of speed when hunting or when avoiding the unwelcome attentions of crows, hoping for a free regurgitated meal. It is not commonly seen in the high fells, as there is little prey there, but is often seen from good vantage points, quartering the fellsides far below.

The wheatear, on the other hand, measures only some 5½ inches, but is distinctly coloured with its slate grey back and black eyestripe and gives a clear flash of white as it drops down from rock or stone wall, hence the name "wheatear" or "white rear". Returning from its winter quarters in Africa in late February or early March, it is always a welcome herald of spring.



Animal life in the fells is very restricted. There are some species of flies and beetles,



such as the dung beetle, which can be seen manoeuvring pellets of sheep dung into their burrows, in which to lay eggs which will be warmed by the resulting fermentation. Occasionally, there are swarms of flying insect, which attract flocks of swifts. There are deer, mostly roe in the valley; they may be seen almost anywhere at times, but tend to congregate in the upper wooded areas and are best seen around dawn and dusk. Naturally enough, their hoof marks or "slots" are seen much more often than the animals themselves.

Although animal sightings around the tops are relatively rare, there are sometimes surprises - such as seeing a common lizard at a height of 2000 feet - so always be aware of the plants, birds and animals around and, as far as possibilities are concerned, discount nothing! The more we look, the more we see. There is always the possibility of seeing a fox in the fells, but the extent of each fox's territory is such that sightings are few and far between. Urban concentrations are often high, lowland rural ones much less so, but in the fells, territories could well extend to 2000 hectares or more.



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