



# Noisy neighbours



Last summer, 30-minute birder **Amanda Tuke** welcomed some new residents to her south London neighbourhood...

**M**y 2024 birding year was exceptional, and not because, as the year ends, I have more birds on my year list than any previous year. But rather because of an extraordinary story which began back at the start of summer.

There I was, drinking coffee in our little back garden one June morning, and listening to the squabbling of Ring-necked Parakeets and the agitated caws of Carrion Crows, when a sharp descending 'kek-kek-kek-kek' call cut through. Our mid-terrace house is built on the side of a

hill. The sound was coming from the large English Oak tree growing 20 metres behind the house in a communal green space. It's a tree we know and love, providing plenty of bird interest, although anxiety-making when it's very windy.

And then it called again. A Hobby. How likely was it for a Hobby to be calling from a tree in a housing estate in inner London? Likelier, perhaps, than you might think. A few years ago a pair nested in the strip of woodland between our road and the playing fields which line the South Circular. The precise location of

You can just see a nestling starting to take a look at what's around him



AMANDA TUKE

the nest site was kept secret, but, later that summer, I did see three mewing Hobbies circling over our garden. So they've got form, locally.

Fast forward, and each morning after that first coffee with a Hobby I heard those same 'kek-kek-kek-kek' calls. Finally, I was rewarded

'Kek-kek-kek-kek' heralds a Hobby



PAUL FARNFIELD/ALAMY

Wherever you find dragonflies, there is a chance of Hobby

with the sight of two birds flying from our oak across the roofs of our road's houses and into the wood. Had they moved into the old crows' nest high in the tree? We love living here, but it wasn't the most obvious choice for peaceful chick rearing. The communal garden is well used by families, and children's parties are regularly hosted under the tree.

A week later, as June became July, I watched the pair calling and displaying over the wood one evening. This was the ultimate window birding. And July carried on in that blissful vein, with my other half and I hearing calls

from our new noisy neighbours and glimpsing the birds most mornings and evenings.

I still hadn't seen the birds actually using the old nest, so one evening I crossed the road and spent an hour or so looking back over our roof for a clearer view of it. A friend trudged up on his way back from work and hung out for a chat. One of the adults chose that moment to drop directly out of the nest and fly over us.

The day of the neighbourhood summer barbecue dawned... which of course was to take place under the Hobby nest tree... in which I guessed there might now be eggs or even

One of Amanda's Hobby neighbours



AMANDA TUKE

## Family sagas

*Bird Watching* magazine reader **Beth Richardson** tells **Amanda** what changed her views of garden nest success

In spring 2023, our garden enjoyed a bounty of birds nesting in trees, hedges and hidey-holes. But the youngsters made easy pickings for predators. Magpies pillaged a Blackbirds' nest, Jays plucked freshly fledged House Sparrows, and crows flew over, beaks filled with fluffy Starlings.

So, this year, when a pair of Magpies chose to nest in our Apple tree, my heart sank. The Blue Tits' favourite box was already occupied close by. And Woodpigeons were industriously delivering twigs to the very same tree. I was disappointed, but there was a surprising calm. The Blue Tits relocated to an empty sparrow terrace. Our other regular nesters – Blackbirds, House Sparrows, Robins and Wrens – bred elsewhere. The Magpies' nest, however, attracted a lot of unwanted attention from crows. The fewer fledglings in the garden meant less predation and we got to witness the challenges and triumphs of a different avian family.

Most summer mornings and evenings brought a Hobby sighting overhead



NEIL DARRADE/ALAMY

nestlings. Would the music and chat bother the birds? Should I have asked for the party to be sited somewhere different? Or was it better if people didn't know the birds were there? I needn't have worried. After some partying into the small hours, the birds noisily made their presence felt in the tree the following morning. And it turned out that my lurking around with binoculars hadn't gone unnoticed by our human neighbours...

One evening in mid-August, I was sitting under a Hornbeam with a reasonable view of the nest. Something flicked above the nest rim – a pair of downy wings flapping vigorously. Finally, the proof that we had at least one baby. As I waited for an adult to return, I idled away the time in true anorak style using Pythagoras' theorem to try and work out how far the nest was from our back door. About 35 metres or so. Half an hour later, an adult slunk in silently, stayed at the nest for around a minute, and left as quietly as it had arrived.

The following morning, there was a kerfuffle in the nest. It looked like housekeeping was underway, with a shower of dusty material ejected over the nest rim. An adult came off the nest somewhat clumsily and perched on the other side of the tree. She shook her wings and, after a few minutes, launched awkwardly into the air before circling. Why "she"? I hear you ask. Well, I've read that the females broadly stay on the nest to defend the young, with the exception of short trips away, while the males do most of the food providing. At a guess, the bird I saw that morning was the female needing a stretch after a long night of brooding.

That evening, I was back sitting tucked under the Hornbeam with my camera pointed upwards. While I was faffing around with light settings, I saw a pale, downy head appear over the rim of the nest, and then what I thought was a second smaller one. So, there were at least two nestlings.

On the final Saturday in August, I woke to

the sound of torrential rain and no evidence of the birds all day. Then early the next morning something was clearly kicking off in the tree. The two Hobbies were calling frantically as they attempted to fend off a group of Magpies who were edging up to the nest. I had other places to be but I heard later from friend and neighbour Penny that a vigorous battle took place. Penny and I met at the viewing point that evening. There was no sign of nestlings, just a couple of downy feathers on the nest rim. I wondered gloomily if the nestlings had become weakened in the wet weather, and then the Magpies had finished them off.

On Bank Holiday Monday I watched as one of the adults mobbed a pair of Magpies over our house. There was no sign of the second adult, which was worrying. By mid-afternoon, I was back at the viewing point, and joined by neighbours with their two grandsons. The little boys looked up at the nest through toy binoculars. We all saw something moving on

Carrion Crow is a regular fixture of the suburban cacophony



ERIN JAMES/ALAMY

the nest and an ungainly but well-developed wing. I felt ridiculously happy, and realised just how invested I had become in what now appeared to be just one remaining nestling.

The lone adult continued to arrive each morning that week, as did the Magpies. Then, one evening at the end of August, I arrived to see the nestling vigorously flapping and apparently trying to fledge. Its wings looked odd, with several flight feathers sticking out at strange angles, and it seemed unable to climb onto the rim, as if it was caught on something. By the following morning, the young bird was

dangling lifeless over the side. I was gutted. Penny and I had been in regular communication and I texted her to say our fledgling sadly hadn't made it.

I moped around the rest of that day, before pulling myself together to read up on the species to try and get things into perspective. The (Eurasian) Hobby seems to be broadly doing OK. They're green-listed in the UK, and are considered birds 'of least concern', internationally. There are thought to be about 2,000 breeding pairs in the UK each year and they're spreading northwards in the British

Ring-necked Parakeets are routinely heard from Amanda's garden



DAVID CHAPMAN/ALAMY

Isles, with a range which has increased fourfold since the 1960s, when their population had been decimated by persecution.

So, the big picture for this small, elegant falcon appears to be better news than it is for some of our other raptors. And, even knowing how the story of our noisy neighbours' nest unfolded, it was a delight sharing our neighbourhood with this fabulous and often elusive species. It would be all too easy to rant about corvid predation while glossing over the likely grim fate of the second nestling, but I refuse to do that. Sometimes it's hard, but I honestly believe that it's the downs as well as the ups of birdwatching which make it such a rich and rewarding experience. Watching the Magpies working out their best strategy for taking on these formidable birds was fascinating, too. And that's what I've been saying to human neighbours who'd never heard of Hobbies, but followed their story avidly.

On the last day of August I sat on the grass with a coffee, watching the remaining adult circle for half an hour or so against an achingly blue sky. Seeming to expend the minimum amount of energy with the tiniest of flaps of its scythe-shaped wings, it flew near enough that I could see moustache and chest markings even without binoculars. I guessed that this might be the last time I'd see it. So it proved to be. **BW**