

## At Tapee Pond.

Tapee Pond? They ask. Where's that?

Then I have to explain that it is no longer a pond, but a reed bed, alongside the rail track just North of Berwick station.

What use is a reed bed? Townsfolk who do not need thatch for their houses, might well ask.

But wildlife appreciates it; there's nothing quite like it between the Tees and the Tay.

And wild life is here.

In fact Tapee Fen as we might call it, is a mini wilderness right on our doorstep, but it's mostly the birds we are aware of because a wilderness is a secret place. And with reeds that can grow three metres in one season, it would take a foolhardy human to venture in.



Just before sunrise you'll see the first signs of life.

Small birds, wagtails by handfuls, burst up into the cool air to disperse towards farmland and even into the lanes and streets of Berwick. Wagtails are partial to old stone walls with their abundant micro life; the sort of tiny bugs and creepy-crawlies we either don't see, or prefer to ignore. In spring and autumn the number of wagtails taking an overnight stop at Tapee can be in excess of 600 birds, the largest known roost in Northumberland. Like tourists, but unpublicized, they enjoy the hospitality of Berwick before moving on. In spring most continue northward next day; in autumn, most are heading south to warmer wintering grounds.

Year round a daily heron flies over the reeds braving the wrath of patrolling gulls and crows. Last summer gulls forced him down to Tapee and kept him there until dusk defending 'their' air space. Cormorants, mallards, redshanks and even swans fly in from Fisherman's Cove, taking the scenic route over golf course, school playing fields, Tapee, the Green Triangle adjacent North Road and

on over Coronation Park and Tommy the Miller's Field to the mudflats of the river.

There are raptors too. Those abundant wagtails fly with an escort of merlins that prey on them, that hide among the reeds and, in manoeuvres more skilful than any fighter pilot, pick off the less able for supper. For you never need to be early from bed to watch raptors; they need to recharge their batteries from morning's warmth and so become more obvious as the day wears on.

Did you know that a kestrel will catch a blackbird if she can? And may eat it below the shelter of your beech hedge if you don't interfere.

Sparrowhawks, however, are the wiliest. I've seen a young one sunbathing atop one of the old fence posts that marked the sheep pens around Tapee thirty years ago. I needed binoculars to be sure it was a bird, so closely did its grey-flecked plumage resemble the weathered, unpainted wood. In spite of many sightings, however, I've only seen one successful attack and the victim was a collared dove, one of a pair that were loitering at the base of our feeding station for bounty dropped by smaller birds.

Small birds are indeed most in evidence, though often what we notice is no more than a small quick movement above or into the reeds. For reeds harbour an abundance of tiny lives, moths and spiders, mites and grubs that sustain larger life in complex ways we have not yet understood. Reed buntings and wrens, blackcaps and sedge warblers, tits and finches, all are present and vociferous, even the song thrush that sits on the bough of our cherry tree at a shrewd distance from his partner on the nest.

Four-footed life is more difficult to spot, though I once had a vole almost collide with my chin when I stuck my head over the wall at the very moment she dashed from the clematis to the ivy.

Like my neighbours, I keep a look out for any hedgehog snoozing below a heap of dead leaves, and I've made a small log pile to shelter the froglets that wander away from the shallows. Sometimes I catch a tantalizing whiff of fox where he's marked last night's route; and sometimes I glimpse a pheasant searching for anything edible amid the grasses and brambles. I once saw a hen pheasant pick up one of those tough black slugs, thump it twice against the earth, peck it in half and then swallow both pieces. So

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it isn't just hedgehogs that enjoy this ugly food, though I do try to put the incident out of mind when friends invite us to dine on pheasant in chocolate sauce.

Tapee? Ah, let me tell you...

Philomena, 9th March 2006.