

An Encounter in Paget's Wood at Dusk

by Nathaniel Handy

Whenever you're about to depart, pause awhile and consider what might lie down the path from which you turned away. I did, in the gloaming light of the 13th of March this year.

On my shoulders sat my son, little Camilo with his flashes of golden hair trailing about his face. His boots were pressed firmly into my neck. He was tired now, his energy gone after the exuberance of discovery on the razor's edge of the Common Hill Nature Reserve. We had climbed in and out of the yew roots on this precipitous ridge as the sun's late rays cut through the old winter branches.

From a junction of five lanes we had wended our way past docile cottages along a track with soft views across the Woolhope Dome to far off tree lines. A pair of geese honked loudly in the still air as a smallholder and his dog led them slowly through a gateway. By the time we ascended once more through the narrow footpaths and bridleways to Hawkers Lane, snaking down into Woolhope beyond, dusk was upon us and the atmosphere beneath the trees was one in which all wary folk consider that it is time to unlock the car, start the engine, switch on the lights, make for the balm of a bright kitchen or a living room full of entertainments.

At the ridge, turning to my car, I paused. Paget's Wood, I knew, lay just beyond this road, down the other flank. I had never been there before, but had heard my father tell of a place of special natural interest. A country man with an eye and an ear for the subtleties of the animal world, I knew this would be a place of calm serenity. Over a stile, I saw a meadow, dropping steeply to what appeared a builder's yard of sand and rubble, with a house in the woods beyond.

"Let's just cross this stile and take a look at the sunset," I told my boy. He is always eager to pit his strength and agility against any manmade object. Stile and gates are particular favourites.

He sprang from my shoulders as I lowered him and was upon the stile in a moment. Once in the meadow, I crouched down on the path, took off my rucksack, and found the reward that I knew would keep him here after so much play: a bottle of milk and a packet of crisps while I watched the last of the sunset.

It was as I crouched by my son, both of us barely taller than the longest grasses, that it happened. I was almost indifferent at first, as one is who spends so much time preoccupied by a child. A bird of prey had entered the meadow. It was gliding silently across it at eye height. Then suddenly it pounced into the grass. Great russet wing feathers a flurry in the half-light. Yet there was nothing violent in the move. It was delicate almost, as its body shifted the grasses.

Whatever its prey, it missed. Empty clawed it rose and alighted on a fence post not more than 20 paces from where we crouched. It was during this sequence that it dawned on me. "It's a barn owl," I whispered to Camilo, though he didn't fully understand me. "I don't believe it." "Owl-a!" he called out on the evening air, adding his distinctive, Italianesque ending. He was loud. Loud enough to disturb a barn owl, I would have expected. Strangely, the bird didn't depart. It only turned its large, snow-white face and looked at us. It stayed upon the fence post.

"Owl-a!" Camilo called again. I rubbed my face. This moment suddenly had what I imagined must be the quality of those exotic holiday experiences where one comes face-to-face with whales or gorillas. I was crouched with my son in the grass, looking at a wild barn owl, looking back at us. The fact that Camilo didn't appreciate the significance, was merely pleased to see an owl just like the ones in his picture books, made it all the more surreal.

At last, after minutes had elapsed, the barn owl lifted from its post and, gliding gracefully over the tall grasses again, as stately as before. It was now that I appreciated just how wide was its wingspan. This was a fully-grown adult. Its white and soft brown plumage almost glowed in the final embers of sunlight. The owl came to rest on a further fence post in the bottom of the meadow for a few minutes more. Then finally, it rose again, this time a little higher, heading out of the meadow, over the hedgerow and beyond a house on Hawkers Lane, flying in the general direction of Fownhope.

I saw flashes of its great wings for several moments more, as it wheeled about in the sky at the height of a lamppost, had there been any in this woodland hamlet, which there were not. As my son and I stood and turned to leave the meadow, I reflected that we had crouched for some five minutes in the presence of an adult barn owl, a hunter in its habitat. I looked at my phone. It was just past six. We had entered this meadow at last light. It was the perfect time and the perfect place to meet a barn owl. I had merely intended to watch a sunset. It was a split second decision. I chose to walk down a path from which I nearly turned away, and that had made all the difference.

We would love to hear about your wildlife encounters in Herefordshire and beyond. You can contact the editorial team on:

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