

THE BLACK DEATH

Time spent by water is always special. A mild summer evening on the Wharfe, watching Spotted Flycatchers doing their thing above the water, and small Brown Trout doing the same below, holds a similar magic to a cold, winter evening at Chelker, watching the gulls coming in to roost.

Water has always held a tremendous fascination for me and played a large part in my life. You will then understand why my favourite bird has always been the Dipper. Just to be in places where it lives is reward enough, then there's the fabulous little bird itself, not just a stunning looker, but with quite a unique and remarkable life-style.

So where's the Black Death then? Some nice, gentle chat about the wonders of water, and going all Wordsworth about our local area – why?

Quite simple really. I can explain it in one word – CORMORANTS.

Did a shudder run down your spine? Did the hair on the back of your neck go quite beserk? No? Well, it should have done. Go back to the “C” word again, and notice that it's not singular, it's plural, and is it plural!!

Ten years ago a Cormorant on any of our local waters would have been a “good” sighting, maybe even deserving of a phone-call or two. Now a count of over 50 roosting birds is quite common, with many more than that at Lindley Wood Reservoir. Very few of our reservoirs don't hold some of these birds, and our rivers are now similarly affected.

Large numbers of them, fishing together, and taking mainly small silver fish, like Roach and Dace, are decimating many rivers in England. In Scotland the biggest threat is to young Salmon parr, where large numbers are being removed from their rivers, Salmon is, of course, already a threatened species struggling to cope with over-netting, and the many pollution problems caused by commercial fish-farming.

With the increase in the numbers of inland trout fisheries in England another easy source of food is presented to these birds, and huge flocks of them gather throughout the year on the big fisheries, like Grafham and Rutland Water. Nearer home, fly-fishing on Lindley Wood Reservoir has been forced to stop, owing to the presence of such large numbers of the birds, and stocks of silver fish on the lower Wharfe are decreasing at an alarming rate.

Why has this come about so quickly?

One very compelling argument put forward is that the fish stocks of the North Sea are now so low that birds are being forced inland to look elsewhere for food. This links with the presence of so many well-stocked rivers and lakes, gravel pits, etc. Throw out food on the lawn in very cold weather and you will be sure to attract birds, likewise with the cormorant.

What, then, is the cause for concern? Cormorants are, after all, catching fish to eat, whereas anglers are hardly dependant on their catches for food. Certainly it is distressing to find large fish badly damaged by the birds, too large to swallow, but with their insides hanging out, where they have been attacked.

But the biggest problem, looking at the overall scene, is where rivers, particularly relatively small ones, are finding their fish stocks running dangerously low. Without the fish the whole ecology of the river is changed, the delicate balance of life in the water is disturbed, with who knows what long-term results.

So what can be done? Studies run by the likes of DEFRA have offered some ideas, but none really satisfactory. Shooting to disturb the birds works well, until they return a few hours later.

Shooting to kill works even better, until their place is taken by other birds eager to exploit an easy food source. Licences to kill certain numbers of birds on certain waters are about to be issued, causing outcry by such organisations as RSPB.

"Leave Nature alone" is often aimed at such actions. We are told to look what happened when rabbits were introduced into Australia, or stoats and weasels into New Zealand. But it is rather too late to pretend that our environment can exist in a sort of Utopian self-healing way. We have changed it so rapidly, that Nature, with no influence from Man, ceases to exist.

So there's the problem. Look up "Cormorants" on the internet and you will find vast amounts of literature, studies, reports, etc on this subject. None seem to me to offer any realistic hope of a solution.

I am a fisherman, so I say, "Shoot 'em all". I'm also a birder, so I say, "Leave 'em alone, don't touch even one".

One thing is certain, something will have to be done. What do you think?