

Birding in Upper Wharfedale:

A brief introduction

John Topham

The area of Upper Wharfedale which lies within the B.O.G. recording area (shown on the map) is usually referred to loosely as 'Barden'. This area covers large tracts of open moorland, coniferous plantation, reservoirs and small valleys.

The section to the west of the Wharfe valley (and the B6160 which follows the valley) is Barden Moor, and the section to the east is Barden Fell. Locals talking about 'the moor' or 'the fell' are making this distinction - quite important when following local directions. Both sides of the valley offer excellent birding opportunities, although Barden Moor is usually patronised to a greater extent than Barden Fell. The latter tends to be watched from a distance, usually from the opposite side of the valley.

The whole area belongs to the Chatsworth Estates and most of the moorland is managed for grouse shooting. This is a very expensive operation but can bring lucrative rewards in late summer and autumn. Entry to these moors is allowed provided that certain access points are used (see map). Detailed maps of the whole of the estate can be obtained from Bolton Abbey or the shop at the Strid. These give all the access points, from Burnsall right down to Bolton Abbey. Once on the moors the walker can, in theory, go anywhere. In practice however, it is best to stick to the well-marked paths and tracks which offer very comprehensive coverage of all parts. Keepers do get very excited when walkers cut across open moorland during the grouse breeding season. Dogs are not allowed on the access land at all, even on leash. Since most birders travel to the area by car, I shall comment on the areas served by the main parking places (see map).

The most popular car-park is almost in the centre of the area - where the minor road leaves the B6160 near Barden Tower and turns up the hill towards Skipton. From here you can follow very well-marked tracks directly up to the two reservoirs or cut across Barden Moor, skirting Bull Copy and Nelly Park Woods to join tracks across Gill Beck up on to the higher moors of Burnsall and Thorpe Fell. On a clear day the views south-east down the valley and eastwards towards Simon's Seat, high on Barden Fell, must rank as good as any in the country. The birding can equal that too, but usually it doesn't!

An average day for me in summer produces scores of Red Grouse and Meadow Pipits, some Curlew, Lapwing and Cuckoo, the odd Ring Ouzel, Wheatear, Short-eared Owl, Golden Plover, Redshank, Whinchat, Kestrel and Sparrowhawk, and a never-ending procession of Black-headed and Lesser Black-backed Gulls making their way to and from their breeding site at Upper Barden Reservoir. In winter the sightings are usually limited to Red Grouse, a few corvids and very little else.

Perseverance, however, can produce some really exciting birds - twice I have had close encounters with our biggest corvid, the Raven. Most of our best "rarities" for the area are sporadic, and usually occur at migration time, like the Wryneck on Lower Barden Moor in Autumn 1992.

The moor has the added attraction of two good-sized reservoirs though, in the main, they produce very little. The upper reservoir has a steep, rocky shoreline offering no attraction for waders and no fish-life to support fish-eating species, although we have recorded Cormorant there more than once. The main interest in summer is on the north and west shores where with 3,000 pairs we have one of the largest breeding colonies of Black-headed Gulls in Yorkshire. Additionally nesting nearby are 300 pairs of Lesser Black-backed Gulls plus occasional Herring Gulls. Golden Plover and Redshank breed in small numbers as do Canada Geese.

The lower reservoir is heavily stocked with fish and is more sheltered, having exposed mud at times throughout the year. Most of our common ducks, ranging from Teal to Goosander, are found here, usually in small numbers. Waders however are scarce.

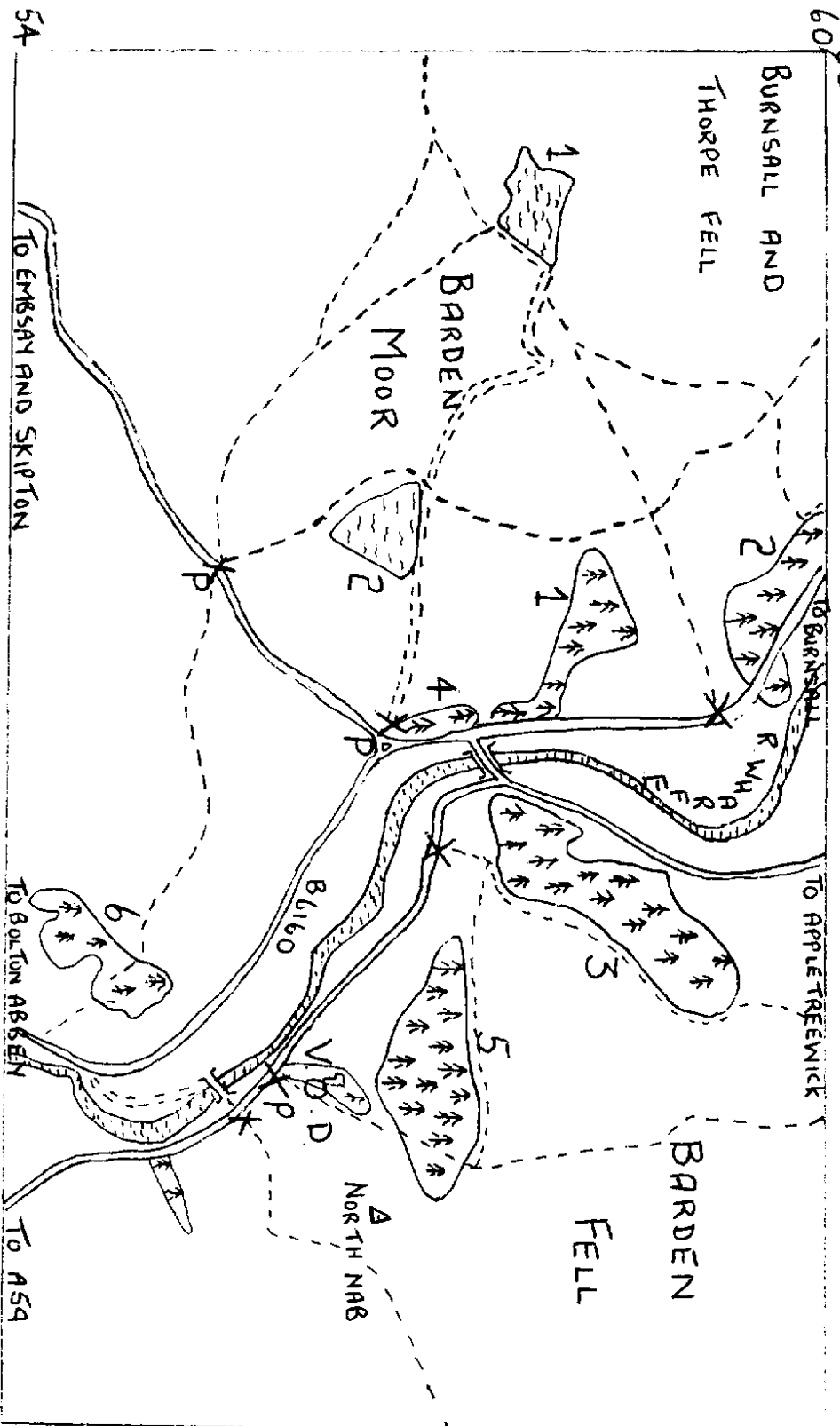
The valley of the Barden Beck between the two reservoirs can be good in spring for small passerines and in autumn for winter thrushes feeding on the rowan trees. We had a memorable autumn day a few years ago when we recorded six species of thrush in a group of rowans at the north-west end of Lower Barden Reservoir.

The woods on the moorland fringes can be very rewarding in autumn and winter when Bullfinch, Siskin, Goldcrest, Brambling, Crossbill and woodpeckers have been seen.

Many birders seldom stray from the central car-park and prefer to watch across the valley towards Lower Fell Plantation or directly across to Barden Fell. This is mainly raptor-watching and a 'scope is essential. It usually produces exactly the same as walking on the moor - nothing but the odd Kestrel and Sparrowhawk. Persistence added to the right winds and a lot of luck have produced Golden Eagle more than once, plus seasonal rarities like Osprey and Red Kite. Winter is best for raptor watching - gloves, scarf etc. are essential!

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- 1 [Hatched pattern] = UPPER BARDEN RES.
- 2 [Hatched pattern] = LOWER " "
- X = ACCESS POINTS
- = FOOTPATHS
- V.O.D. = VALLEY OF DESOLATION
- P = PARKING

- 1 [Arrow pattern] = NELLY PARK WOOD
- 2 [Arrow pattern] = INTAKE PLANTATION
- 3 [Arrow pattern] = LOWER FELL PLANTATION
- 4 [Arrow pattern] = BULL COPPY WOOD
- 5 [Arrow pattern] = LAUND PASTURE PLANTATION
- 6 [Arrow pattern] = WESTY BANK WOOD

The quickest walk to Upper Barden Reservoir is from the parking at the top of Eastby Brow. Again the views are spectacular, though the western side of Barden Moor has never produced as much for me as the area to the east and south of the reservoirs. A footpath also runs from here to Bolton Abbey, dropping down through Westy Bank Wood, passing the old fish-ponds of the Priory and emerging on the B6160 by "the hole in the wall". The Red Kite of two years ago roosted in Westy Bank Wood; in spring the bluebells are quite staggering.

The Barden Fell side of the valley tends to be watched, as previously explained, from the western side of the valley. Two access points on the east side, however, are well-worth a closer look. The Valley of Desolation offers varied habitat, from mixed, mature woodland by the road and up the first part of the valley, through the conifers of Laund Pasture Plantation, then out on to the open moorland of Barden Fell, right up to Simon's Seat. Snow Buntings have been recorded at North Nab (an excellent viewpoint but a stiff climb) and on the higher fells. The secretive Hawfinch is reputed to favour the tall trees near the cottages at the start of the walk.

Further along the minor road towards Barden Bridge is another access point to the Fell. Parking here is restricted to the narrow grass verge by the road. The walk is a long, uphill drag on to Coney Warren but the birding can be good. I usually find my first Wheatear and Ring Ouzel of the year on the hillside. Facing south-west it catches any early sun and warms up quickly. It also provides excellent lift when the westerly winds blow strongly across the valley, favouring the raptors. Lower Fell Plantation has been radically changed through forestry activities in the past five years, but it provides trees of all sizes, giving a varied habitat for many species.

In conclusion, the region offers much variety, giving birders something to hope for during most of the year. These moors and fells are usually very frustrating, yielding up their wildlife very grudgingly. In addition, the weather at all seasons can be desperate, ranging from thick mist to torrential rain which seems to attack from all angles on the higher slopes. In spite of this it remains my favourite patch, and I spend more time birding there than anywhere else in our recording area. Give it a try!

Paul & Phil

In a desperate attempt to reduce travelling time to Paul Clough, Phil Cunningham has moved to the wilds of Oxenhope. His new 'phone number is 0535 - 644873.

Comic Relief ?

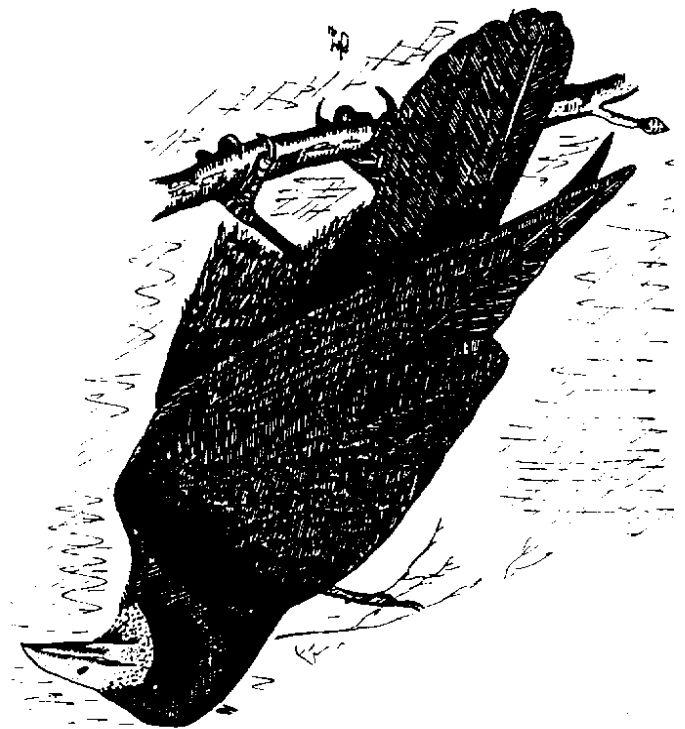
Godfrey Priestley

One morning in May a few years ago my wife and I were driving along Trough Lane, Denholme. "That's odd!" she said, pointing to the left. "There's a corvid over there hanging from a wire. It looks as though it's dead." I stopped the car and peered through binoculars. A Rook was dangling upside down, its claws encircling the wire.

Suddenly the 'corpse' came to life and, using the wire as a pivot, swung up through half a circle to reach twelve o'clock, where it perched between a Jackdaw and another two Rooks. After a pause (for applause?) the bird lowered its head, seized the wire with its mandibles and, withdrawing them, but not its feet, on the way down, swivelled back to six o'clock.

This extraordinary performance was followed by eight encores in the space of ten minutes. At the bottom of each revolution the bird would wait for up to sixty seconds. During one of these breaks the Jackdaw hopped along the wire and, standing beside the Rook's feet, stared at it with something resembling awe.

Anthropomorphism (the attribution of human characteristics to other creatures) used to be a dirty word. And there may still be experts ready to argue that the Rook was improving its chances of survival. But I'm ninety-nine per cent certain that it was merely having fun.



Sorry about the illustration. For some unaccountable reason I could not find a drawing of an upside-down Rook. - Ed