

Short-eared Owl Invasion at Wicken Fen



by Richard Nicoll ARPS

Large numbers of Short-eared Owls (*Asio flammeus*) migrated to East Anglia during the autumn of 2011. At Burwell Fen, which forms part of the National Trust's Wicken Fen reserve in Cambridgeshire, up to 15 were recorded flying at the same time. By comparison during the previous winter I only counted 3 of these and subsequently there were far fewer opportunities to photograph them. The images I took that winter were all rather disappointing and distant but some of the behaviours I witnessed indicated that this species was well worth persevering with. A year later with better equipment, a lot of patience and enthusiasm I set out to see if I could do better.

Reports of large numbers of owls started to appear in mid to late October 2011, 50 were reported flying off the Norfolk coast, so I decided to go and see if any had turned up where they had been the previous year. The very first morning looked like it would be very disappointing as it was foggy. A brief glimpse of a Hen Harrier later and four owls were circling up into the blue sky above the gloom. What followed were weeks of patiently waiting, trying to find the 'best' locations, seeing what worked and didn't in terms of camouflage, hiding or simply sitting still.

During the time leading up to this I was also learning a lot about wildlife photography, having taken it up seriously the previous autumn. I was determined to learn as much as possible in order to improve my chances of getting some good images. It took me several weeks to get the camera set up correctly to get good images of both still and moving subjects while waiting for the right lighting conditions.





The hours spent observing this species led me to be able to identify individual territories. These seemed to be marked out by fences, ditches and other geographic features. One owl in particular made this job easier as it had some broken flight feathers which may have been caused by an encounter with a barbed wire fence. One day I came across one of the owls, dead, hanging from a barbed wire fence. A sad end for such a magnificent creature.

The owls would be most active after first light and late afternoon before sunset, although you could see them at any time of day, these seemed to be the best times. They would hunt for a while and

then vanish into the rough grassland. Their camouflage made them almost impossible to see after landing if you had not made a mental note of the exact location. After catching a rodent the owl would look around then immediately fly a short distance to eat it. This behaviour is unlike my observations of Barn Owls (*Tyto alba*) that seem to eat prey where they catch it, unless carrying back to feed their young.

When the owls first appeared there seemed to be so many that it was hard to know where to point the camera as they would suddenly appear, hunt for a while and then disappear back into the grasses. This number of owls led to many mid-air fights which I assume was territorial. An owl would see another and fly straight at it whilst screeching and with talons outstretched, sometimes interlocking in mid-air. I had seen similar behaviour the previous winter but between a Short-eared Owl and a Barn Owl. At first they did not seem to associate the clicking sound of the camera shutter with any danger. One owl in particular flew straight at the camera leading to a memorable image shown on BBC 'Autumnwatch Unsprung' on 2011-11-11.

News of all these owls soon spread and more and more people were turning up to see and photograph them. At times there were more photographers than owls. This led to the National Trust having to put up some very polite signs asking people not to



invade the wildlife areas in pursuit of their 'better' photographs. I witnessed many photographers in full camouflage gear and with very expensive equipment, who simply ignored these requests and headed right into the middle of the reserve. The silly thing about this situation was that one of the 'best' spots I found was in a small field surrounded by fencing and ditches with a convenient picnic table where you could sit in a bag hide and have the owls fly by at very close quarters. No need to disturb all that wild area at all.

It was from this location that I gained some very memorable images of a kestrel attempting to steal a rodent which one of the owls had caught. I had observed the previous year a barn owl being mobbed by a kestrel trying to steal its prey but all those images were too far away or not sufficiently sharp. This time they were a lot closer (but they are never as close as you want!) and had a fight for long enough to take of a sequence of images, not perfect but far better than previously. This image won a PAGB Gold Medal at the Rushden National Exhibition 2012 and was also a finalist in Wildlife Photographer of the Year 2012.

Over the coming months the number of owls declined dispersing into the surrounding areas. Perhaps in search of other habitats where the competition for prey species was not so intense. The folks at Wicken Fen are hoping that they will breed this year but there are no reports of this to date. Lets hope that we have another influx of these magnificent owls again this coming winter. I for one will be trying to improve on last winter's images.

Equipment used: Canon 7D; Canon EF 300mm f2.8 with 1.4 x converter; Gitzo tripod with Wimberley Head; Bag hide; Camouflage Clothing.

