

# **A Bird in the Hand**

*The true-life story of a Robin*



**Ursula Jeffree**



## **A Bird in the Hand**

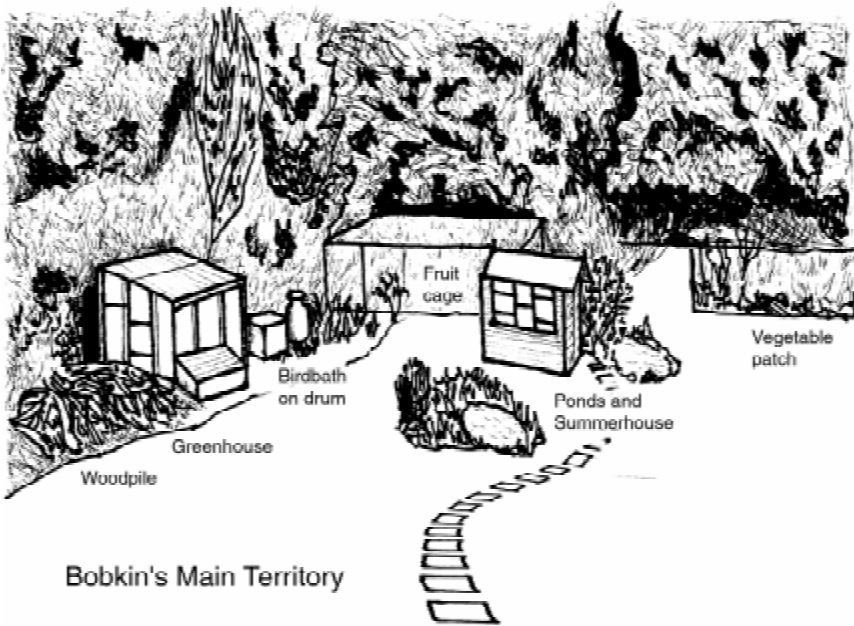
*Being a short diary of the life of our garden robin, together with some other wildlife that shares his environment. The story follows him through some five years until the present time, when he is still full of life.*

*To set the scene, the garden is mainly utilitarian, about half an acre in size, with plenty of lawn, some apple trees, vegetable plot and fruit cage. There are also two little ponds situated on either side of a small summer house. We have neighbouring houses and gardens on either side, but ancient natural woodland on our furthest boundary.*

*Small parts of the garden have been deliberately left wildlife-friendly, or rather unkempt as many may prefer to describe it. Long grass, leaf litter and other undergrowth lurks beneath some of the hedges and a stack of unwanted wood is allowed to rot quietly in the sun, undisturbed. A stinging nettle patch is always allowed to flourish as food for the caterpillars of many beautiful butterflies and moths. A small bramble patch provides both flowers for insects and fruit for the birds and ourselves to share. The mixed hedges contain holly, ivy and various cotoneasters which provide valuable pollen and berries.*

*There is seldom much snow in our part of the country, but if the weather turns really cold, we scatter some apples, stored since autumn, for the local blackbirds and thrushes. Redwings and fieldfares also come to feed. We stir up leaf litter under the hedges and turn over logs so that the birds can help themselves to the goodies revealed. It is also important to make sure there is some water free from ice.*

*Ursula Jeffree, Brockenhurst.*



*A visiting fieldfare.*

## **The first Bobkin year.**

It was a bitterly cold morning in mid-December when Bobkin hopped through our dining-room window and into our lives. Having finished up the remains of some food we had left on the sill, he found a gap just wide enough for an adventurous little bird to enter. Perhaps there was more or better food inside? He flew down to the carpet at our feet and proceeded to explore our dining and sitting rooms. The green carpet proved to be no substitute for grass, however, yielding no worms at all and only the odd dried crumb. Allowing himself to be gently steered back to the open window, he paused momentarily on the sill for a loud snatch of song before flying off.

As days grew colder squirrels grew bolder and, finding it hard to keep the windowsill well provisioned, we fed our bold robin from a bowl held at arm's length through the window. Once used to the routine, he grew brave enough to come to anyone standing outdoors with his bowl.



With lengthening days, the cold snap over and snowdrops appearing under the apple trees, we and our robin gradually parted company. He went about his

courting and we became busy with early gardening chores. It was not to be until late summer that we re-established close contact.



In the back garden we had an invasion. A pair of roe deer made a habit of coming through the hedge very early each morning to sample our vegetables and anything else that took their fancy. They presented a very pretty picture when we drew our bedroom curtains in the early light, tripping daintily and warily up the lawn with ears pricked, alert for any strange noises. Though ever watchful and poised for instant flight, their curiosity led them on, exploring almost up to the house. The doe delicately tasted a crocus and finding the bloom very much to her liking, gobbled the whole clump. Not to be outdone, the buck found some more



*The dawn raiders.*



*Large Red Damselflies egg-laying..*

hedge finding sheltered places to sun themselves on the woodpile. Newts also awoke, emerged from their over-wintering places under stones or logs and made their way back to the ponds to breed.

Later, whilst wrestling with garden chores, we took time off to watch the first large red damselflies emerging from our two small ponds. They were, as always, the first members of the dragonfly order to appear, being on the wing by late April. Since hatching from eggs laid in water plants last spring, their larvae have led a carnivorous existence, climbing through the vegetation and along the bottom of the ponds stalking their plankton prey. They have been fortunate not to have themselves ended up as a meal for the much larger species of dragonfly which share their environment and sometimes spend

and they demolished those as well. Surprisingly little other damage occurred though as laurel and brambles seemed preferable to our broccoli and leeks.

The longer warmer days of early spring tempted butterflies out of hibernation. As usual brimstones came first, followed by peacocks, commas and small tortoiseshells. They fluttered along our southern boundary



*A newly emerged Southern Aeshna dragonfly.*

*Bobkin on the edge of his territory, which varies in size from year to year but always includes our small summerhouse, the woodpile and the stretch of thick hedge behind it on our northern boundary.*



*A fine toad in the pond.*

several years in the larval stage. These larger ones are also quite capable of devouring big tadpoles and young newts. Being a very old order of insects, they have no pupa stage, transforming straight from crawling, swimming, water-breathing larvae to flying, air-breathing adults. Once a dragonfly is ready to emerge, the larva, or nymph as it is sometimes called, climbs up a reed or other suitable support. Its skin splits to release the adult which expands its wings and dries out ready to fly in an hour or so. Several members of the dragonfly order breed in our ponds and others come visiting, so there are usually dragon and damselflies to be found here in suitable conditions throughout the summer. A small proportion of youngsters are taken by birds either whilst drying off after emergence or during their rather slow faltering maiden flight, but many seem to survive.

One very hot dry day when natural food was in short supply, a robin appeared on the scrounge as we were eating lunch in the summer house. To see if it was our bold friend from the winter, we fetched his bowl and sure enough his immediate interest proved that he knew what it should contain. He soon flew onto it to feed as before and as his confidence grew, the bowl quickly became redundant. With the first physical contact of his landing on a hand, our relationship took a large step forward. Enchanted by his trust, we named him Bobkin and knew we should be friends from now on. It only gradually dawned that we had fallen under his spell and were about to become willingly but irreversibly enslaved.

Provided food was on offer Bobkin was quite free with his favours, delighting some of our visitors by landing on their hands. They had to remove their hats first though and on no account approach him wearing an anorak hood. He distrusted anything that disguised the shape of the head, even having his doubts about shoulder-length hair.

We gradually became aware of the extent of Bobkin's territory. This has changed from year to year both in size and shape, but always included the summerhouse, woodpile and most of our northern boundary hedge where there are several trees to provide strategic singing perches.

Apart from the two very small ponds, we had a variety of places for birds to bathe in the garden, a popular one being a large photographic developing dish, supported on a drum about waist high and close to the cover of a thick hedge. However, Bobkin and even blackbirds sometimes preferred the cramped space of an old margarine pot. I once watched a young blue tit try to bathe by entering a bath backwards. It tried again and again, apparently unable to understand why its head and shoulders remained dry. Sometimes blue tits bathed in the dew. They





*Bobkin with ice in the developing dish...*

chose a place where the grass or vegetation is lush, crouched down low and pushed themselves forwards through it until they were thoroughly wet. Normal ducking and fluffing movements followed.

Our garden robins usually bathed in the evening, however cold the weather, and often at other times of day as well. Following a bath, after a quick shake or two, Bobkin was usually very hungry. He perched on a hand, alternately feeding and fluffing his still damp feathers into place, before flying to a sheltered spot for a preening session. It was astonishing how quickly he went from soaking wet to dry and immaculate.

For drinking, Bobkin much preferred rainwater from a revolting old plastic pot, half full of leaf debris, which stood under the hedge. He also often took rain or dew drops from leaves and twigs.



*... and in a margarine pot.*

Determined to construct a squirrel-proof bird table before winter returned, we started experimenting. Replacing the wooden support with a smooth steel pipe failed utterly, as a squirrel climbed it before Paul got back to the house. We then stretched three long wires across the garden and suspended the table and nut holder where they joined. This was successful at first, but after a while some squirrels became expert tightrope walkers, and could even negotiate large spinning



*Shaking so vigorously, after bathing, that his tail feathers vanish in a blur.*

disks threaded onto the wire. Bundles of holly tied along deterred them for only a little longer. The eventual solution to the problem was very simple and has proved most successful ever since. The trick was to use a smooth support pillar, wide enough that the squirrels could not clasp it to climb up. A length of 4-inch drainpipe was just adequate, with a horizontal bar on top from which to hang the nut feeder about six feet off the ground. A table for seeds fixed to the top of the pipe served also to cover up the hole so that no young birds could fall down. Provided the setup was situated out of leaping range from house or trees, all was well. In fact 6-inch pipe would have been better, as one very determined squirrel almost managed to reach the nuts. His ambition however, was easily foiled when we smeared the support with a little baby oil causing him to slide ignominiously down. He hopped off with such dignity as he could muster and never tried again.

We have since had a large variety of birds using the table. Apart from the usual tits and finches, we see spotted woodpeckers, nuthatches and siskins. Seeds and a wire mesh peanut holder are available all the year round, as there seems little chance of unsuitable food being fed to the young. We have watched blue tits flying up into the trees for caterpillars to feed their brood, but using the nuts to supplement their own diet.

## The second year.

When winter came and we were no longer spending much time outdoors, we needed to discover a means of attracting Bobkin's attention to continue his hand feeding. Unsurprisingly, calling proved useless but he responded well to any kind of whistling noise. On some occasions he ate relatively little whilst remaining a long time on a hand, which led Paul to comment: "He really just wants an excuse to warm his feet."

One day we discovered that a blue tit was roosting in the dome of an outside telephone bell, on the wall of the covered passage leading to our back door. We first noticed it in September and it returned each night until March, when it left, presumably for the breeding season. It returned, we assumed the same one, in the next autumn and stayed that winter too.

While it was in residence, we tried to remember to turn the bell off at night and on again each morning. However, finding that this chore could be easily forgotten it seemed simpler to keep the switch off all the time. We shall never know how many calls went unheard in consequence. Because the bluetit was very easily scared when first entering the bell, we also had to remember to use the front door around blue tit bedtime, which is, incidentally, much earlier than robin roosting time. Once



*Bluetit waiting to feed.*

asleep, however, with its head under its wing and feathers fluffed up against the cold, it seemed oblivious to most comings and goings. On the few occasions when we forgot its presence, made too much commotion and frightened it away, we felt terribly guilty, especially if the night was cold. Sometimes, after a fright, it would remain away for a night or two, so there was always a sense of relief when it eventually returned unharmed.

Other, less welcome, visitors that winter were woodmice in the garage, nibbling our stored apples. Paul devised a trap, to catch them without harm, which proved very effective. Quite amazingly effective in fact, since we caught a mouse every night for the next fifteen nights! It at last dawned on us that the woodland

beyond the bottom of our garden, where we had been releasing them, was simply not far enough away. The same pair just kept coming back, only slightly inconvenienced. The next two nights' catches were exported a couple of miles and we had no more trouble.

In midwinter when the days were shortest and the weather cold, Bobkin was busy singing loudly, proclaiming ownership of his territory and advertising for a mate. Other robins around could be heard doing the same, as this was the time of year for the birds to pair up. Prior to the courting season, a hen entering a male's area would be unceremoniously chased away, so she approaches cautiously at first. Once accustomed to each other, though, robins share each other's domain.

In due course we noticed that Bobkin had acquired a mate. She was very shy and we seldom caught a glimpse of her as she kept in the cover of the hedge, but they raised four fine youngsters. Soon after they fledged there was a shortage of good robin food. Having watched Bobkin hunting for long periods of time without



*Greater Spotted Woodpecker.*

success and perching by the woodpile on fruitless worm watch, we eventually decided to try to help. We bought some maggots from an angling shop and offered them to him in a small hand-held box from time to time during the day. He was delighted with these extra rations, eating some himself and taking the rest to his young. Sometimes he would fly straight to the box from the far side of the garden, overshooting in his eagerness and landing half way up an arm. He was then obliged to hop back along the arm to the box. Occasionally, he would even land on one's head. Often he fed the maggots to the hen, which in turn fed the young. As before, she kept her distance from us. Of course, as conditions improved we had to gradually wean them off this extra food.

One Sunday afternoon in mid summer, we found a rather beautiful, bold, furry stranger in the garden. Initial interest quickly turned to dismay when we realised we had a mink amongst us. It didn't seem at all afraid, exploring under the summerhouse and over the woodpile. Bobkin came and watched intently but didn't seem to see it as a threat, nor did he cuss it as he would a cat.

Clearly we had to get rid of it, but how? We decided to trap it in the greenhouse and then seek help. Persuading it into the greenhouse proved fairly easy, as its curiosity knew no bounds and every corner seemed worth exploring. But once the door was shut, it went berserk, rushing all around and through the water reservoir under the tomato plants.

We first tried the RSPCA but could get no reply. We then spoke to someone from a local animal sanctuary who informed us it is illegal to keep mink and also illegal to release them. So we had a problem! He suggested we kill the animal with a spade. Not feeling quite up to this task, we rang the Forestry Commission, which was most willing to help by sending someone to shoot it. Considering where it was trapped, we turned down this kind offer and went to see how our captive was behaving. To our horror it was setting about the task of methodically chewing a way through the wooden frame of its prison. Although the wood is thick, we were afraid it might break out during the night so desperately rang the RSPCA again. At last we got through and a splendid lady came with a trap. Undeterred by the fact that it was now pitch dark, she managed eventually to catch the animal by torchlight, with the aid of a bribe of cat food scrounged from a neighbour. Sorting out the greenhouse next morning, we realised how lucky we were to be rid of such a hazard.



*Spring beech buds. The overhanging branches give shade where a few bluebells grow.*



*Holly Blue on bluebell.*



*Speckled Wood.*

### **The third and fourth years.**

Bobkin gradually became still more trusting. When winter came again, we would go and whistle by his woodpile and, if hungry, he quickly came to be fed with pinhead oatmeal, which he enjoys. In very stormy weather, the best strategy seemed to be to keep the hand containing food close to the body whilst using the free hand to hold one's coat open as a windbreak. Bobkin, surprisingly, didn't seem to find this method too claustrophobic.

We came to realise that raising a brood safely is no easy task for small birds. Bobkin had family problems in the third and fourth springs.

In the third spring Bobkin's mate was again extremely shy, possibly the same bird as last year. They raised a brood but, sadly, on the day the youngsters left the nest, some of them and also their mother went missing. We thought a cat, or possibly a fox, was probably to blame but could not be sure, as there are so many hazards around for small birds. This left Bobkin to cope with the two surviving offspring, which he did magnificently. He kept them hidden in a thick rhododendron bush near the nest site for a few days, until they were strong enough to fly quite well. He then escorted them across the garden into the much better cover of a thick hedge on the other side and fed them conscientiously for three weeks until they were well grown and independent. Feeling he could probably do with some help, we again supplied maggots as in the previous year.

Bobkin's new mate in the fourth spring had a very different character from her predecessor. She was a much bolder little hen although not very robust looking. She had a broken toe, which probably made her takeoff and landing a little awkward, although it didn't seem to hurt her.

She watched Bobkin feeding from hands and came quite close. After a while we decided to encourage her by resting a handful of food on a large metal drum by the hedge. A sparse trail of food was placed between hedge and hand to tempt her to follow. At first, she would stop a few inches from the hand but gradually ventured closer and closer until she could reach over the fingers to feed. We found this stage most endearing as she pressed her lovely soft front feathers against one's skin. She soon put one foot, then both together, on the hand and within about five days was prepared to fly short distances to us. In a week or so she dared to fly in from anywhere in the garden, as did Bobkin.



*Wild Arum fruits.*



*Hoverflies on Hawkbit.*

*There are several uncultivated corners in the garden, where wild flowers flourish.*



*Speedwell.*



It was then that we were able to observe the differences between male and female robins at close quarters. We noticed that the hen had lighter coloured legs and feet, together with a more streamlined appearance generally. She perched very neatly with feet close together gripping one's finger or thumb as though it were a twig, rather than balancing with legs wide apart and feet flatter which was



*Squeak flutters her wings as she comes to hand.*

Bobkin's style. The hen also fed much more hurriedly, presumably practice for the short time she had available when brooding young. Occasionally, both birds would come to a hand together and feed quite amicably side by side.

When ready to breed, in common with all hen birds, the female kept up a constant cheeping at her mate for food and, in consequence, we named the new girl Squeak. Most of the time Bobkin brought her a proper robin diet of insects, grubs, spiders, worms, etc., but, if hard pressed, he would occasionally give her a couple of grains of oatmeal to keep her quiet. We were astonished by the amount of food she could eat.

Squeak tried several times to produce a brood, but always without success. She started to lose feathers and look out of condition generally, spending much too long preening and not enough time eating, or so it seemed to us. She also cheeped less so Bobkin lost interest somewhat. We sought advice but no one seemed to



*Bobkin (left) interrupts Squeak's feed of oatmeal to give her something better.*

know what the trouble might be. We decided to try feeding her up with nutritious food and bought her some mealworms, which, we had learned, are supposed to be much better for robins than maggots. Incidentally, someone should explain this to Bobkin as he always flatly refuses to touch them, even when ravenous. I don't know whether this extra feeding helped, but Squeak liked the new fare very much and gradually recovered. Bobkin fed her again in earnest. She made another nest and it soon became clear she was brooding eggs. We awoke very early each morning to the sound of her cheeping at Bobkin for food. Perhaps all would be well at last.

However, sadly, it was not to be. One morning, around about the time we calculated the eggs should hatch, the garden was much too quiet. With a feeling of foreboding we went out to investigate. Confirming our worst fears, Bobkin came for breakfast alone and took nothing away. After an hour or so, to make certain sure, we approached the nest site. It took a moment or two to find its exact location, as we never go too close lest disturbance of the vegetation should lead the

way for predators. The nest had been dragged out of its shelter in the ivy and there was no sign of either eggs or Squeak. It seems that female robins live a very hazardous existence.

A week or so after losing his family, Bobkin started to moult. As do other birds, robins feel insecure at this time, being somewhat handicapped by a shortage of tail and flight feathers. As Bobkin seemed nervous and was reluctant to leave the cover of the hedge for long, we took his food over to him. Around this time he started to have bouts of sneezing, something he had done before but never so badly as this. Because the sneezing seemed to impair his ability to catch and swallow his natural prey, we bought maggots again. He was also fed centipedes, which were by then one of his favourite foods although he seemed afraid of them when younger. Millipedes met with his approval too provided they were smallish. He found the largest ones harder to cope with when they wound themselves around his beak like animated spaghetti. We don't know whether the cause of his sneezing was illness or allergy, but after a time it became less severe and, with new feathers, his confidence returned. It was a happy day when he at last started singing again.

We noticed a new hen robin hunting at the bottom of the garden, more robust than Squeak and very cheeky. She frequently made trespassing forays into Bobkin's territory, which annoyed him intensely. However, she looked a fine bird and we wondered: "Perhaps next year?"

One fine evening Bobkin was singing on our southern boundary fence when I took him his usual oatmeal for supper. Having eaten his fill, he continued his song, fortissimo, from my hand, keeping it up for many minutes, answering the robin next door. When delivered at point blank range and intended to carry, robin song can be earsplittingly shrill. However, at the time and on later occasions when he has repeated the performance, I felt ridiculously pleased as he seemed to be saying "this person is mine".

Often whilst working in the garden, one became suddenly aware of a small presence close by. Bobkin would perch in the nearest suitable cover and warble his quiet little sub-song, nonstop, for a considerable time. A beautiful, melodious noise, it always sounded contented to us or even a little smug.

Bobkin became even more sociable. One afternoon, whilst weeding a flowerbed, I felt a light touch as he landed on my shoulder. He had decided I would maybe make a good perch to hunt from, as though he had been watching exotic wildlife films about buffalo and cattle egrets, with me cast as the buffalo.

*Bobkin in full song.*



Unfortunately the strategy didn't work well for him as he made me laugh so much I unintentionally shook him off.

Our back door had to be kept firmly closed because Bobkin was quite likely to come in, exploring, if he felt neglected. Apart from any considerations of hygiene, there were too many hazards like hot cookers for this to be allowed. However, one never knows what other wildlife surprises may occur indoors.

On visiting the bathroom one night, half-asleep and without my glasses, I noticed an oak leaf in the loo pan. This came as no great surprise since we had both been gardening that day. What I was quite unprepared for, though, was the 'leaf' suddenly falling into the water with a loud plop and proceeding to swim vigorously. The surrealism of it shocked me instantly awake. Considering the very long and arduous journey the poor frog, as I now saw it was, had undertaken up our drains from the bottom of the garden, it didn't seem right to pull the chain. I therefore tried to catch it but without success since, misunderstanding my good intentions, it kept diving round the bend. I returned to bed and by morning there was no sign of our visitor until a shout came from Paul downstairs: "Here's your frog by the front door, waiting to be let out."



*On fine days in midsummer, robins like to sun themselves, lying flat with their feathers spread out, in the hottest place they can find, here on a large metal tank. This behaviour may help bring their parasites to the surface.*



## The fifth year.

Next January, on the 10th, the same date as last year almost to the day, Bobkin had a new lady friend. She looked beautiful and bold, very likely the same hen who had been a thorn in his side last summer. We decided not to attempt to tame the new girl, thinking it might lead to complications later on, and that perhaps one robin coming to the hand was enough. Bobkin had other ideas though. Whilst feeding from a hand by his woodpile, he suddenly made the little chortle which means “Come and eat here darling”, and hopped aside to make space. The hen shot out of the hedge but at the last minute her courage failed her.



*A courting silhouette.*

Bobkin needed to try just twice more for her to land on my hand and feed, less than twenty-four hours since his first invitation. Though clearly terrified, for one could feel the tension in her feet, she was astonishingly prepared to accept his judgement in preference to her own. A fine demonstration of the trust a hen bird can have in her mate. Once successful there was no going back, however, and she soon became much more relaxed. We heaved a sigh that our plans had been so easily thwarted and named her Scamp, appropriately as it turned out.

Once confident, Scamp claimed any hand with food as her own, refusing to permit Bobkin to share. He had to wait patiently for her to finish and leave. Though he accepted the situation with a good grace, we decided to get around the problem by putting food on both hands at once, held about two feet apart. Occasionally Scamp would imagine that maybe his was better than hers, but on the whole the system worked well.

Both birds were my constant companions whilst busy with spring chores, digging and barrowing compost. They were particularly pleased when I removed the black polythene which had been covering our vegetable patch over winter, revealing a feast of exciting goodies beneath. Scamp quickly gobbled down all the



*Scamp (left) and Bobkin.*

prey she could find and most of Bobkin's catches too. Since one has to be very careful wielding spades and forks with two such tame robins under foot, I decided to take things slowly, with pauses to try photographing Scamp. I had few pictures of her so far as she was very camera shy at first. She didn't trust that big round eye, and dived into the nearest bush at the sound of the shutter. However, she had by now suddenly decided that it was harmless after all and ignored me. The trouble was just that she was never still for two seconds and when I bent over to snap her on the wheelbarrow, Bobkin distracted by hopping about on my back.

Spiders were one of the robins' favourite foods. They ate plenty of the smallish ones that run around on the ground, and would eagerly tackle even the very largest kinds. We had other spiders however that usually escaped the birds' attention. Crab spiders match their colour to various flowers, where they sit in motionless ambush awaiting pollen-hungry insects. So good is their disguise that one only becomes aware of their presence by noticing the unnatural stillness and position of their prey.

It was interesting over the years to note how different robins varied in their food preferences. When occasionally offered a very large chafer beetle grub, Bobkin immediately grabbed it as a great prize and retired under the hedge to deal



*Scamp catches a worm in the wheelbarrow.*



*Scamp hunting in the compost heap.*





*This wasps' nest is well placed in an apple tree, with food close at hand.*



*The crab spider can match its colour exactly to the hypericum flower, where it waits to pounce on its prey.*



*The Angleshades.*



*Large Emerald.*



*Pine Hawk.*



*Elephant Hawk.*

*The garden is host to many different kinds of moth, some of which are eaten by robins.*

with it in private, whereas Scamp ignored such things completely. Although most robins appear to greatly enjoy mealworms, Bobkin never lost his distrust of them.

Scamp built her nest in an old rotting fence post at the bottom of the garden, in her last summer territory. Whilst she was brooding eggs, the weather suddenly took a turn for the worse. We had gales, rain and even some late snow. It was bitterly cold and we were worried that there was little proper food available. We bought mealworms for Scamp so that she could fill up quickly in the very brief time she could spend off the nest. We also bought maggots for Bobkin to keep him going, and as something he could take to her. Much to our delight all went well and their three youngsters survived to become independent.



*Scamp amongst the apple blossom.*

A week after her brood had left the nest, Scamp started building again while still helping to feed the youngsters. A week later she was sitting on eggs while Bobkin fed both her and their by now well-grown family. Unfortunately, this time she chose a rather too exposed site. It was in her old territory again and we wondered whether she preferred a place that she knew well, and so chose it instead of the much better cover in Bobkin's territory. Something raided the nest and took the young when they were about five days old, but Scamp luckily escaped unharmed. The culprit could have been one of many different kinds of predator including magpie, squirrel, snake or even hedgehog.

Bobkin was clearly in favour of immediately starting again. He sang from his highest tree and brought Scamp presents of food and nesting material, but we don't think any more eggs were laid.

During one very hot spell, we had an unpleasant task to perform. For some time we had been finding hornets indoors in the evenings and suspected there was a nest nearby. It turned out to be in the worst possible place, through a gap below the roof tiles next to our bedroom window. Unlike common wasps, hornets continue foraging all night and, led astray by the lights in the house, they blundered in whenever a door or window was left open. We tried keeping upstairs windows closed until the lights were put out at bedtime, but unfortunately a few still found their way in. Having a disorientated hornet zooming around the bedroom is hardly conducive to sleep and when it inevitably falls to the floor, one can't help wondering where it will crawl. Lying in the dark, imagination works overtime. Perhaps it will climb on the bed, or stay on the floor to be trodden on by a bare foot or even become enmeshed in one's underwear? To keep the windows shut on hot summer nights being out of the question, we reluctantly made plans to destroy the nest. Luckily it was just about accessible by ladder and Paul, wearing suitably protective gear climbed up with some derris to perform the grizzly deed. Hornets seemed to be much more susceptible to poisons than are common wasps and one dose was sufficient. We hated having to kill them though, as they are such fine looking insects and normally not at all aggressive.

Common wasps that live in the ground often have their nests destroyed overnight by badgers, which dig them out in order to eat the grubs. Though a nuisance and quite aggressive, wasps are not altogether bad news in the garden, as they kill many harmful pests to feed their carnivorous larvae. Unfortunately they also kill desirable insects. I once found a wasp decimating a clutch of young small tortoiseshell-butterfly caterpillars. The wasp was slicing the caterpillars into portable chunks with its jaws and carrying them away to the nest one at a time. It returned again and again and, fearing lest there would be no caterpillars left, I took the remainder into protective custody. I kept them in a muslin cage and fed them their diet of stinging nettles until they pupated. A couple of weeks later, I had to keep a close eye on them for signs of imminent emergence, such as colour darkening as the butterfly wings began to show through the by now thin skin. Once safely out and dry, the new insects were released back into the garden.

One hot day in midsummer the robins were uncharacteristically absent when we were sitting in the garden and we wondered why. A clue came when we noticed swallows and martins swirling around in excitement overhead. Even a few bats had

joined them although it was only early afternoon. Obviously a feast of some sort was on offer up there and we realised it had to be swarming ants. All the ants of the same species in a given area habitually swarm at the same time. This must have been a good year for them as many millions were taking to the air at once from the nests around. We eventually spotted our robins getting in on the act gobbling the insects as they emerged from the ground. It seemed to be a ticklish business necessitating rushing in, grabbing and retreating rapidly before the ants crawled up their legs.

Moulting time came again and both birds were extra alert watching for danger. They were especially aware of anything flying and kept a wary eye open for sparrow hawks, which have always been a great menace to small birds in our area. They fly fast and low along the hedges ready to dive on any easy prey and sometimes perch in silent ambush high in the pine trees of our southern boundary. Sometimes such a threat would appear when a robin was on a hand feeding and, if safe cover was too far away, the bird would flatten itself down where it was whilst giving the long high call which means 'danger from the air'. A sudden loud clap of thunder once also produced the flattening action. The robins also dive for cover when any member of the crow family flies near.

Scamp recovered from her moult quite quickly, but Bobkin became badly out of condition again, sneezing and scratching like mad. We bought a few more maggots for both of them, and caught centipedes and the like for Bobkin, not too hard to find under sacks of leaf-mould and such places. The only snag was ensuring that this most nourishing food went down Bobkin, as Scamp, being fitter and quicker, always tried to grab the best bits first. I tried offering him one of the centipedes held between thumb and forefinger within a few inches of his beak. He immediately took it and, once we had our coordination synchronised correctly, this strategy worked every time, but



*Bobkin and centipede. He prefers them to millipedes which writhe around his face.*

if I let go too soon the 'pede ran away or if I held on too long Bobkin couldn't take it. Usually it was simple with such a very tame bird.

One day, when Bobkin's moult was at its worst and he should normally have been keeping a low profile, he appeared bobbing and hopping about on top of his woodpile, cussing furiously. I don't think I have ever seen him so indignant. He drew himself up to his full height, revealing patches of bald skin around his



*A Painted Lady butterfly sunning itself on the woodpile.*

neck and face, giving him something of the appearance of a miniature vulture. On going over to investigate, I could see nothing at all untoward. No cats about, although no mere cat would have provoked such a reaction. This little scruffy bundle of feathers was literally hopping mad and, from his body language, the object of his wrath was very close at hand. At last I saw it. A very young grass snake curled up asleep on the warm wood under a piece of honeysuckle. I fetched my camera and one click was enough to send it packing. Once out of sight, Bobkin



*Bobkin's grass snake.*

immediately lost interest in it and calmed down. He was right to be cross, though, since grass snakes are a considerable danger to eggs and young birds. The snakes climb readily and I recently found one's sloughed skin at about shoulder height in one of our hedges. We see grass snakes in the garden every year. They hunt in the ponds, and one can often tell when a large one is in this confined space as the frogs leap frantically out of the water in panic.



*Hornets enjoy eating apples, but there are seldom very many of them.*



*Red Admirals also like apple juice.*

Breeding and moulting over, the robins started to show some animosity towards each other. At first just gaping when food was about, but then Bobkin started shooing Scamp off and she was obliged to retreat to her old territory of last summer. To avoid too much hassle, we now fed Scamp by a buddleia bush at the bottom of the garden. She knew the form and flew to the bush as one approached. If she was out of sight in the wood, a quick whistle or two was soon answered by her short 'tick' contact call which means 'here I am', as she hurried out of cover. Bobkin therefore had the house end of the garden and Scamp the wood end. The summerhouse belonged to Bobkin, but if she felt particularly hungry, Scamp risked a visit when she could see us sitting there. This once resulted in her being chased round and round the interior, about 7ft square, for her temerity.



*Comma butterflies, like Small Tortoiseshells, have two generations a year, the second brood emerging in September.*



One day we noticed that Bobkin had acquired a very large tick, on the middle of his forehead just above his beak. He had had them a few times before, always in the autumn, but previous ones had been on his chest where they dangled like medallions until falling off, gorged, after a few days. He had never scratched at them or seemed in any way put out by their presence. This one was different though, probably because of its position, in human terms like having a tennis ball attached to one's forehead. When it had grown really huge, Bobkin became alarmingly and most



*With tick on forehead and a weevil on his beak.*

uncharacteristically dopey. He sat on his woodpile for hours with his eyes frequently closing, very dangerous for a small bird. We stayed close, to deter any predators, and fed him centipedes by the finger and thumb technique in his more wakeful moments, to keep up his strength. He recovered somewhat in the evening and went to roost at his normal time. Next morning, luckily, the tick was gone, leaving just a small gap in his feathers, which quickly covered over.

It was extremely windy that autumn with several gales. The robins found it hard to remain on our hands in this weather, frequently getting blown off. To make things easier for them, we pressed a hand with food against the twig or branch where they perched, so that they could remain on a firm support whilst feeding. Since neither bird flinched in the least when a hand was placed next to its feet, the system worked well.

### **The sixth year.**

In mid December Bobkin had a little adventure. Whilst cleaning up and tidying our outside passageway, I closed the back door without noticing that he had hopped through it. Some time later, working upstairs in the spare bedroom which doubles as an office, Paul suddenly became aware that he was no longer alone. Bobkin appeared in the doorway and on seeing a friend at last, flew happily over to



*Bobkin , immaculate and tick-free again, on his woodpile.*

the desk to join him. Paul opened a window and tried to gently usher him towards it with a hand. Bobkin inspected the approaching hand carefully but finding it didn't contain food, hopped neatly over it landing in the same place. He was clearly not ready to go while there was still exploring to be done and went off for a tour of our main bedroom. He found some dirty socks, which seemed to intrigue him, and he hopped around on our bed as though to say "so this is where you go to roost". At last he flew to a window and made an unhurried exit. Looking around the house later, we were able to trace his progress by the droppings and found that he had visited every room except the bathroom. He had not apparently fluttered at the windows or shown any sign of panic.

Around Christmas time we noticed that Scamp was entering Bobkin's territory more and more frequently. He made a show of chasing her away but she didn't give in quite so readily as she used to. By New Year he was prepared to tolerate her around so long as there was no food about and a week later she was also allowed to feed. Then Bobkin started entering Scamp's territory and singing loudly from the overhanging beech tree branches at the bottom of the garden. It seemed that they were together again and had pooled their resources.



*There is a home-made, dragon bird-bath on our front lawn. It has seldom been part of Bobkin's territory, but is used by other robins and many larger birds including the jackdaws.*



A pair of jackdaws made it plain throughout the winter that they had designs on our dining room chimney pot. Apparently our chimneys make very desirable residences as was demonstrated last spring when a pair nested in the pot on the other side of the house. This pair clearly intend to repeat the performance which doesn't worry us too much as their chosen chimney is never used. However, we do occasionally want a fire in the dining room so something had to be done. As the weather was wet and windy and our old fashioned chimneys very high, Paul postponed the necessary climb until mid January. He fixed a thick wire grating over the chimney top but the indignant birds had no intention of giving up easily. Loud steel band noises echoed through the house every morning, from first light, as the jackdaws struggled to remove the offending obstruction.

One day in early February Bobkin flopped down onto my hand with a badly damaged leg. It stuck out slightly sideways and he seemed completely unable to use it or move it at all. It was clearly painful as he tried to avoid touching even a claw against anything. Whenever he leaned forward to peck he needed to flutter his wings to keep balance and in flight the leg dangled down out of control. We couldn't tell whether it was broken, dislocated or badly strained, as the injury was invisible, high up amongst his feathers. Our immediate concern was to keep him off the ground, where his clumsy fluttering made him a temptingly easy prey for



*Scamp, left, and Bobkin on the woodpile, awaiting supper.*



*Bobkin almost overshoots in his eagerness.*

any passing cat. We therefore offered him food - pinhead oatmeal, chopped sunflower hearts and tiny bits of cheese - at very frequent intervals. Live food didn't seem a good idea since the need to bash it around would have been tiring in his condition. We adopted the same method of feeding that we use in a high wind, with a hand held against a log or branch to give him a firm support. The hand could be held at a suitable angle so that he didn't need to bend forward too much. Larger branches seemed the best choice since, if he perched on a twig, the injured leg hung behind him preventing him from turning round easily.

Seeing his problems, the urge to 'do something' became very great. However, we realised that to remove him from his environment was out of the question. Though he sometimes behaved like a tame budgie, he was no domestic pet to be taken to the vet, but a free wild bird with a territory to protect. Quite apart from the trauma of being caught, another male who was a rival challenging for his patch would immediately have taken over in his absence. In fact it could well have been chasing and clashing with the rival that caused the injury.

Rather than keeping a low profile in his disabled state, Bobkin became furiously active, chasing the other male at high speed through and around the hedge and singing loudly from his loftiest perches. He kept it up all day, just grabbing quick meals from us from time to time. He wouldn't ease off in the evening until all the other birds were silent and he was hardly visible as a dim silhouette against the darkening sky. Only then would he swoop down to find the outstretched hand for a last feed before roosting. We thought his determination quite staggering but he clearly knew that any show of weakness would spell disaster. Three days after his injury, Bobkin showed such a sudden great improvement that we assumed a dislocated joint must have slipped back into place. He could once again use the damaged leg as a prop and even grip slightly with the claw. The improvement was timely, as it happened, since a gale blew up the following night which would have added considerably to his balancing problems.

Bobkin's furious bluffing seemed to have discouraged the rival bird who became much less pushy. This allowed Bobkin to scale down his chasing and singing and return to a less exhausting regime. His leg continued a slow improvement until it was virtually back to normal. Once all was well, we were able to cut down his feeding sessions to a more sensible amount again. Scamp watched all the frenetic goings on from the sidelines and availed herself of any extra food on offer. For a day or two she seemed to be staying closer to the rival male, but soon decided that Bobkin was still the dominant bird and returned to him.

Now she seems to be showing him a little more respect than she did this time last year, even sometimes sharing a hand with him at feeding time. At the time of writing both birds look in immaculate condition. Bobkin is now six years old, at least, but come spring perhaps they will breed again.

There is a cautionary side to this story. It demonstrates how one can become unintentionally more and more involved, probably against better judgement at times. We are fortunate to have an old friend who stays in our cottage when we are away and attends to the birds' needs. It would be most irresponsible to cut off feeding suddenly, especially during the breeding season or in cold weather. That said, being so close to a wild bird for such a long time has been a very great privilege. Bobkin and his ladies have brought much pleasure, made us laugh, posed for photos and taught us a great deal.

Wild creatures can soon get under your skin. On holiday this year, returning from a high mountain walk, we passed a little clump of trees on bare hillside above the valley floor. Suddenly, from amongst them a burst of robin song rang out clear and loud and we both found ourselves exclaiming, with shameless sentimentality:

“Aah, Bobkin!”



*Bobkin and Scamp sharing a meal.*

