

BIRD HACKING

I love local newspapers such as this excellent publication and pick them up on my travels throughout the area, and it was in the 'NEWS of the WEALD' that I first read about the subject of "Bird Hacking". This was a new one on me so I was delighted to read in the January edition of the Valley Diary an article entitled "A summer love affair – me and Mrs B." Written anonymously, a Bird Hacker gave a detailed account of his activities. In brief, he had won the affections of a female (not lady!) blackbird by chirping and offering food to the point where she was virtually feeding from his hand. The patience required in doing this was commendable, although I most admire the cuckolded male of the species who, in spite of witnessing first hand the erotic shenanigans played out before him, he nevertheless helped produce and raise three broods with that Hussy!

On seeing the same article printed elsewhere in February I was now hooked. Bird hacking was definitely for me, and I decided to get started straight away. After all I am not entirely heartless, and felt that by winning the love of the bird sooner, might save the male of the species having his beak put out. To date my hand feeding experience was limited to the odd cat or dog, a stroppy parrot called Arnold, a horse and a giraffe in a French zoo. Oh, and of course myself, although as my shirtfront will bear witness to, I could do better. So good preparation was vital. Sensible clothing, a comfy chair and plenty of assorted food seemed to be the order of the day, and thus armed I settled into the task.

The first fruitless week proved a steep learning curve. My preparation was lacking. Knowledge of the blackbird's call and preferred diet may have brought her to me sooner rather than a constant stream of cats, crows, a passing tramp and a flock of sheep bleating over the back fence, none of whom did I wish to have a summer affair with, (although one of the sheep was quite pretty.) Derisory remarks from the family such as, "who's a pretty boy" did not help either.

The second week started just as badly when the family pointed out that Mrs B may be able to hear me but could never find me if I continued to wear my army surplus camouflage fatigues! Good point, I was wondering who would spot that! It was then I had an idea and got myself down to the garden centre where I bought one of those stuffed birds. You know the sort, they come with a "press me" label, which, when squeezed gives the call of the bird in whose image they are made. I took home what I thought was a blackbird but it's call did not bring my feathered friend to my bower. For, in my haste, plus my colour blindness and a touch of tone deafness I had instead purchased a stuffed replica of the very rare Lesser Spotted Crowfinchtit. No prizes then for guessing that it did not bring me the bird of my choice, but instead a great deal of very colourful advice from an army of twitchers glowering at me over the fence, recommending where I should let the said bird nest!

Towards the end of the third week the ideal situation presented itself. I could now chirp in blackbirdese, and knew their exact diet. The sun shone, and the family were off out for the day. As I watched my good lady get into the car, I enquired as to their destination, and received such jolly retorts as, "well it's not birdworld", and, "don't worry, we'll bring you back some sand for your cage".

As the engine noise disappeared into the distance I settled down to the job in hand, and just felt that today would be 'the day'. Late into the afternoon I let go both a very melodious chirp and a handful feed. Was that a response I heard? Had I imagined it? There it was again! At last! Eureka! Soon my every chirp was answered, but where was she. Soon I was hurling food in all directions and whistling like a demented fool. "Calm down, calm down!" I shrieked at myself sweating profusely. I took a breather, and then concentrated very hard and was sure that she was just the other side of the high lap larch fence, between us and our next door neighbour. I moved my deckchair so that I could reach her hidden position with food, and started again, making sure that an ample supply of it reached over the fence in order to encourage her from that garden into mine. And then!! I froze. To my horror the food was coming back at me! I threw another handful of food and a mouthful of chirps, and got back the same. Not only was she hard to get, but also very hard to please. Suddenly an idea, stop the food and just tweet. And so for the next twenty minutes we tweeted along to each other as only two dedicated beings might do. It really was love, although not 'at first sight'. But just then, as I was planning my next move some more food came at me, and I was amazed to see a small piece of pizza land at my feet. Now even I knew that pizza was not high on a blackbird's menu choice, and I had not sent it over the fence in the first place.

Astonished, I crept slowly forwards and found a knothole at a convenient height. On peering through, my eye first took in the flower border, then the edge of the lawn. No birdie yet. I then took in the shrubbery around, and the fruit trees, still nothing. And then, I saw it! A sight for a sore eye! Could I believe my eye? For there, sat squarely in the middle of their lawn, chirping his head off, and the very reason why food was coming my way was,..... My next door neighbour!! For the best part of the afternoon two grown men had happily and adoringly been tweeting to each other, each totally unaware that the man next door was also a Bird Hacker. For me however there was worse to come. He had out done me and I didn't like it. He was dressed, head to foot in,.... a blackbird outfit. He looked fantastic. I felt sick. I had not thought of everything as I had supposed. I dragged myself back to my seat and threw myself into it. Near to tears, and more in disbelief than anything else I staggered back to have a second look. He looked magnificent. Why had I not thought of that? And then, like a tidal wave it hit me. I could still do it. Surely somewhere about the house I could find enough bits and pieces to create my very own blackbird outfit.

Frantically, I raced indoors and went straight to the loft where I rummaged through numerous boxes and trunks, each labelled Christmas, fancy dress etc. Not much of use there. After a suicidal decent of the loft ladder, a and manic tour of various rooms and cupboards, I ended up in the bedroom with the following. A black balaclava and a yellow pointed party hat with the elastic chinstrap. That was my head and beak sorted. For my body a black bin liner with holes for head and arms, and this I pulled on with great difficulty over my sweating torso. I then attacked it with scissors for the feathery affect. On went the balaclava and the party hat beak. I was halfway there, but what about wings. I couldn't have my lily white arms on show. After all it wasn't a puffin that I was trying to imitate. The best I could find was a pair of long black dress gloves that my beloved wore when appropriate. They'd have to do. A quick look in the mirror now showed my brilliant white matchstick legs, and they needed to match the yellow of my resplendent beak. My beloved came to the rescue again, when I found, hidden away in her massive wardrobe an old pair of yellow tights from her hippy days.

I dangled them before me in the mirror. They looked very small, but they would have to do.

Now, I have witnessed many times the struggle to put tights on dainty female legs that are both hairless and sweat free, and it always a fight, particularly the last bit as the top seam reaches the armpits, with the knees flying in all directions. So it was no surprise that throughout the next twenty minutes I entered into a gargantuan battle. Inch by sweaty inch the undersized garment edged it's way upwards. Exhausted, I lay back on the bed to regain my breath. As my strength returned I wriggled around the bed so as to get a better view of myself in the mirror. The end result brought a smile to my face, and I gave a silly giggle. Just then, and all at the same time, I made a frantic adjustment of the tights that were riding up.

Just then, and all at the same time, my family walked in!

Cedric Horsefeather. aka 'The Birdman of East Dean'.

Somewhere on Levin Down.