



# BIRD'INN THE VILLAGE

DANIEL DOVAR

**A**s a follow up to the last 'In the Village' on green spaces, we take a look at some of the inhabitants of those places: the birds found around the Inn.

## CARRION CROW (*Corvus corone*)

One of the dominant, and most numerous, birds in The Walks, the crow, from the corvid family, was a source of great inspiration for Ted Hughes who lived not far away on Rugby Street. Maybe the ones seen around the Inn are the same ones that he watched. Although they seemed to rub shoulders fairly easily with the starlings in The Walks, they are far from popular in the country and have a long history of persecution and association with evil. The word 'crow' also has poor associations, such as 'crow's feet' – a metaphor for lines around the eyes. Despite this, as a corvid, they eschew the mantle of 'bird brain' being one of the most intelligent species of birds, pairs often acting in tandem to distract and then steal food; or juveniles communicating locations and co-ordinate the mobbing of other creatures; or simply dunking hard food into water to soften it up before guzzling.



## BLACKBIRD (*Turdus merula*)

Being a thrush, it is part of a family that includes the robin, the nightingale, the ring ouzel and the royal thrush – the fieldfare. It needs little, if any, description. It is one of the most beautifully melodious birds that is fortunately so common in our cities and our countryside. It is second only to the wren and chaffinch in number in Britain and Ireland and perches wing to wing with the wren in being the most widespread from the Hebrides to Cork and Dover – a feat assisted by its versatility with both food and nesting material. Interestingly, bird boxes erected in a corner of the Inn for the blackbirds have been taken



over by robins (see the photo). The blackbird obviously appreciates the benefits that accompany living in cities, as the density of population is 10 times higher in town than in country, although it wasn't until around the 1940s that blackbirds ceased being hunted – in the 17th century a dozen, for a pie, would set you back a shilling.



## WREN (*Troglodytes troglodytes*)

Talking of the little wren, readers might be reassured to know that there is still a nest hidden from view near the greenhouse at the back of The Walks, a place wrens have been known to frequent from many years back. Jason reports that they adopt a sheltered spot nearby as a nursery area when rearing their young.



**PARAKEET (Psittacula krameri)**

Another dominant bird in The Walks, this 'exotic' arrival has grown vastly in number over the years in London, and there are a variety of myths as to how it first took hold here – from Jimi Hendrix to Victorian pet zoo escapee. There has even been a Radio 4 programme dedicated to their arrival on these shores. They are regarded as a pest in their native India (if you look closely at the films *Ghandi* and *A Passage to India* you will see they play the part of subtle extras) and over here – they are installed at Gray's Inn in a hole in one of the huge plane trees near the greenhouse – they are a threat to smaller birds, taking all the fruit. Without any obvious presence of a predator (it is some time since sparrow hawks were seen), one fears for the impact they might eventually have on our native bird population.



**HOUSE SPARROW (Passer domesticus)**

The fact that they were so much part of our daily lives is reflected in the fact that the name is almost 1500 years old, from the old English 'Sparwa'. They also have a reputation for lechery – a characteristic not lost on either Chaucer or Shakespeare. This may have been partly the explanation why they were considered to be so much a pest that around the country sparrow clubs sprang up, providing medals

and honours for those who presented the most sparrow beaks in a year. More recently, though, their rapid and shocking decline led to numerous campaigns to protect them and also to reflect on the fact that they have rubbed shoulders with us for thousands of years.



**STARLING (Sturnus vulgaris)**

Almost the opposite of the blackbird, the starling has been said to emit 'a weird array of ecstatic noises that pass for a song' or a 'lively rambling medley of throaty warbling, chirruping, clicking, and gurgling sounds interspersed with musical whistles and pervaded by a peculiar creaky quality' (*Birds Britannica*, Cocker and Mabey and Tucker). They are also great mimics, even of humans. In days gone by, they were popular pets: listen out for its influence in Mozart's Piano Concerto in G Major, K453. They used to mass in their thousands in London; so that, in 1949, they managed to stop the hands of Big Ben by collective perching – a sort of modern day XR. Introduced to the United States by a man who wanted all the birds of Shakespeare to be resident across the pond, apparently their immense body mass now plays havoc with airline jet engines on take off.



**COMMON WOOD PIGEON (Columba palumbus)**

Possibly the clumsiest of all birds, often heard almost tumbling and flapping out of trees, the wood pigeon does have a handsome appearance and a charming call 'who cooks for-you-oh' (although sometimes a little too early in the morning). What it lacks in grace when in trees, it more than makes up for in the air, with its lilting swoop through the skies. Surprisingly, it is more common than the rock dove (on which, more below). They are fairly unphased by the human population, and are frequently seen 'waddling' about the Inn – presumably in the hope of finding a morsel of food.



## **GOLDFINCH (*Carduelis carduelis*)**

The arrival of goldfinches is heralded by their burbling calls a charm of these birds flock to the high branches of a tree. They are pretty easy to identify with the red around their beak and their bright yellow stripes on the wing. Most common here in the summer, they migrate to Southern

France and Spain in the winter. As well as an occasional visitor to The Walks they also appear in Bosch's 'The Garden of Earthly Delights'.



## **TITS GREAT (*Parus major*), BLUE (*Parus caeruleus*) and COAL (*Parus ater*)**

Blue and great tits being the most common, sightings of the darker coal tit have become more common recently, although they do prefer woodland of which there is not too much in town. The word 'tit' itself means small creature. Their exploitation of milk bottles by pecking the tops has lost its significance for most as we have moved away from door step delivery, full fat milk and glass bottles. The irony is that they cannot digest milk – just the cream on the top. As well as having black instead of blue markings, the great tit is larger than the blue and its songs are a little more complex.



## **ROCK DOVES (*Columba livia*)**

I have always thought that 'rock dove' was far too gnarly and rural a name for our most commonly sighted and rather mangy street bird, the pigeon. However, sometimes, when you catch sight of one with its iridescent plumage, you can see there is potential and are reminded that it is one of a number of birds within this species. Darwin estimated that there are around 228 varieties of rock dove, which include not just those that once filled Trafalgar Square, but also the symbol of peace. Their popularity with humans in Britain is reflected in the fact that at one point there were 26,000 dovecotes; although a lot of that was to do with the quest for a high protein diet. Their use as messengers dates back at least to Rameses III in 1198 BC and, although more of a hobby today, they were put to use during both world wars.



## **MAGPIE (*Pica pica*)**

And, finally, a bird, or rather usually a pair of birds ('one for sorrow, two for joy'), seen daily flirting either in The Walks or in Gray's Inn Square. Easy to identify with its black, blue and white plumage and notably long tail, the magpie, a member of the crow family, has acquired an unhappy reputation for stealing the eggs and young of other birds during the spring, though during the winter the magpie's diet is largely vegetarian, and in the summer predominately ground invertebrates. Apparently, magpie numbers have quadrupled in the last 35 years, most noticeably in suburban areas: they have relatively few enemies. Interestingly, they are non-migratory, and it is rare for one to travel more than 10km from where it was hatched.