

Plymouth “Hazzard” or Not?



In August 2010 the local Plymouth paper broke the news of an unlikely pairing in the wild under the headline of **“Common Buzzard and Harris Hawk have bred in Plymouth”**, following with typical journalistic scaremongering, asking **“Could this be the beginning of a Super Buzzard, or perhaps Buzz hawks, how dangerous is this type of cross in the wild?”**

So are the resultant youngsters Super Buzzards? From what I have heard from the locals who I have spoken to the simple answer is “Yes”. “Buzz hawks”? No, the locals call

them “Hazzards” and I suspect that they have the potential to be a hazard in some respects, but to date none have been reported that I am aware of, but I accept that the potential is there because of their unique upbringing which results in them being very tolerant of humans. How dangerous? Well if you are a rat or grey squirrel living in Plymouth then you had better get into the habit of looking over your shoulder!

The story started around 2006 or 2007. That summer I had a phone call from one of my daughters who was attending a barbecue at a friend’s house overlooking Victoria Park, Plymouth. She told me that there was a “falcon” sitting in a tree and taking a great interest in the BBQ. I got my falconry kit together and went down to find a juvenile male Harris Hawk sitting quite peacefully in a tree in the park. Yes – he took an interest in food and was more than interested in a dragged lure, but he was not going to come to the fist or be caught regardless of what I tried. The park was (and still is) alive with dog walkers and the Harris simply ignored dogs; there is none of the raucous screaming for which the species is known when a dog is sighted.

A few days later I had a phone call from the Independent Birds Register (IBR), as did several other falconers during that time, reporting a captive bird of prey loose in the park. Sure enough, these calls all related to this Harris, which at that time was fully kitted out with falconry gear: anklets, leather jesses to a swivel, an orange cable tie round one leg and a very obvious blue IBR closed ring. The bird was registered as lost with the IBR, having apparently been lost very early on by its novice owner before it had been fully trained. It remained fully and very visibly at large in the park where it established a territory to which it has remained faithful ever since.

Over the next couple of years I made periodic visits to the park, and saw the Harris on most visits, now in full adult plumage. Over the years he somehow managed to get rid of his kit, other than the anklets and closed ring, and was clearly thriving in this inner city park; the question was: How?

In time some of the residents pointed me in the direction of an older gentleman whose home bordered a secluded corner of the park. It transpired that he had adopted the Harris, naming it “Shadow”, and was calling it into his garden each day to be fed. Over time I got to know Ivor and learnt that he was hand-feeding the bird which would frequently sit on his shoulder as he pottered about. When the bad winter weather set in he used to shelter the bird overnight in a spare garden shed. I thought that I had convinced Ivor that it was in the bird’s interest to be recovered and returned back to falconry and its rightful owner, but he felt that he and his neighbours had adopted the bird, and there was no way that they were going to give it up.

A feral but very confiding Harris Hawk living in a city centre is interesting enough in its own right, but what really made me sit up and take notice was a report in February 2010

that the Harris had paired with a wild Buzzard and was nesting in a huge pine tree on the edge of the park. A visit to Ivor added a further twist: he told me that when “Shadow” had flown out into the park after being fed, he was attacked in full flight by an ‘eagle’! In fact, the “eagle” was the female Buzzard and the paired-up birds were doing food passes of the day-old chicks that Ivor was providing for them. The female Buzzard was interesting in her own right as she was one of the very pale morphs, and she could often be seen flying back to the nest site carrying day-old chicks. In 2010 they produced three chicks that fledged successfully.

There is some suggestion that later in 2010 the Hawk Board and Natural England tried to catch and remove the Harris and the brood of hybrid offspring. Whether this true or not, the birds remained at large. Unfortunately, around that time some of the rougher local elements took exception to the interest being taken in the birds, and several falconers got pushed around and roughed up in the park.

To my knowledge, 2011 was the only year in which the pair did not produce youngsters, but over the next years they remained faithful to the original nest site and have produced three or four chicks each year, up to and including 2013 when three youngsters fledged. In May 2013 I visited the park and could clearly hear the sound of a chick calling from the nest. As always, the male Harris was very evident. It is rare that a visit fails to result in a close-up view of him; he soars superbly and on more than one occasion I have watched as he climbed and soared on a thermal until out of sight. From that height he can see across Dartmoor, over the River Tamar deep into Cornwall and across the city into South Devon, as can his offspring. All these areas hold territory that is well suited to the needs of a Buzzard-type species.

So were the offspring remaining faithful to the natal area and forming a Harris Hawk-style family group, or was the female Buzzard driving them off once they became independent? I still cannot answer that question. When I have visited, I have on occasion seen the hen Buzzard perched in close proximity to one of her adult offspring, however I have only ever seen one of the hybrids in the park at any one time, although I have seen other hybrids flying near the park while others were perched within it. I have yet to see a first year hybrid as far as I am aware from their plumage I have only ever seen older birds.



On 18 September 2013 the Plymouth paper again ran a story when one of the hybrid birds was photographed taking a rat on Plymouth Hoe close to Smeaton's Tower. The article discussed the value of the hybrids in clearing up the city's rat population; it seemed that the City Council were more than happy to have them on the pest control team!

Rats are not the only mammals on the menu. When I first started to visit the park in 2007 the place was full of squirrels and you could hardly move without stepping on one. Try and spot one now, and the odd one that you do see is very wary and does not venture out from under cover.

The residents around the park have really taken these birds to their hearts and spend hours watching them from their front gardens. I have been told some remarkable stories of the hybrid youngsters ganging up to catch squirrels and gulls, hitting them one after the other and hammering their victim into submission. I have also seen the male Harris making high speed passes at Carrion Crows that venture too close to the nest site. There is no question of the crows mobbing the Harris; they simply flee screaming in fright, staying as tight to the ground as possible until they find safe cover.

Over the years, the youngsters have been fed in part on day-old chicks supplied by Ivor and they, like the Harris, have learnt to visit his garden to be fed. As a result they are remarkably tolerant of humans and carry on as if you were not there. For a wild-raised bird, they are tame beyond belief. There is a children's play park within yards of the nest and there are stories of the hybrid youngsters perching on the frames of the swings while kids play feet below. During the incredible hot summer of 2013 the bowling green at the end of the park was watered by a hose and sprinkler system and the hybrids gave great entertainment as they bathed under the sprinkler system; people queued up to watch the spectacle.



What does the future hold for these birds? The falconry community has mixed views, ranging from 'Shoot them all' to 'Live and let live'. Having spent some time visiting the park, and enjoying the spectacle of seeing their hybrids close up – within 10 metres without them being in any way concerned, I fall heavily on the "Live and let live" side. I accept there are doubts, and even rational concerns; in an ideal world they would be captured and removed from the wild ecosystem. I would jump at the chance to train one to see just what they can do as a falconry bird.

The big question being, "Are these hybrids fertile and capable of producing young of their own and in turn will those second generation hybrids be fertile?" At the present time I am not aware of any other confirmed reports of "Hazzards" anywhere else in the UK, so it's only the study of the Plymouth bred birds that will give us the answers to these questions. Bottom line there is no easy answer, some birds of prey do interbreed in a wild state Black & Red Kite have been recorded as doing so as have one species of tropical forest owl, I do not know of any evidence in respect of the fertility of the resultant cross bred Kites but the owl hybrids are fertile.

If you turn to falconry to give an insight both hybrid falcons and hybrid Buteo's have been produced by means of AI and those resultant offspring in turn reproduced by AI methods, however in general falconry terms the first generation hybrid females are found to be 75% infertile while the males are 50% fertile. Harris hawks tend to produce a greater number of female young than male, with on average 40% male and 60% female so that ratio in itself tends to lean towards a negative in relation to future breeding viability, given that in a wild state the first winter mortality of young raptors can be as high as 75% this fact again tends to negate the likelihood of a hybrid breeding successfully (but as stated the Plymouth birds are fed by the local residents which may boost their survivability) Given that the birds have been breeding since 2010 with an average of three chicks per year (other than 2011) I suspect that there have never been more than 10 surviving hybrids at most at any time, most such birds become sexually mature and capable of breeding in their third / fourth year, so 2014 is potentially an important and interesting year from the breeding prospective. That said, when all the relevant factors are taken into consideration while the likelihood of the hybrids producing a successful nest cannot be ruled out there are many adverse factors in play to work against this outcome ever coming to fruition.

The male Harris Hawk can easily be seen by anyone visiting the park. It is usually heard before being seen. It now seems to have lost its IBR ring. Unfortunately, whoever caught it and removed the ring did not also to remove the birds anklets which must by now be iron hard, constituting a potential problem for the bird. I would hate to think that after all these years the bird might die because one of its anklets became snagged.

The hybrids are unique. They have lived in the centre of a major city since 2010, they are more than tolerant of humans, and to my mind they deserve detailed study of how they live and how they are affecting the indigenous wildlife. In fact, both Grey Squirrels and Brown Rats are introduced to Britain, so introduced birds are controlling introduced mammals! They are without doubt very powerful hawks; they have the size and bulk of a Buzzard and a formidable set of talons, more powerful than those of either parent, on very long Harris-like legs. They have been observed hunting in groups of up to four birds (as do wild Harris Hawks), effortlessly taking squirrels in the park. They are well described as formidable and the local name of “Hazzard” is pretty appropriate! However, there have been no reports of any problems; in fact, they may be doing good work in taking rats and virtually clearing the park of grey squirrels.

One big question is where have the hybrids disappeared to over the years. Yes, you can find the odd one or two, and sometimes as many as four, around the park, but where are the rest? Have they simply succumbed as many young raptors do during their first winter? I think not, because these birds have been, and are being, fed by local people living around the park, so we can probably assume that they are not starving as do many young raptors facing their first winter. We falconers do lose birds, but what happens to those that survive and learn to live in a feral state? Will these birds in time harm the reputation of falconry to the detriment of all of us? We know that British populations of Goshawks have been boosted by escaped falconers’ birds’; in more recent years escaped Eagle Owls have bred in the wild.

In October 2013 a member of Devon Birds reported seeing one of the hybrids on the outskirts of the city, on National Trust land several miles from the nest site, so are they dispersing and establishing new territories? I can understand that there may be concerns that the hybrids may in time breed with native Buzzards, as the Harris Hawk did. Perhaps more worrying is the possibility of the Harris Hawk breeding with one of his own female offspring and producing hybrids that are three-quarters Harris Hawk and one quarter Buzzard and, in turn, the possibility of these birds breeding with native wild Buzzards.

There are many opinions on these hybrids, and many questions that we cannot yet answer. However, until evidence proves that there is a problem, I think Plymouth and its residents should enjoy these unique birds while they can. I know that I will.

Steve Hopper ~ 15/01/2014