

Bedtime for Birds

A few weeks ago Peter Absolon from The Taberna in Herbrandston contacted me to say that there was a small bird perched right above a light on the outside of the pub, but it was dark and they could not work out what it was. The next day we went to have a look – it was a female House Sparrow, and she was sound asleep on her warm, dry, sheltered perch under the eaves and next to the light. This led to me to think about where birds spend the night, a subject which is not often discussed, except in reference to Starlings.

Starlings are of course famous for their “murmurations”, which occur just before they plunge into their communal roost. These roosts can be situated in sites such as a plantation (Plumstone) or reed bed (Slebech), but more recently a large field of *Miscanthus* seems to be the local favourite. After a lot of squabbling, the birds eventually settle down to perch at a distance of about 6 inches apart - this appears to be a safe “pecking distance”!

In contrast, many birds roost solitarily, just perched in a bush or a tree in a sheltered place - evergreens are a popular choice. Other birds roost in more open spots - walking through a woodland at dusk will undoubtedly cause a number of Wood Pigeons and Pheasants to erupt from the trees where they were planning to spend the night. The spot chosen needs to be safe from predators, as dry as possible and as warm as possible – though birds are remarkably resilient to cold if they are well fed. However, being small they do lose heat easily – when the weather is bad some small birds will huddle up together. Long-tailed Tits are renowned for perching in a tight row, all pushed up together, while large numbers of Wrens have been seen entering a nest box where they presumably all cram in together in a big heap!

You won't often see birds going to roost – many species are quite secretive about the whole exercise as they obviously don't want to advertise their location. It was a while before we realised what was happening in our garden. Every evening a number of Blue Tits and Great Tits would arrive in our large hawthorn tree. They would hang around for a bit waiting for a suitable opportunity then each one would fly quickly and directly into the space underneath the corrugated asbestos roof in our old army pumphouse. Others actually flew inside the building. They have found a really, good, safe place to spend the night, and the knowledge is passed on from year to year.

Pied Wagtails also like to make use of man-made environments. They seem to be attracted to the warmth generated by our buildings and town centres and are not too bothered by human activity – they will even roost in trees decorated with Christmas lights in shopping malls! They often choose commercial buildings and greenhouses - recently 420 Pied Wagtails were seen entering a building at Witybush to roost. This is a **lot** of wagtails and they must have flown in from quite a large area.

The last word on birds using human environments to roost must go to a small group of Wrens in the north of the county. A friend of ours has a small, rather primitive cottage in the Presellis. On cold winter nights he shares his home with about 20 Wrens. How they get in and where they perch I do not know but I have a mental image of Wrens perched picturesquely on the backs of chairs or on the table, though I suppose it is more likely that they creep into the log basket!

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