

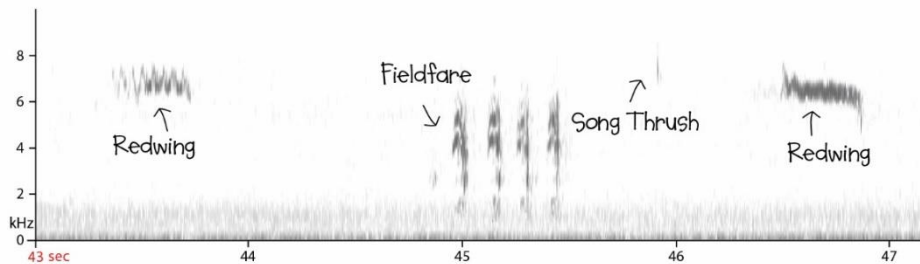
## BIRDS AT NIGHT

Last November, a friend in Marloes reported to me that he was seeing a regular flock of about 100 Lapwings, and that he was also hearing them at night. They seemed to be feeding during the night in a nearby field. This brought back memories of an experience we had some years ago when living near Wisbech. For several nights we heard strange loud yelping calls from further along the village. We took a torch and went to investigate. There, on the playing field, was a flock of Lapwings, feeding avidly – presumably on worms which had come to the surface at night, and they were calling as they were feeding. This was real surprise to me. I knew that some birds were definitely nocturnal, for example most owls, nightjars, woodcock and stone curlews but it never occurred to me that other birds could also be active at night.

And then when I started doing wader counts at The Gann, it struck me that many of the birds there, for example, the Curlews, only feed at low water. In the winter, at least one low water per day will occur at night and the birds must be going out to the tide line to feed at these times – they could not afford to miss the opportunity. And in some ways they are safer at night – no Peregrines to worry about!

Other birds exhibit nocturnal singing. The most famous of all is the Nightingale, and it seems that only unpaired males sing at night, probably to attract a migrating female passing over. Which leads us on to the fact that many, if not most, small diurnal birds, migrate at night. I quote an American article from the web: “The stars and the moon aid night-flying birds’ navigation. Free of daytime thermals, the atmosphere is more stable, making it easier to maintain a steady course, especially for smaller birds such as warblers that might fly as slowly as 15 miles per hour. Cooler night-time temperatures also help keep hard-working birds from overheating. And for birds that frequently wind up on the menu of hawks and other daytime predators, flying under cover of darkness can be a lifesaver.”

Birds also call as they migrate. It is often possible to hear Redwings migrating in the autumn as they give their “seep” call as they pass overhead. But listening to migrating birds has now become a hobby and a new birdwatching term has emerged – “nocmig”, short for nocturnal migration, and this typically employs sound recording equipment to capture the flight calls of migrating birds. Here is an example:



Using these techniques amazing new information has been gathered about the numbers and varieties of birds flying over our heads at night in spring and autumn.

Rosemary Royle