

Forty Minutes in a Bird Hide : by Phil Hanmer

6th December 2023 near Bamburgh: I had met Mark Middleton (the Northumberland Coast Nature Recovery & Farming Officer) at 11:00 to put up a Barn Owl box in a tree. It was very cold when we had arrived but quickly warmed up. After first negotiating some very friendly sheep, who did think my bag of owl-bedding (wood-shavings) was sheep food; and taking the ladders to the wrong tree; we had eventually found the right tree and got the box up. Hopefully an owl looking for a new home will use it soon. Mark had to go to a meeting so we went our separate ways and I headed to the North Hide near Spindleston, to eat my lunch and hopefully watch some birds. The pool at the North Hide was frozen over and there were only a few tits and a Robin around, so I soon moved on to the South Hide.

Those that know this hide will realise that it's a short walk down a field with the wood on the right. In making this approach I observed a few Blackbirds and two Tree Sparrows and then spotted a Grey Squirrel in the field, running very fast across the path in front of me heading vaguely in the direction of the hide (and bird feeders). This was not a particularly auspicious start but I continued on to enter the hide.

First, I watched some tits and a Chaffinch and a Robin, then there was some minor excitement when a female Great Spotted Woodpecker arrived and set about a Peanut feeder with some urgency.



It was notable that it was *a little* warmer in this this hide and the water in the pool was not frozen. I glanced at the log-book in the hide and noted that someone had spent a few cold hours waiting for (and eventually seeing a) Kingfisher. I thought it unlikely I would be staying long enough to see such a beautiful but elusive bird. Then things started to happen, first a Red Squirrel arrived (*not what I was expecting having already seen a grey as I walked up to the hide*). This squirrel (not I thought a very large squirrel) proceeded to open the top of a wooden feeder and take out several hazel nuts in quick succession, then it made some several trips backwards and forwards through a metal trap and I reasoned that this was set to catch the heavier greys (this I confirmed by reading some notes in the log-book).



Then another squirrel arrived and some chasing started, although this was only brief. Eventually one settled on eating peanuts while the other returned to the hazel nuts. Next, I heard a loud shrill pinging sound, which while I was certain I had heard it before, I could not immediately place. Anyway within a few minutes a Kingfisher appeared chasing another kingfisher. After another few minutes one of them came back and perched agitatedly on a perch (that someone had obviously left near the waters edge just for this eventuality). I took some photos but the kingfisher did not stay long; instead, it disappeared into a thicket of vegetation that overhung the pool. Eventually it flew out and disappeared. Meanwhile the Red Squirrels had been continuing to feed and were briefly joined by a third; although it did not seem as though this one was welcomed by the other two and it quickly hid around the back of a tree.



Next, I watched one of the squirrels abandon the feeder it was on and move to the ground to eat some loose grain.

Then a Treecreeper arrived and started to feed on the ground, using its long tongue to lick-up flaked pieces of peanut that had fallen from the feeder above, recently occupied by one of the squirrels. If you have never seen this behavior its quite interesting (*I remember seeing it first at Wallington perhaps ten years ago; when it was definitely unusual*).



Soon one of the Kingfishers came back and I was able to take some more photos. Looking at these at home I can confirm that there was a male (all black beak) and a female (base of lower mandible orange) although they did really did not seem to be 'pair'.



Suddenly a Grey Squirrel appeared although it did not stay long as pandemonium broke out amongst most of the small birds (tits, chaffinches, robins) as a Sparrowhawk came through the trees and I think grabbed a poor unsuspecting Coal Tit for its lunch. The remaining kingfisher's behavior at this point was interesting; despite being somewhat out in the open, it did not fly-away, instead it froze and apparently watched the Sparrowhawk until it was quite certain it had moved on. Then it moved into its favourite thicket, although this time it settled where I could still see it and take some more pictures.

I had an excellent and intense bird & squirrel watch for just 40 mins. So, thank you to whoever still maintains these hides and provides the bird food and I must remember to come here more often. See attached pictures all taken from the hide.

Phil Hanmer

(The Spindleston hides, also known as Barrack Wood, were created on land belonging to Charles Baker-Cresswell.

Charles visits most days to fill and maintain the bird feeders, see if there are any trapped grey squirrels and put hazel nuts in the squirrel feeders.

Visitors are welcome to visit the hides. Grid references NU155334 and NU157328.

The NNBC supports Charles with annual donations - £100 so far this year. R Poyer)