Montagu's Harriers in Pembrokeshire and an historic photograph

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Introduction

The earliest Pembrokeshire breeding record of the Montagu's Harrier *Circus pygargus* indeed for Wales is that from Leweston about eight miles north of Haverfordwest Mathew (1894) reporting: "The late Mr. Fortune found a nest of this Harrier close to his residence at Leweston, July 2, 1854, containing an egg and three young birds in down. He succeeded in obtaining the two old birds and mounted them with the young, and the case is now to be seen in the Museum at Tenby, and is a beautiful example of his skill in taxidermy. The egg was presented to the collection by the Rev. C.M. Phelps. This is the only instance of Montagu's Harrier in the county of which we can find a record, but it must doubtless have been both shot and trapped without recognition". A recent inquiry with Tenby Museum elucidated the information that the specimens were disposed of some time ago, presumably because they had deteriorated beyond repair.

Over half a century was to pass before another sighting of a Montagu's Harrier. Henry W Evans of Solva, a keen ornithologist and collector, noted in his copy of Mathew (1894) how he had purchased for 10 shillings a beautiful specimen which he then stuffed. This had been shot by Ben Thomas, tailor of Solva, on 11 March 1911 at Bwlchmawr just north-east of Solva (Whitelock 2010).

The next record was a female Montagu's Harrier and four eggs taken in 1914 though no details are available (Lovegrove *et al*. 1994). Again tragically without details, Lockley (1961) reported that Montagu's Harriers had bred in many years between Tenby Marsh and Freshwater West.

Lovegrove *et al.* (1994) drew attention to the egg collection of the indefatigable, and clearly a menace, J.H. Howell of Solva now in the National Museum of Wales; eight clutches of Montagu's Harrier eggs, no less, between 1926 and 1939, taken in Pembrokeshire. Despite being a 'terrible' collector he was described by Captain H.G. Gilbert as the only man who can save Montagu's Harrier from extinction in the county (Lemon 1936). This was never put to the test as in 1940 Howell turned his attention to the Peregrine *Falco peregrinus* substituting dummy eggs for real eggs at eyries on the Pembrokeshire coast in an effort to reduce predation on message-carrying homing pigeons (Howells unpublished mss).

Missing from previous publications are the observations of Bertram Lloyd, a resident of Hertfordshire, known to his friends as 'Wolf' on account of his long, easy and rapid gait (Benson 1944) who made a number of visits to Pembrokeshire, including the islands, during the 1920s and 1930s. One of his contacts was the Reverend Alfred Saunders Jeremiah, priest in charge of St Michaels and All Angels Church, Castlemartin, where a memorial window to Jeremiah depicts the birds of which he was particularly fond: Raven *Corvus corax*, Chough *Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax*, Barn Owl *Tyto alba* and Montagu's Harrier (Hardy 2019). Together they visited the nests of Montagu's Harriers in Castlemartin Corse, the valley extending eastwards from the sea at Freshwater West.

In 1930 the nest was 'near the middle of a big quiet marsh, as we approached, the female – looking

a very dirty brown flew off the nest at about 5yds from us. She flew silently up the marsh, perhaps joining the male whose pet perch is a small fence-post about half-a-mile away'. On 8 July the nest contained four eggs, the female returning pretty soon 'slinking low over the marsh so that we didn't sight her'. The following day Jeremiah and Lloyd discovered to their distress that the nest had been robbed by humans.

The same patch of marshy ground was used in 1931. Two of the four young were lost as the result of two days' heavy rain in late July, while in 1934, Jeremiah reported that three young all got off safely (Lloyd Diaries). Jeremiah died the following year. No more seems to be known about the Montagu's Harriers at this location, though Lloyd tantalizingly notes that he had seen nests 'within a short furlong' on two previous occasions.

Montagu's Harriers probably continued to nest on the marshlands and wet heaths north-east of St David's after 1939, though not until 1954 was there any record, when in that year D. Richard Evans located two nests each containing three young which all fledged even though a single male serviced both females. From then on breeding was recorded or strongly suspected at this location and at least two others until 1962, following which adult birds were seen in other suitable habitats with breeding possibly taking place for the final time in 1968 and 1970 (Lovegrove *et al.* 1994).

The historic photograph

In February 1978 Colonel Morrey Salmon submitted to The Zoological Photographic Club a photograph of a Montagu's Harrier with three young taken on 7 July 1935 on the rough shoot near to St David's, run by Captains (Barmy) Gilbert and J.H. Howell. In his note accompanying the photograph Salmon describes how: "…they told their keeper, a ruffian named Lamb, with an immense capacity for beer, to see that it came to no harm and the young flew alright. The nest was in a small bog of only a few acres extent much overgrown with tall, rank gorse, sallow etc and it was less than 100 yards into the bog over the churchyard wall on the outskirts of a small village. G.C.S. Ingram and I shared the hide with Arthur Brook who was then still collaborating photographically with H.A. Gilbert".



Among the fifteen comments made by Photographic Club members regarding the photograph is one from Harold Platt, an enormously influential figure in the history of the Club, whose membership lasted some sixty-three years until his death in 2000, and second only to that of Morrey Salmon who was a member for seventy-three years. It reads: "I went down on my own in 1937 (A.B. was then in Bristol) after Lamb wrote me to say that the Monty had hatched. A.B. had warned me about Lamb and his drinking exploits but I was lucky that he was in bed with lumbago

and his son, a red-haired youth, showed me the nest. There was one young only and after questioning Lamb of the size of the clutch he said that it had laid six eggs but he took four away as the bird 'couldn't cover them'. The other four were no doubt sold as a clutch. The morning I went in the hide a thick sea fog had descended on the area and all I got was a very inferior shot of the male. The fog stayed for several days and I had to return home disappointed".

As to the location, from the description by Morrey Salmon the most likely seems to be Llandeloy. Although part of the bog is now reclaimed, some still remains within the Ministry of Defence land of the former Brawdy airfield, and would, before the Second World War, have been excellent Montagu's Harrier territory.

Acknowledgements

More years ago than I care to remember, Peter Howlett, Curator of Vertebrates at the National Museum of Wales, drew my attention to the Morrey Salmon collection of photographs held in the Museum, that shown here just one of many which catch the eye. Stephen Evans, Botanical Recorder for Pembrokeshire, having an intimate knowledge of the heaths and rough pastures of the St David's Peninsula suggested Llandeloy as the location of the photograph. John Tinning, of the Zoological Photographic Club, provided information concerning Harold Platt who also photographed Montagu's Harriers in Pembrokeshire while Eloise Morgan of the Tenby Museum sadly broke the news that the Leweston Montagu's Harriers have long been destroyed. Better news from Linda Asman of the Pembroke and Monkton Historical Society, who drew my attention to the memorial window in Castlemartin Church and whose book includes a biography of the Reverend Jeremiah.

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