

Pam Taylor

In the countryside

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When hunters return, so do the buzzards

The buzzards are back and so are the shooters. Volleys of shots echoing across the stubble fields as the geese come in to feed. Greylag and Canada geese are the prime targets, calling as they descend.

They call even more raucously as they scrabble to take off again in the face of danger. The skeins of pink-footed geese that arrive with the autumn fly too high across the skies on their way to more coastal pastures.

Throughout the summer marsh harriers have dominated the local raptor scene, together with the occasional kestrel hovering over the marshes or sparrowhawk speeding through the garden.

I believe the harriers have bred once again on the nearby reserve and at least one or two can be seen gliding over the reedbeds most days.

The buzzards by contrast have rarely been seen here over the warmer months and I suspect they bred elsewhere this season. It was only towards the start of autumn that I counted five in the sky together one day. Now though, they are once again becoming a familiar sight near my home.

Over the marshes the harriers still drift by in the distance, but in the fields to the other side of the house the buzzards await their meals.

One bird in particular seems to favour a nearby telegraph pole as its vantage point. Perched on the top it surveys the surrounding countryside for a potential meal. Often as I walk down the lane in the early morning I can approach within a few metres of the post before the bird takes flight.

As the buzzard sweeps down on outstretched wings to glide across the field and into the trees beyond, I get some truly splendid views.

The bird in question is fairly dark brown with a paler chest band. Its broad and rounded wings are also dark above, but show pale on the primaries and secondaries beneath. The wing tips, as in all buzzards, are dark.

Much as I love to see such a magnificent bird as this fly close to me without apparent fear, my feelings are mixed. Its presence is almost certainly due to the carrion left behind by the hunters.



■ The cast of A Norfolk Home Companion take a bow at the 2014 Hostry Festival.
Picture: ROBIN WATSON

Welcome whimsy in our very own 'home companion' show

These are heady times for an old codger with a penchant for musing, meandering and mardling about Norfolk.

I found a perfect resting-place for my favourite brand of unpretentious whimsy on closing night at the fourth Norwich Hostry Festival in that spectacularly engaging new building rubbing shoulders with our historic cathedral.

We sang heartily, laughed easily and shared tales and tunes (ancient and modern) as A Norfolk Home Companion made an instant bid to be considered for final curtain duty at many autumn city festivals to come.

There was even talk of taking this show "on the road" to spread a bit of old-fashioned joy if busy personal schedules allow. BBC Radio Norfolk made a recording and may broadcast excerpts over the festive period.

Perhaps my multitude of genial memories from 25 years of leading a home-grown Press Gang entertainment troupe around Norfolk and the environs found compelling echoes in this cheerful production at the end of a fledgling festival spreading its wings in the cause of commissioning local projects.

My invitation to take part led to a freewheeling extravaganza based on A Prairie Home Companion, a cherished live USA radio show created and hosted by Garrison Keillor, heard in more recent times on BBC Radio 4 Extra.

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It has existed in similar form since 1974 and borrows its title from a radio programme in 1969 that was named after the Prairie Home Cemetery in Moorhead, Minnesota. The film of A Prairie Home Companion was released in 2006 starring, among others, Meryl Streep, Lily Tomlin, Tommy Lee Jones and Kevin Kline.

The radio favourite is packed with musical guests, tongue-in-cheek drama and Keillor's own famous story-telling segment, News from Lake Wobegon, his fictitious home described as

"a little town that time forgot and the decades cannot improve ... where all the women are strong, all the men are good looking and all the children are above average."

Music is a key feature of the two-hour show, American folk of many genres leading the way, especially country, bluegrass, blues and gospel. Keillor and the ensemble perform comedy skits including the satirical Guy Noir, Private Eye.

The show provides fictional adverts for fictional products, presented in the manner of live old-time radio commercials. The

programme itself is "sponsored" by "Powdermilk Biscuits, made from whole wheat raised on the rich bottomlands of the Lake Wobegon river valley by Norwegian bachelor farmers."

It is a tribute to Norfolk's own distinctive culture, including a sense of humour refusing to be hurried or watered down to match the norm, that a strong cast could be assembled to pay homage to such a gem in the wireless crown without falling foul of blatant parody or obsequious worship.

For a start, the choice of Canadian Peter Barrow as narrator in this local celebration offered an extra layer of gentle self-deprecation to go with a string of neat asides at Norfolk's expense and gloriously over-stated quotes from the likes of Plato, Mozart and Bob Marley.

Mustard seeds and sugar beet turned into key ingredients for spoof adverts while a running soap opera seemed to be loosely concerned with getting a herd of cows across Wroxham Broad. An enchanting harp solo (Donna Triggs) and poems about the lure of north Norfolk (Steve Glasson) spelt compelling changes of mood.

Effervescent cheerleaders and strolling players Tim Seeley and Sharon Upton ensured no members of cast or audience could swan off and lose themselves in a lather of nostalgia. Far too many joining-in sessions for that.

I chipped in with reports as rural co-respondent from Darkest Norfolk and my home patch of

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Puckaterry Parva (not yet twinned with Lake Wobegon) where the signposts are still turned the wrong way round to confuse the Vikings.

At the beating heart of this Hostry hoe-down were the kind of talented musicians and singers any variety gathering would be proud to welcome on stage. Hayley Moyses, Lee Vasey, Mike King, Rebecca Chapman and John Bates slid effortlessly from touching ballad to foot-tapping swinger. They also found scope as a background chorus to prompt more amiable mayhem up front. The Last Mile Home was dotted with unashamedly sentimental salutes to the old adage that the best pictures may still be on the wireless.

Those with long-lasting accumulators would have thought of ITMA, Much Binding in the Marsh, The Goons, Take it From Here and Round the Horne.

Or any other two-way family favourite where instant reaction leans naturally on affection and laughter.