

Last year, a new question was added to the usual list that David Lindo gets asked: is urban birding dangerous?



IT WAS A QUESTION THAT STOPPED ME IN MY TRACKS and one I seriously had to ponder. A quick survey among my birding friends soon resulted in various tales of woe, most of which were quite humorous, like being sprayed with pig slurry and being shouted at by angry residents who were unfortunate enough to have a rarity in their neighbourhood. There was even a story of a birder being publicly assaulted at a twitch by his long-suffering wife!

If you have your wits about you, are sensible by avoiding certain areas after dark and don't flaunt flashy optical equipment as an invitation to be mugged, then you should be totally fine. Being barked at by Alsations, dive-bombed by nesting urban gulls and being nearly hit by the occasional stray football is usually as good as it gets.

However, the world was a different place when I was a keen ten-year-old. I delighted in studying the plumage detail of the House Sparrows in my backyard, but I also yearned to head further afield. I was especially fired up after reading books that spoke of people seeing, to my young mind, exotics like Cuckoos and Little Ringed Plovers. So, I used to tell my mum that I was cycling around the block to go birding at our local park with my Irish schoolmate, Alan, and instead we'd travel across London to arrive at Rainham Marshes in Essex two hours, three buses and some 20 miles later!

In those days, when visiting this pre-RSPB feral wilderness, you had a choice: enjoy some potentially great birds while warily looking over your shoulder or turn around and go home. Rainham was a lawless, derelict land frequented by air rifle-toting Essex boys. One day, after catching sight of our first ever Cuckoo, Alan and I had to beat a hasty retreat after coming under fire by a bunch of hostile local lads. We were literally chased out of town. Thereafter, Alan and I took the unprecedented step of 'arming' ourselves against any future attacks – with a small penknife and a catapult each. I guess our purchases gave us a sense of security, though I would not condone buying that stuff today. Quite what use a catapult would have been baffled me even then – it was Alan's idea!

Thankfully, we never needed to use our weapons, apart from once several years later when we used our knives to cut a drowning Long-tailed Duck free from a fishing net at Dunwich, Suffolk.

In fact, it was out in the country where I had my next brush with potential danger. Driving to a twitch in deepest Norfolk, my companion and I took the wrong turn and accidentally ended up on a driveway to a property hidden deep in a wood. As some tethered dogs started to bark excitedly, a guy appeared, clearly very angry and shouting the word 'titters'. He then unreasonably threatened to shoot us before running back into his house. Naturally, we didn't stick around and opted instead for some nifty rally driving in the opposite direction.

You really do need to be careful when you are abroad in a strange city where you could inadvertently wander into dangerous situations without realising. The general rule is to either do your birding with a local or stick with the recognised areas like nature reserves or in safe areas like the botanical garden that is found in almost every city.

When I'm birding in a foreign city I always err on the side of caution to try to blend in. I came unstuck, though, a couple years ago. One morning while in Bratislava, I decided to venture into the wooded wasteland by my patch that extended for a couple of miles to a motorway flyover. I came across a recently-deserted junky campsite. Feeling uncomfortable, I decided to leave the area.

Soon, as I was walking along a track, I heard a Land Rover behind me. I felt very nervous – there was something very wrong. There were two burly looking guys in the vehicle and they caught up with me and screeched to a halt alongside me. One of the guys jumped out and aggressively addressed me in Slovakian. Here I was, in the middle of a wood in eastern Europe, with no ID on me, unable to speak the lingo and potentially about to be kidnapped or murdered.

As I pleaded my English-ness and the fact that I was only a birder, I realised that they were two undercover policemen. In broken English, he told me to leave the wood and not to come out again without a passport. The lesson? As quoted in the movie *An American Werewolf In London*: don't stray off the paths!

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