

Countrydiary



By Robin Page

Off to chase the great hare in the sky

Farewell Briar, beloved lurcher, who will be sorely missed – though perhaps not by all the inhabitants of the farm

Midnight is a bad time for tears. They leave you emotionally drained. Sadly, sorrow has struck again, unexpectedly and quickly. Our little lurcher Briar struggled for breath and he would not move; his medication for an enlarged heart was suddenly failing him. Our much-loved “running dog” could hardly stand; his running days were over. It was hard to watch and we called the vet. Lulu and I both held him and stroked him as he left us. There is no point trying to fight back tears and I am past understanding the emotional bond that dogs hold over us. Lulu was distraught.

I buried him the next day in Bullocks End, the field where he liked to chase rabbits – without much success. Bill, our occasional dog sitter, helped me, and he too was reduced to tears. A Scouser reduced to tears for a dog! We covered the grave with the bulbs of Whistling Jack gladioli and Scilly pride narcissi from St Agnes – extreme sentimentality, and why not?

Lulu gave me Briar to mark our first wedding anniversary nearly nine years ago – bought for me, but he worshipped her. What a dog! He was beautiful, and running at speed he displayed extraordinary grace and balance. He loved running for sheer joy, and in the snow his footprints revealed huge strides for such a small dog. Then, six months ago, he started coughing. It was not “kennel cough”, the vet said. An X-ray revealed a damaged heart. The end could come in two minutes or two years. Instead the end came unexpectedly a week ago at midnight.

On his arrival I’d assumed that Briar would outlive me. My first lurcher, Bramble, had lived until he was over 17. He too was a loyal and lovable dog. In the days before Lulu, he went with me everywhere – in the car, on the tractor and around the farm, where he was fearless with the cattle. Even the bull would back away from him. We expected Briar to be a similar long liver, but that was not to be.

Although I love lurchers, it is doubtful that we will have another one. Bramble was with me when hares had virtually disappeared from the farm and the parish because of intensive farming and stubble burning. The hares simply had little autumn food and few safe places in which to rear their young leverets. With no hares, a walk around the farm with a lurcher was a pleasure.

By the time Briar had arrived, the brown hares were back, courtesy of a stubble-burning ban, set-aside and grass margins planted through agri-environment schemes, and we now have good numbers. Consequently half the farm – beyond the sheep fencing – was off limits, unless Briar was put on a lead. In certain “hare fields” he instantly switched from laid-back farm dog to wild-eyed, hunting animal. Rabbits did not have the same effect – they could disappear underground, whereas the hare would remain above ground. The one and only time he caught one he took both Lulu and the hare by surprise. A hare got up in front of him and that was that. It didn’t happen again: when hare numbers on the farm became more important than jugged hare on the table, Briar was kept on the lead. However, I am still occasionally invited to eat jugged hare elsewhere – with redcurrant jelly and parsley and thyme stuffing balls, it

makes a delicious, traditional country meal.

The dangerous time for the hares, and us, was after harvest, when the fields were still covered by stubble (the dead, dried-out stalks of cereal crops). Once a hare was up and running, it was visible – trouble. Several times in the early days, Briar was off into the distance, over into the next parish and out of sight. It meant two or three hours of calling his name, whistling, and quartering the fields in my 4WD until he came into view on the edge of exhaustion. The relief on his return was twofold. First, he was safe, and second, he had not been stolen. There has been a flourishing trade locally of “dognapping” – selling stolen dogs back to their distraught owners, with threats and menaces not to go to the police. One friend had to pay £2,000 in cash to get her much-loved lurcher back – another unreported, unrecorded rural crime.

Over recent years hare numbers seem to have fallen slightly. From the remains outside fox earths in the spring, it seems foxes take quite a few, but the arrival of buzzards has put extra pressure on them. Last spring, Tim, the tenant of the CRT’s Lark Rise Farm, was cultivating a field when he saw a buzzard swoop down, take a half-grown leveret and fly off with it, periodically landing to rest because of the weight. The year before he had seen two carrion crows attacking a small leveret, causing him to sprint from his tractor to save it. He hid it in long grass, hoping that the muggers would not return and search it out.

Of course, some conservationists will not accept witness accounts like these, dismissing them disparagingly as “anecdotal evidence”. I would rather hear the anecdotal evidence of farmers, tractor drivers, shepherds, foresters and gamekeepers than listen to the

findings of desk-bound scientists using skewed computer models to give the politically correct or marketing answers that they require. I would remind readers too that anthropologist Dr Martina Tyrrell welcomes anecdotal evidence and refers to it as “non-scientific expertise”.

It is a striking coincidence that our personal sadness has coincided with the publication of two remarkable books featuring hares. Film-maker and photographer Martin Hayward Smith has produced *My Year with Hares* (see photo) with a foreword by Ray Mears. He has not just photographed hares from the countryside around him – he lives in the middle of Norfolk, the heart of hare country – but also a leveret saved from a dog attack, which during the course of the year grows into a fully fit adult animal.

Martin’s book is helped with some remarkable photography – some taken with the help of a camera-carrying drone, for which no licence is needed. Then there are photographs taken by a remote-controlled camera placed inside a stuffed hare – incredible. I have already bought several copies of *My Year with Hares* to give as Christmas presents.

Another outstanding book is *Halcyon* by artist Andrew Haslen: he too has lived with tame hares that he later released. The hares in this book, in his distinctive and brilliant style, are quite exceptional. Lulu and I hope to visit the exhibition associated with it – I shall attempt to leave

my plastic behind to avoid the workhouse.

● *My Year with Hares*, by Martin Hayward Smith, at £31 inc p&p from Tickety Boo Cottage, Lime Kiln Lane, East Barsham, Norfolk NR21 0LQ. martinhaywardsmith.com
● *Halcyon* by Andrew Haslen at £27 inc p&p from The Wildlife Art Gallery, 98-99 High Street, Lavenham, Suffolk CO10 9PZ. Pictures from the book will be on display at the gallery until Christmas. wildlifeartgallery.com
● The Telegraph is media partner for the CLA Game Fair 2015. Early-bird tickets are available at 2014 prices until Jan 4; to apply go to gamefair.co.uk



Easy prey: young leverets face attack from foxes, buzzards and carrion crows; Robin and Lulu enjoyed nine years with Briar, below

