

A RARE ENCOUNTER OVER BUSHY PARK

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I am a plumbing and heating engineer by trade, but I am also an amateur wildlife photographer. Living in Surrey, I am easily able to get to Bushy and Richmond Parks and tend to visit them a few times a week. On October 19th I had gone over to Bushy Park to try to locate the Little Owl that I had seen there the previous week. I did my usual scout and although there was no sign of the Little Owl or of anything much else to catch the photographer's eye, the visit this time turned out to be different from any previous ones. Because I am so used to the familiar sightings, I knew, from the moment I first spotted a shape circling high in the sky, especially from the way it was flying, that it was something special. It was certainly not a bird I had seen before!

I was at the Diana Fountain when I first noticed it flying over from the direction of the River Thames. I had not had much luck that morning in finding anything to photograph apart from a brief moment with a Kingfisher. As soon as I realized this was an unusual bird, I extended my camera lens to 600mm to get as good a shot as possible while it circled at speed high above. It was 12:29 on a sunny day. As I followed the bird's circling flight with my camera I noticed it had distinct white markings that made me even more curious as to what it might be. In the harsh midday sunlight it was quite hard to get good shots. I managed to capture a few images before the bird, continuing to circle, flew off in a northeasterly direction towards Richmond. I tried to keep up, but it soon disappeared. I had spent only about ten minutes with the bird before I lost contact. Not knowing if any of my photos had captured the bird adequately, I was pleased that at least some of them were clear shots, and on closer inspection I realised that the bird I had photographed was actually a Common Nighthawk. I immediately put this information on social media and my account exploded: so many people contacted me, from birders to other wildlife photographers to people who were just generally interested. I was astonished by the huge amount of interest in the sighting until I subsequently discovered that this is an American bird that is very rarely seen in the UK, let alone in London.

After further investigation it was agreed that it was in fact the same bird that had turned up in Northern Ireland a few weeks earlier, as both



Common Nighthawk. (Lewis Newman)



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sightings were of a bird with the same missing feathers that gave its tail a very pronounced V-shape. It was a day to cherish and I feel extremely lucky to have been there at the right time and able to capture a few photos.

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Postscript: The sighting was accepted by the BBRC on 19th June 2020, making it only the second Common Nighthawk for London. The first was found in poor condition at Barnes Common on October 23rd 1984. Although it was taken into care it died several days later.

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