

Ruminations on a new electricity pole

We have just said goodbye to our old electricity pole. It was indeed getting a bit tatty looking, not helped by continuous investigation by woodpeckers. They have never actually drilled a nest hole in this pole, but they did in a pole just up the road a few years ago – not only drilling a nest hole but successfully breeding. The picture here shows an adult bird feeding a young bird who is poking his head out of the nest just above the “Danger of Death” sign. It is difficult to believe that there was enough space inside such a modest pole for a nest and also for there to be enough wood outside to continue to support the pole, but apparently there was. The electricity company removed it the following year, not only because of the woodpecker hole but because it wasn’t actually doing anything - it was the supply pole for a long forgotten pump-house!



The old pole had a roof-shaped metal cap. The metal top was presumably intended to help with weather protection, but also perhaps to deter perching birds – they probably do not find much to grip on and apart from woodpigeons we have had relatively few birds perching on our pole. However, the woodpeckers loved the metal cap – they used to drum on it. It makes quite a different noise to drumming on wood as you can imagine.

Now we have a new pole and the woodpeckers have now changed allegiance to the next pole along which has not been replaced. The new pole is a bit taller and beefier than the old one and it has a sloping wooden top – good for perching. It had only been installed a few hours when the local buzzard came along to try it out. He (or she) didn’t stay long – I wondered if it might be due to the strong smell of creosote but then remembered that most birds do not have much sense of smell. (There are exceptions - some jungle-dwelling buzzards from South America use their sense of smell to detect rotting corpses deep in the undergrowth and kiwis smell out worms, but I digress)

A buzzard on a pole is a very common sight in these parts – the main element of their hunting strategy is to just sit and wait and see what moves. They can of course also hover but only when a stiff breeze is blowing.

In Scotland, buzzards are known as “tourist eagles” - visitors are very excited to see so many birds of prey and they think that they are all eagles. One key question settles the identity – “Was it sitting on a pole”? If so, then it’s definitely a buzzard!

Rosemary Royle

PS When reading this, those birdwatchers amongst you may have thought “But what about petrels and shearwaters - they can smell a slick of rotting fish oil from a very long way off” - this is true, and this fact is used to attract birds on pelagic expeditions. It is thought that these species use their sense of smell to find food and it is also important in their social behaviour - the burrows of Storm Petrels, for example, have a very characteristic musky smell. However all this is surprisingly new science - until recently birds were thought to have no sense of smell.