

Dawn at Brockholes Nature Reserve

After a half hour drive on nearly deserted city roads the initial shock of a 3am start is beginning to wear off. As we put on our boots and gather up camera and binoculars the light of the full moon is competing with the glow of the unrisen sun to create a half light and the sounds of the birdsong are clearly audible above the noise of the nearby motorway. It's a short walk along one of the reserve paths to check on the nesting great crested grebe

sitting stoically in the cold on her semi-submerged platform.

Dedication personified. From here we enter the woodlands and as the sounds of nature take over from those of the grinding wheels of commerce we are, in turn, transported to another world. One of natural tranquillity and rich earthy smells emanating from the abundant woodland floor.

We can pick out the repetitive but beautiful call of a song thrush and just about make out its silhouette, perched on a nearby sapling and as we watch a subtle

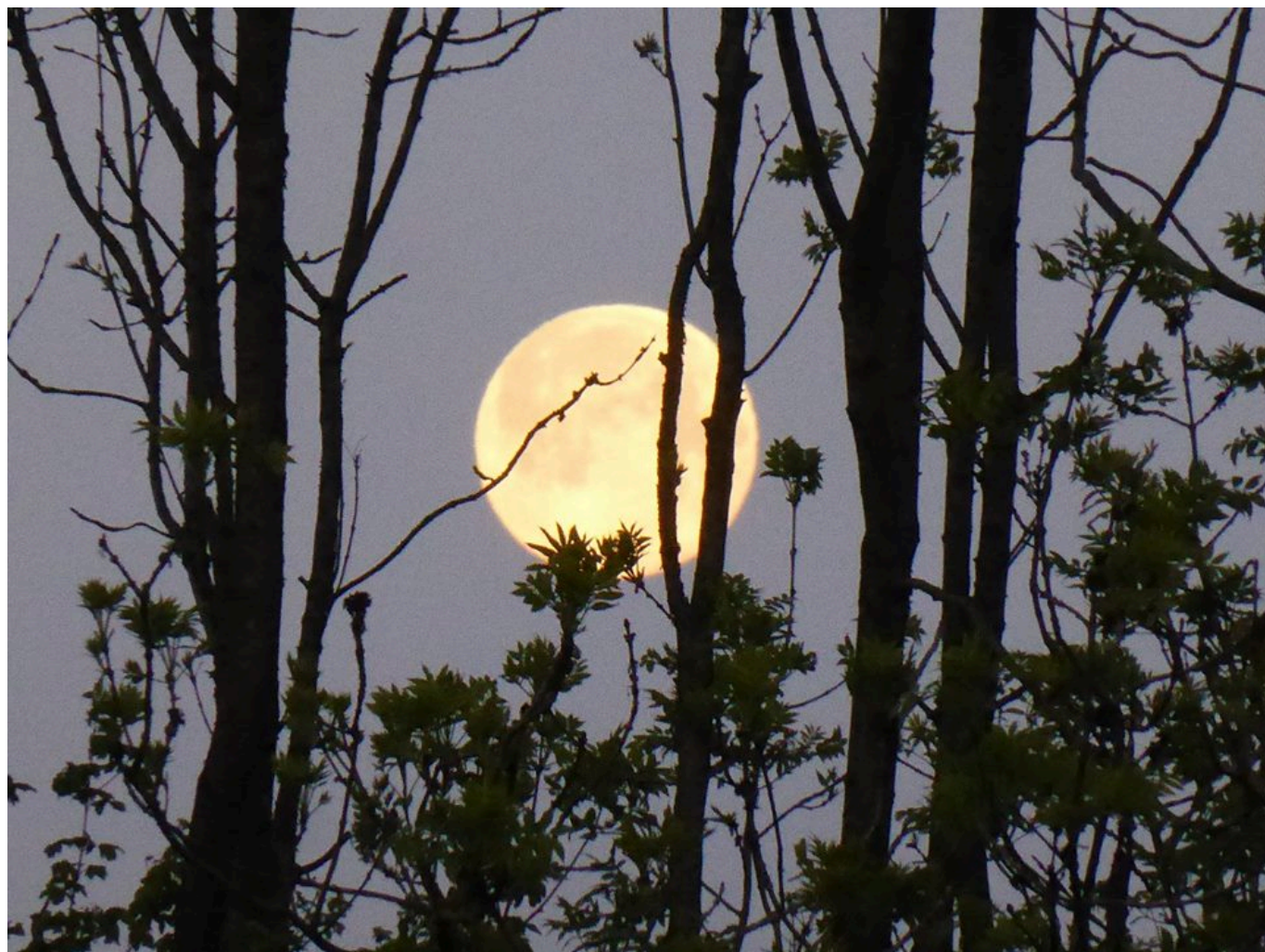
movement catches Gill's eye. She calls out, quietly, deer! There are two young female roe deer just twenty yards from us. All four of us have stopped in our tracks and we stare at each other waiting for somebody to make a move. After a couple of breath taking minutes the deer decide we are far enough away not to pose any immediate threat and they melt quietly into the undergrowth. Jumping over fallen branches soundlessly and seemingly without effort they make their way through the familiar terrain as we clomp clumsily on along the path in our heavy boots,

like aliens in a foreign world.

It's still too dark in the woods for bird watching but we have fun trying to identify the numerous calls and songs. The familiar wren is ever present with its strikingly loud song that nearly always incorporates a giveaway trill mid call. It's a wonder that such a tiny creature can create such a powerful cacophony? At less than a quarter of their size it drowns out the blackbirds and song thrushes it shares this place with and seems to shout out its territorial demands with an

unlikely authority.

As we leave this enchanted place
the sun is threatening to rise
over the river, opposite the still
bright moon which glows pale and
surreal through the high branches
of the trees.



Setting moon

It's cold, very cold and despite the promise of a warm spring day later on; we are glad of hats and gloves as the faintest of breezes wafts the chilled air off the waters of the Ribble. The river is busy with black headed gulls,

oyster catchers and the odd redshank. Herons are already standing sentinel, looking for their first fish or eel but the sand martins that occupy the riverbank mud walls are nowhere to be seen. I'm thinking that it's probably too early but just as that thought crosses my mind the first ones appear swooping and darting above the river, leaving their nest holes to feed on the early flies.



Chilled bird watcher

A fiery red crescent is growing out of the distant skyline giving the impression that the eastern horizon is being engulfed by a terrible inferno.



Here comes the sun

I can't wait to feel the first warm rays on my back as we turn away from the water and make our way towards the car park area where it's very likely we will be able to spot one of my favourite mammals. We climb quietly up the

river bank and peer, commando style, over the top of the rise and sure enough there are two brown hares cavorting on one of the paths just close by. They pick up our scent immediately and retreat to a safer distance but not before we catch a tantalisingly brief view of their antics. They are spotted on the reserve at all times of the day but if you want to be sure of a good sighting it's best to come early.



Brown hare in car park. Photo by Emma Jayne Sharples

By now the odd car is arriving on the reserve. We are not alone any more and the feeling that we are somehow privy to a wonderful secret is slipping away. It's time for something to eat and a brisk walk to restore some warmth to

chilled fingers and toes. Our visit isn't over but the main objective of experiencing the new day is. We have shared something very special that only a dawn walk can provide. There is a real sense of adventure about starting out in the dark and a wonderful reward in watching the birth of a new day at this spectacular time of year. Was it worth setting the alarm for three in the morning? What do you think?



Early morning light