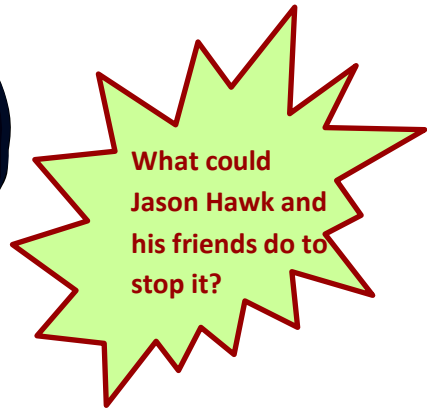


Jason Hawk

Special Operations Agent

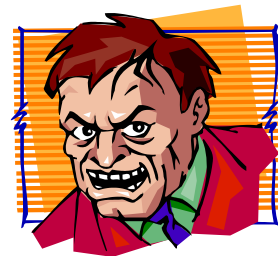


Beware! Subject material and some photographs are unpleasant and could be upsetting. They are, however, realistic!

By Graham Temby

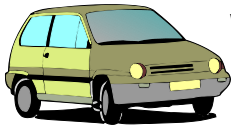


http://www.northumbria.police.uk/about_us/wildlife_crime/wildlife_terms_offences/



Chapter 1

It was a bitterly cold late-spring day. Jason Hawk drove his 4x4 to the brow of the ridge, past a 'County Durham' sign, and pulled into the side of the tight moorland road. He surveyed the scene before him, in the valley below, through narrowed eyes. After a minute, he emerged from the vehicle, pulling his fleece around him in the brittle-cold of the gusting air. His feet crunched on the gravel, thrown to the roadside by countless tyres. "So, this is Weardale" he said, to no one in particular. Jason took his binoculars from the back seat and scanned the

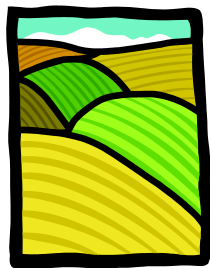


valley. The dale before him was a broad valley, with myriad fields, separated by dry-stone walls. Every few miles along the winding road, which follows the river Wear from its beginnings around Wearhead, there was a small village, built of the local stone, which revealed the geology of the area, and between the villages, the hills were sprinkled with small hill farms. In the main, it seemed to be just fields, pastures, clumps of trees and sheep. It's too high and cool for much arable cropping, so pretty much the only thing grown in the fields is grass, some of it for summer pasture and some to cut for winter feedstuff.



The North Pennines, Jason knew, are a varied land of heathland, blanket bogs, juniper scrub and oak woodlands, upland hay meadows and grassland. Many of the flora species of the dales are special to the area; and not just important, but *internationally* important! <http://www.northpennines.org.uk/>

Jason had read that the area also contains a number of rare species of birdlife. About 12% of Britain's beautiful merlin live here. The small, dynamic falcon is to be found, during warm summer months, out on the upland moors, nesting in the long heather, and preying on the resident meadow pipits. Merlin are not easy to spot, though, and the usual view of the avid bird-watcher, prepared to go the extra mile, is a dark shape, dashing fast and low over the heather.



Many avian residents of the dales, including these two, are, of course, *highly protected*.

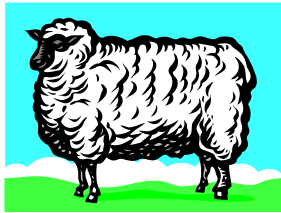
The village of Brockford lay before Jason. The spire of the church stabbed up into a sky of battleship-grey. In the centre of the village, a shallow stream fed a pond, large enough to house a few mallard and the odd coot, amongst a bed of reeds, before it spilled, burbling, into the River Wear. A village green was surrounded by a jumble of housing – obviously built over many years and many periods of architecture, but which gave a quaint and cosy feel to it. There was the post office and grocery shop, a small café; a couple of other odd shops, and a garage and filling station, a small school and cricket pitch were just visible behind a row of stone cottages. In the centre of the village, Jason could see, through his powerful binoculars, the inn sign of 'The White Lion' swayed back and forth on its bracket. That would be home – at least to begin with.

Jason raised his binoculars skyward. The tops of the hills were bare of trees, and covered instead with heather and bracken. A few juniper bushes prodded out from amongst the low growth. A flock of hardy sheep, hefted to the hillside, grazed, ignoring the damp wind ruffling their long, shaggy wool like tattered flags. Further down the vale, woodland followed the twisting and turning of the rivers and streams. This was the remains of the ancient North Pennine woodlands of birch and scots pine. Of course, over the millennia since the North Pennines have been populated, the woodland has been gradually cleared to form today's 'natural'

environment. Many different peoples have lived here, in the dales – Celts, Romans Saxons, the fierce Norsemen and the Norman conquerors, and each have left their mark. <http://www.weardale-history.org.uk/>

In an in-bye field were wading birds, feeding quietly in the rushes and pastures. A couple of curlew could be seen, probing with their long curved beaks. Their call of 'cur-lee' is, of course unmistakable.

The lapwings were very difficult to miss. Their bright green and white rainbow-like plumage and long crest stand out for all to see. But it was always their dramatic display flights, with its plunging and soaring, that pleased Jason.



A dozen ewes were feeding on the better grazing. Lambing season was almost upon us, and a number of lambs could already be seen following their mothers, some gambolling and some still looking a little unsteady on their feet. Jason knew that these would have been the sheep that had been scanned by the farmer and vet, and were probably carrying twins. The sheep still on the hillside would probably only be carrying one lamb, and could graze happily on the available, but poorer fodder on the fells. The sheep knew, though, where the best grazing would be found, and didn't need the help of the farmer to find it.

These sheep, Jason knew, were Swaledales, easily recognised by their black faces and large, curling horns. The name comes from the valley of Swaledale in North Yorkshire. Swaledale sheep are very tough and are not troubled by the hard winters of the high moorlands. The lambs, when they arrived in bulk in April and May, were usually crossbreeds. Their fathers would probably be Blue-faced Leicesters, which would produce better meat for the dinner table!



Lambing, of course, is the main 'harvest' of the year for the dales hill farmer. It could provide him with up to 2/3 of his annual earnings, and so is taken very seriously by dales folk. This is *not* the time, Jason reflected, for people to be walking their dogs off the leash in the countryside!

Further down the valley sides, where shelter could be had, mixed woodland stretched, down to the side of the stream. "Brock's Wood," Jason breathed to himself. Further still down the valley, meadows, skirted by old dry-stone walls of the local rock stretched into the distance. A few odd barns and other out-buildings, in various states of repair stood in random positions. The white-painted buildings, he'd read, belonged to the Raby estate. <http://www.rabycastle.com>

Cattle grazed on the new spring shoots of grass, and at the hay-stalls by the field gates, where extra fodder and water had been sited to supplement the spring growth. Jason admired a particularly large bull – easily seen as a magnificent beast, even at this distance.



He spent a further few moments taking in the view and observing all of the features of the landscape. This would become his work-place for the next few weeks.

Of course, it was important that no one should know his real purpose in the village. As far as the locals were concerned, he was just 'an avid rambler and bird-watcher, keen to walk the dales trails and take in the beauty of the countryside during a short break from work'. At least that was his cover story.

Jason climbed back into the driver's seat and fired up the motor. He drove gingerly down the winding dales road, entering the village past cottages that seemed to be tumbling down the hillside, until he reached the centre of the settlement. I'll bet the roads around here are fun in the winter, he thought to himself. Here, in the centre, stood the inn where Jason would spend the nights, whilst he potted around the countryside, 'getting the feel of things'. He was already booked in, so parked the 4x4 and lugged his bags into the bar. It was pleasant enough, if a little dark. The walls were painted in cream, and oak beams stood out on walls and ceilings. A collection of tankards of glass and china hung from the beams, along with highly polished horse brasses. Pictures of dales



scenes were hung around the walls, and a couple of deer heads, complete with antlers gazed down at him, sightlessly. The seating was upholstered in red, and was beginning to look a little threadbare in places. A log fire blazed in a large brick fireplace, casting its lights and shadows across walls and ceilings. Cosy, Jason thought.

The pub landlord was lazily washing and drying glasses and placing them back onto the shelves, to await the night's customers. He glanced up as Jason entered and dropped his cloth onto the bar.

"Can I help you, Sir?" he ventured.

"I'm booked in here for a short break. Just thought I'd check in."

"Mr Hawk, is it, Sir?" the landlord asked.

"That's me," Jason replied.

The landlord produced a large book and pen from behind the bar. "Just sign here," he said, "and I'll get your key." He disappeared off around the bar and returned with a key on a large fob. "Room 7, Sir," he said. "Top of the stairs, turn right."

"Thanks," said Jason, as he signed in. He took his keys, and with a brief smile and nod to the landlord, he carried his bags up to his room. It was a small room by any standards, but clean, warm and comfortable. Jason sauntered to the window and peered out. It overlooked the village green and the pond. Might be useful to watch comings and goings, he thought.

After he'd unpacked his bags and stowed some of his gear out of sight of hotel's cleaners, Jason exited the pub and meandered casually down what passed for a main street, glancing at the shops and neat houses as he



walked. Some had blue plaques on the walls with interesting snippets of information about the history of the village and its people. Jason was always fascinated by such historical nuggets, and read them carefully. "Interesting," he muttered to himself.

Wandering like a tourist, Jason, nevertheless, took in *any* and *all* details that would likely pass a real tourist by. He needed to have a clear idea of what was going on in the area, as it might prove vital to the job facing him. He peered into the window of a local taxidermist - scanning a wide variety of birds and mammals. There were snipe and pheasant. A merlin stood, seeming to peer at him, on a small stand, made to look like a moorland tuft. Stoats, weasels, and even an adder, lay before him, in action poses. No *badgers*, though.

That was the reason Jason was in the dale. This was the sort of mission that the RSPCA Special Operations Unit thrived on.



© Dave Sumpton