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Author: Jackie Drakeford

We were busting out the thin strip of woodland adjacent the footpath, as you do, and the skylarks were singing their socks off as the bunnies bustled in and out of cover and squirrels shot up trees. Not that we were hunting the squirrels of course because that would be illegal – they were simply getting out of the way of the rabbits. A terrier and lurcher team is very entertaining, especially now the young terrier has steadied down a bit and stays more or less in the same county. It's a good area of cover, this, for not only do we have the woods, there is a long rife full of water that is lined by sedges and reeds, and usually half-choked by weed of various sorts. As well as rabbits and squirrels, there are rats and sometimes mink. It has been known for foxes to lie up here, but we haven't seen any for a while, I don't know why.

Now that the Bedlington Thing is getting on a bit, and has been retired from the more extreme lurcher sports, bush-bashing is the best fun he gets, and it's up to me to make sure he has enough of it. I like to see my oldies enjoying themselves: their skills are hard-won, and I owe them. The little chap has many miles on the clock, with various scars and remodelled bits, and has given his all willingly in every situation. Age-wise we are about the same, both a little arthritic and taking time to get going in the morning, but plenty of life in us yet. The Sahib had gone on point duty at the end of the wood, the dogs were out of sight but with amounts of rustling, and then I saw a brace of ramblers coming towards the hot zone, so I sauntered over to lure them away with guile and friendly conversation. They were very nice, as ramblers often are, and appreciative of being told that the birdsong was from skylarks, which they had not realised. They enquired about the new and robust fence by the footpath, wondering if their Right to Roam was being infringed, and I explained about the Countryside Stewardship scheme, ground-nesting birds of the rare variety (much appreciated by

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the corvids and foxes but we didn't touch on this) and outlined what the farmer had been doing in this, his first year of farming wildlife. The fence stopped uncontrolled dogs from harassing the birds and was therefore a Good Thing (it had left certain of us with rather moist fireworks, but you could see the farmer's point). All the time walking away from where I could hear the high-pitched yip-yip-yip of a terrier hot on the heels of whatever it was, we discussed the wide variety of birds around us, and parted, I like to think, on amiable terms.

I left them at the junction of footpaths, having confirmed which was the one they were following, and was about to return to the job in hand when the Bedlington Thing appeared over the rife in front of them and ran towards me with something floppy in his mouth.

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I was horrified to find a lurcher being walked with a cloth muzzle on. His owner had been advised to do this by her dog behaviourist, because he was being attacked by other dogs. The idea was that, if damage was done, her dog could not be accused of being 'dangerous', with all the legal hassle this implies.

This was alarming advice. If the dog ran, he would be unable to pant and lose heat, and if he became lost, he would be unable to drink. As dogs that run up to others and attack them are bullies, they would realise he was unable to defend himself, and the attacks would get worse; furthermore the lurcher would be so stressed at being helpless that he, too would be likely to develop behavioural problems.

Lurchers are specialist animals, and the average dog trainer often does not know enough about them to give good advice.