North Derbyshire is justifiably renowned as one of England’s most wildlife rich regions. It is also famous for the diversity of its landscapes, from the dark tops of Kinder Scout to the beautiful ashwoods of the limestone dales, where the trees are often so furred with mosses and epiphytes that they look like temperate rainforest.

In the eighteenth century Daniel Defoe found the gritstone areas so forbidding that he spoke of a ‘waste and houling wilderness’ and judged them to be among England’s wildest places.

Today we appreciate them better, not only for the glorious late-summer display of flowering heather but also for the presence of breeding ravens and peregrines, which have returned here after 150 years of persecution. Equally wonderful are the White Peak areas, with their reticulated pattern of drystone walls and the their limestone-loving flora, which is at its best in late summer.
Lightwood, Buxton

But we shall begin our break by visiting Lightwood (above) where I was born and where the local wildlife inspired my lifelong interests. The place is easily the richest spot within a short distance of town and is just a five-minute drive from our hotel. Until about 15 years ago there was a brick-lined reservoir at the heart of the valley, but this has since been drained and dismantled and the site transformed by a fabulous restoration project.

It now holds a blanket of golden flowers (mainly kidney vetch and hawk’s-beard) richly speckled with marsh and spotted orchids (right, mid) with numerous foxgloves that sway in the breeze like kinetic sculptures. It is one of the few Buxton places that stills holds breeding lapwings (right, mid) and common snipe (right btm).
Millers and Cressbrook Dales

Lightwood gives us a good introduction to the gritstone areas of the Dark Peak, which strongly contrast with the softer, more feminine contours of the White Peak. And it’s the latter that will be the focus for the next couple of days. We shall be heading first for the River Wye, because at this point in the summer its banks hold great swathes of wildflower - knapweed, field scabious, luxuriant spikes of dark mullein and carpets of marjoram or wild thyme (right) which, in turn, act as magnets for bumblebees, butterflies and hoverflies.

The old railway station at Millers Dale (above) serves now as a visitor
carpark, but at one time the local farmers came to load their churns onto the London trains, to make sure that Derbyshire milk was served on the capital’s breakfast tables.

Today it is among my favourite places. The multi-coloured sea-swell of flowers is surrounded on all sides by a glorious sheer-sided limestone canyon. The crags are the perfect sound wall for the ringing calls of jackdaws and occasional ‘cronking’ ravens (right, top) that breed in the area.

In the nearby quarry, which would have supplied the ballast for the old line, there are wonderful speciality flowers. It’s odd to think of this industrial site, filled once with noise and hard labour, and now blessed with the delicacy of fragrant orchids (right, mid) and common blue butterflies. Here the Wye is great for dippers (right, btm) and in July they form family parties, with the adults busy cramming mayflies and caddis larvae into the ever-open beaks of the scaly-breasted young.

Derbyshire days with Mark Cocker
Cressbrook
After Miller Dale we will have a picnic lunch nearby and then head across the cattle fields from Litton, a quintessential Derbyshire village complete with excellent pub, down into the glorious dry cleft of Cressbrook Dale with its dense ashwoods towering up to the crags overhead. It is a National Nature Reserve and full of flowers and birds, such as, common redstarts, singing blackcaps and garden warblers, raven and peregrine.
Our next day is devoted to perhaps the best known of all Derbyshire places, Dove Dale. We will avoid the traffic and the queues of walkers strolling to the famous stepping stones over the river. Instead we make a loop from the village of Hartington taking in Beresford, Wolscote and Biggin Dales, an area made famous by the publication of Izaak Walton’s classic The Compleat Angler.

These upper reaches of the Dove are a mixture of deciduous woodland and then open limestone slopes smothered in flowers and insects. We are so often told how the underlying geology determines an area’s wildlife. There are few better places in Britain to illustrate how life has itself shaped the very rock themselves. The limestone faces are packed with shell and coccolithophore fossils of the life forms that dwelt here 300 million years ago when this bit of Derbyshire was south of the Equator.

Birds are excellent in these dales with peregrines, buzzards, ravens and, increasingly, red kites overhead. The woods hold common redstart, spotted flycatcher and marsh tits, while dippers and grey wagtails are regulars on the river.
Perhaps strangest of all are the mandarin ducks (above). These hole-nesting ducks, symbols of love for the Chinese, have taken to breeding in hollowed tree down the dales and are routinely seen in the area. With their weird ‘tail fins’ and floppy facial ‘whiskers’, the males are truly spectacular.

The walk back from Biggin Dale to Hartington passes through classic Derbyshire countryside with rolling pasture divided by a geometry of limestone walls. The combination of grazing cattle and stone barns are perfect for the swallows (right btm) that breed in abundance here. If there is time at the end of a very full day we will head over to the other key dale, the Manifold Valley, where the river has vanished into its limestone bed. The woods are great for an increasingly rare Derbyshire speciality, the willow tit, while the spectacular cliff at Beeston Tor is a favourite perch for local peregrines.
**Kinder Scout**

Our last day in England’s most landlocked county will be at its most iconic location - Kinder Scout - where the Pennine Way starts, where the famous 1932 Mass Trespass unfolded, and where Britain’s national parks began 70 years ago. It summit is the highest part of Derbyshire and from Hayfield involves a 300m climb. We will save that for another day but we will get to see the area’s beautiful scenery and wildlife, including red grouse, redstarts, ravens, spotted flycatchers and purple hairstreak butterflies. A favourite Kinder resident is the solitary heather bee, whose colonies riddle the exposed shaly outcrops with holes. We may not get the health benefits of a full Kinder climb but the foot of the Scout is a great spot for our picnic, while the panoramic views are a perfect finale for our Derbyshire break.
The 360 Degree Approach
Our Derbyshire breaks are co-organised by Mark Cocker and Chris Mounsey of Balkan Tracks. Chris will make all arrangements, handle bookings and oversee finances. Our approach has been worked out over many years of sharing wildlife and its place in human culture with others. The break is intended to be a form of alfresco salon where the landscapes and life of Derbyshire are a stimulation for reflection, thought and unending conversation, as well as laughter and great fun. We shall never be in a rush. There will be no concern whatsoever for listing. And while I am not expert in everything, we will look at everything. The aim is to pack each day with wonder so that you have the richest and most imaginative engagement with all parts, whether it is peregrines or periwinkles. It is not a writing trip in any sense but the approach lends itself to creative responses. If you feel inspired all the better, and impromptu readings in the evening are a routine part of our holidays.

Your Guide
Mark Cocker is an author and naturalist. He has contributed to the Guardian country diary for 30 years and his 12 books of creative non-fiction, including Our Place, Birds and People and Crow Country, have been shortlisted for many awards including the Samuel Johnson Prize. Crow Country won the New Angle Prize in 2008. In a previous life he led wildlife holidays all over the world and the 360 Degree approach is a distillation of that experience.

Your Derbyshire Days Organiser
Originally a lawyer in London, Chris Mounsey worked for an environmental NGO in Greece. He and his father Richard then founded their dedicated 'responsible tourism' company, which is devoted to connecting visitors with some of Europe’s finest nature and, importantly, the people who live among it. Chris is now diversifying into new forms of flight-free holidays in the UK and other parts of Europe.
Our Accommodation

Our base is the four-star Westminster Hotel, a family-run 12-room establishment on Broad Walk at the heart of the town, with lovely views over the Pavilion Gardens’ lakes. The breakfasts and packed lunches are hearty and based on locally sourced produce. In the evenings we have three-course dinners at a small privately-owned and -run restaurant called La Brasserie de la Cour. It is just ten-minutes walk from the hotel and located in the most vibrant part of Buxton’s scenic centre. There are terrific micro-brewery pubs around this area and our hotel is chosen to give you easy access to Buxton’s famous historical architecture, such as the St Anne’s Crescent and the Devonshire Dome. You can find out more about your accommodation at their respective websites:

www.westminsterhotel.co.uk & www.thebarbrasseriebuxton.co.uk

Prices and Arrangements

Dates: Thurs 30 July – Sun 2 Aug 2020
Price £695 (£100 for single supplement)

Included are all transport, guiding, entry fees, meals (including daily packed lunches) and accommodation. Mark will be with you on all excursions. The only additional costs are your travel to/from Buxton, drinks or snacks during the day, evening drinks with your dinners. The tour will have a maximum of seven participants. Our programme is based on 9am – 6pm excursions, although sometimes we might be later back from more distant locations. Closer to departure we will provide a detailed daily plan. We can make reading and equipment recommendations. A £200 deposit is payable on booking. See my website for additional details but don’t hesitate to ask us for more information.

www.markcocker.com