

Softkill

For me the goshawk is Britain's ultimate avian killing machine: a winged terminator, which radiates the furious, belligerent yet rational and precise aura of an assassin. I am in awe of its evolved design because, put simply, it is perfect. It is the perfect winged weapon, perversely because it doesn't always catch its prey. Nature has 'built in' a necessary failure rate to ensure that prey species like squirrels can co-exist in an uneasy yet functional harmony with their nemesis. But it will always be an arms race, with any tiny advantage immediately exploited by either 'side' to shift the balance in its favour.

There are very clear parallels with the world of military technologies, both historical and contemporary, and this provides one of the central themes of this wonderful exhibition. During World War II the 'Battle of the Beams' was essentially won by Britain and our radar stations played a significant role in the conflict, notably during the Battle of Britain. Through research and development we procured an advantage - we essentially evolved the technology to a higher level and prospered. Lyndall Phelps has patently misapplied such technology here, and it is with great amusement that I see the nefarious invading grey squirrel, so loathed by many, being offered a tray of 'nuts' to counter the refined biological 'radar' of the goshawk, which in turn sits wearing its characteristic frown when confronted with another crude countermeasure. There is no shame in anthropomorphising the rodent's desperation and the bird's sneering.

Elsewhere the fascination that corvids have for shiny things manifests as a jackdaw elated by an aluminium trinket, which I'm afraid would, in reality, little perturb a stooping peregrine. But that's the twist in this exploration of history, natural and military; its sensitive subject matter has been mixed with surreal metaphors, which challenges us to question our motives and the role they play in the reality of our lives.

The animals in this exhibition are all species about which we have an opinion, typically prejudiced and misjudged, and as such are or have been persecuted. It is fitting, then, that they are here in rigid form to turn the tables and quiz our dangerous technologies and subsequent susceptibility.

Chris Packham, Naturalist and Wildlife Broadcaster