

Notes

Water Rail killing Little Stint and Eel.—With reference to the recent notes on Water Rails (*Rallus aquaticus*) killing a Wren (*Troglodytes troglodytes*) and other small Passerines (*Brit. Birds*, 55: 132-133 and 165), I should like to record that on 4th September 1958, at Falsterbo, Sweden, I was watching a small party of twenty-four Little Stints (*Calidris minuta*) feeding at a drying and shallow pool when a Water Rail dashed out of some adjacent reeds and seized one. It pecked it and trampled it in the mud until it was dead. I recovered the body and found that part of the breast was missing, eaten or torn off.

The following morning, at the same pond, a Water Rail dashed out at a White Wagtail (*Motacilla alba*), but failed to catch it. Later, it or another appeared again and killed a small Eel (*Anguilla anguilla*) thirteen inches long without making any attempt to eat it. There were several Water Rails by this pond—and also half a dozen Spotted Crakes (*Porzana porzana*)—so that more than one bird may have been involved.

A. G. G. THOMPSON

Melanistic Black-headed Gulls in Northumberland.—In the late afternoon of 30th December 1961, an unusual small gull was seen in a flock leaving a roost on a coastal meadow near Seahouses, Northumberland. In the short time it was within binocular range, it showed a remarkable amount of black in its plumage. The following day, Miss P. A. Harrison and Miss M. B. Hyslop saw a bird in Seahouses harbour which resembled an Arctic Skua (*Stercorarius parasiticus*), but which had black, not dark brown, feathers and no tail streamers; it showed none of the behaviour typical of a skua and was often chased by Herring Gulls (*Larus argentatus*).

This bird was seen again on the morning of 1st January 1962 by Dr. E. L. Arnold and D. L. Arnold who also discovered two more black gulls bathing in a creek about half a mile away. One of the latter was almost uniformly dark, while the other had a piebald appearance with large black patches on the upper breast, mantle and wing-coverts. That same afternoon, and in the same area, a very dark gull was disturbed by the two Arnolds and the writer in a flock of roosting Black-headed Gulls (*L. ridibundus*). This bird, which was in excellent plumage, flew off steadily inland and immediately afterwards a very dark individual with heavily abraded feathers and two others which were piebald were located in Seahouses harbour. From their size, shape, flight and behaviour, it was concluded that they were melanistic Black-headed Gulls. The scruffy dark bird remained in

the harbour area and was seen there again on 2nd January by M. C. W. Evans, J. G. Edwards and the writer. On the 3rd, we managed to catch it and took the following description:

Head entirely black, except for a grey nape patch like a Jackdaw's (*Corvus monedula*); mantle very dark grey, shading to black rump; upper tail-coverts dark grey; tail light grey and heavily abraded. Scapulars, lesser and median coverts light grey, with a few white feathers among the lesser coverts; greater coverts black; primary coverts dark grey; primaries had white shafts and black tips, and in the outermost three the leading edges were black and the trailing edges white or pale grey, while the inner primaries and secondaries were grey, darkening markedly towards the body. All under-parts from chin to under tail-coverts black. Bill dirty red with a black tip; legs sooty red.

I showed this bird to the local fishermen and they informed me that it had first been seen at the beginning of the very cold weather in the last week of December; they had thought it was a skua.

The observations make it clear that at least four different individuals were involved. In each the black patches were symmetrical and could not have been caused by oil or dye.

P. R. EVANS

[It is a little unfortunate that no feathers were collected for scientific tests. Many black and grey gulls prove to be soiled and not melanistic at all. In the present case, however, it seems unlikely that the observers could have been deceived by a bird in the hand, particularly as the markings were symmetrical. The recent paper by Bryan L. Sage on "Albinism and melanism in birds" (*Brit. Birds*, 55: 201-225) makes mention of this observation (p. 216) and suggests a link with an earlier record in Co. Durham. If this is a case of hereditary melanism, it would be very interesting to locate the colony concerned and we ask that people keep a watch for such individuals in the future.—EDS.]

Weasel attacking Tawny Owl.—At 3.0 p.m. on 26th November 1961, at Norton, Sheffield, Peter Doherty (aged 15) was watching a Tawny Owl (*Strix aluco*) perched on a log beside a stream, when a Weasel (*Mustela nivalis*) came from undergrowth three feet away and grabbed at it, taking most of its tail feathers. The owl flew up, but travelled only about ten feet and there the boy was able to catch it. He thought that it must be tired or injured and so brought it to me. Apart from its missing tail feathers, its right wing was dislocated. This may have happened while the boy was catching it, but I think that the greater part of the injury resulted from the grip and pull of the Weasel. The boy said that there had been quite a tug while the Weasel held on with its teeth. In view of the bird's injuries I kept it in a conservatory at my home until 3rd May 1962 and after that at large in my garden, but seven months after the attack its wing is still dislocated and its feathers are only just beginning to grow, although it otherwise appears well.

NOTES

While on this subject it seems relevant to add an observation in connection with the recent notes by T. J. Lawes and J. M. Last on Short-eared Owls (*Asio flammeus*) and a Barn Owl (*Tyto alba*) killing Weasels (*Brit. Birds*, 54: 326-327; 55: 87). At 6.0 p.m. on 15th September 1961, again at Norton, we found a freshly dead Weasel by a hedge near which both Tawny and Barn Owls live. It had a small puncture on each side of its chest and these had penetrated the lungs. I concluded that it had been killed by the talons of an owl and dropped because we came on the scene. W. A. TIMPERLEY

Bonelli's Warbler in Suffolk.—At about 10 a.m. GMT on 29th April 1961, at Walberswick, Suffolk, we encountered a pale leaf-warbler about the size of a Willow Warbler (*Phylloscopus trochilus*). We were first attracted by its song—a short trill on one note of five to seven syllables, lower pitched and slower than the trill of a Wood Warbler (*Ph. sibilatrix*) and without the acceleration. We identified it as a Bonelli's Warbler (*Ph. bonelli*). Its most noticeable field characters were pale under-parts, yellow edgings to primaries and secondaries and a yellow patch near the carpal joint. There was no wing-bar and the yellowish rump was seldom noticed. We succeeded in trapping the bird and the following description was taken in the hand:

Upper-parts: forehead and crown brown tinged olive; superciliary pale creamy yellow (not bright) extending to a point above middle of pale brown ear-coverts; nape and mantle olive-green overwashed earth-brown and shading to yellow-green on rump; upper tail-coverts bright yellow-olive; rectrices brown edged yellow; all wing-feathers brown edged yellow-green on outer webs (especially secondaries) and remiges with paler tips. *Under-parts:* throat to under tail-coverts off-white; axillaries bright yellow; under carpal edgings bright yellow, paler towards coverts which were brown with pale yellow tips. *Soft parts:* upper mandible and end of lower mandible brown, base of lower tinged pink; iris blackish-brown; orbital ring pale cream; tarsus dark pinky-brown. *Measurements:* wing 65 mm., tarsus 19.5 mm., tail 51 mm. *Wing-formula:* 3rd and 4th longest, 2nd 8.5 mm. shorter and between 6th and 7th; 3rd to 6th emarginated.

We were puzzled by the emargination on the 6th primary, but P. Hope Jones informs us that a proportion of nominate *bonelli* do show this—a fact which does not seem to have been previously recorded. The bird was also seen in the hand by, amongst others, H. E. Axell, G. J. Jobson, A. Morley and A. D. Rowe (and by most of these in the field as well). It was last recorded, still singing, at noon on 30th April. This is the seventh record for Great Britain, but the first for the spring and the first for the east coast.

D. J. PEARSON, S. BODDY and M. SMART

[Since this bird was recorded there have been two further records for Great Britain and Ireland, one in Co. Cork (*Brit. Birds*, 55: 92-93) and one on Fair Isle (see over)—EDS.]

Bonelli's Warbler on Fair Isle.—A first-winter Bonelli's Warbler (*Phylloscopus bonelli*), the ninth recorded in Britain and the first in Scotland, was seen and trapped on Fair Isle on 22nd September 1961. It was first located by W. H. Truckle, S. L. White, E. J. Wiseman and D. Wooldridge, and was later watched by a dozen other observers, including G. J. Barnes and the writer, as it fed among the potatoes at Shirva and Brows; these had been withered and beaten down by a hurricane a few days earlier, so that they seldom impeded our view, and in any case the bird was absurdly tame, permitting approach to within two yards. It was searching for food both among the leaves remaining on the stems and in the debris on the earth beneath. For a leaf-warbler it was very grey on the head and upper-parts, and it had silvery-white under-parts and bright green edgings on the wings and tail. No yellow could be seen in the field on the rump or upper tail-coverts, which was puzzling at first as all the available references emphasised this character. However, one of the watchers, P. J. Sellar, stated that the yellow was seldom visible in Bonelli's he had seen in France; and in subsequent correspondence P. Hope Jones confirmed this from his considerable experience at Tour du Valat in the Camargue, adding that the unique combination of grey and white contrasting with the bright green edgings on wings and tail make identification quite easy. These points have since been made independently by I. J. Ferguson-Lees in this journal (*Brit. Birds*, 54: 395-398). The bird had a distinctive call, a harsh and almost disyllabic *clweet* which it uttered frequently as it explored the crop. It was soon captured in a mist-net and the following description was taken in the laboratory:

Forehead, crown, nape, mantle, back and scapulars greyish-green, with slight yellowish and brownish stippling on crown; lower rump and upper tail-coverts with slight yellowish tinge. All feathers of wings and tail brownish, edged bright green, except for yellow patch at carpal joint and yellow axillaries and under wing-coverts; flight-feathers and tail unworn. Supercilium whitish, short; lores and ear-coverts tinged greyish. Entire under-parts silvery-white with grey tinge on flanks and sides of breast and spot of yellow near shoulder. *Soft parts*: upper mandible horn with pinkish cutting-edge and base, lower mandible pinkish; inside of mouth yellow; eye very dark brown; legs brown with slaty tinge in front and pinkish tinge behind. *Measurements*: wing 59 mm., tail 46 mm., tarsus 18 mm., bill 13.5 mm.; weight 6.4 gm. at 1615 hours GMT. *Wing-formula*: 4th primary longest, 3rd and 5th —0.5 mm., 6th —3.5 mm., 7th —5.5 mm., 2nd —6 mm., 8th —7.5 mm., 1st 4.5 mm. longer than primary-coverts; 3rd to 5th emarginated.

The bird was released at North Haven and flew off to the cliffs; it was not seen again.

PETER DAVIS

Spotted Flycatcher feeding on grasshopper.—Neither *The Handbook* nor D. A. Bannerman's *The Birds of the British Isles* (vol. 2, pp. 265-266)

mentions Orthoptera in the food of the Spotted Flycatcher (*Muscicapa striata*). On 2nd October 1958, at Khanaqin, Iraq, I saw a Spotted Flycatcher catch and eat a grasshopper which was at rest on a lawn. It was of the species *Eremopeza gibbera*, which is about two inches in length.

BRYAN L. SAGE

Dunnock's method of obtaining seeds from antirrhinums.—In the autumn of 1961, at Perivale, Middlesex, two Dunnocks (*Prunella modularis*) frequently visited a suburban flower-bed which contained only a few well-grown plants of the garden antirrhinum (*Antirrhinum majus*). On 26th December, when the ground was frozen, one of them was seen to stretch up and tug at a stem bearing seed heads, thus spilling them, and then rapidly pick up the fallen seeds. It repeated this a number of times, gradually moving round the plant, and then flew up to perch on one of the stems, shaking it with its weight. With wings fluttering to balance, it stayed there only a few moments before dropping back to the ground and immediately crouching to pick up more seeds. It repeated this action eight or nine times in rapid succession and I had the impression that it was associating the act of perching with the finding of seeds on the ground afterwards.

Later the same day this bird, or it may have been the other one, was seen on three further occasions working its way around the plants, reaching up to pull at them and picking up the seeds shaken out. Twice it tugged repeatedly at stems which carried neither seed heads nor leaves, though this action appeared to cause seeds to fall from adjacent stems. Once three House Sparrows (*Passer domesticus*) took advantage of what was happening and rushed in to seize fallen seeds, but they were not seen attempting to shake any down for themselves.

C. J. O. HARRISON

Grey Wagtail nesting in Sand Martin's burrow.—On 23rd April 1961, while walking up the River Rye in north Yorkshire, I was very surprised to see a hen Grey Wagtail (*Motacilla cinerea*) fly out of a burrow made by Sand Martins (*Riparia riparia*) in the bank, some five feet above the river bed. With the aid of a torch I was just able to distinguish the nest, but not its contents, about two feet down the burrow. I returned to the site on the 27th and both adults were then feeding young in the nest. Thus the clutch must have been completed by about 14th April—a fairly early date—but it was the choice of nest-site which was the most remarkable feature. Of eight other nests I found in that area during 1960 and 1961, three were in open depressions in mud banks, two were under grass tufts on grassy banks, one was

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among tree roots over the water and two were under bridges.

IAN HARMER

[Grey Wagtails not infrequently nest in drainage pipes in bridges and walls (two sites not specifically mentioned in *The Handbook*), but in this case the use of a Sand Martin's burrow and the distance to the nest inside the hole both seem unusual.—EDS.]