

Notes

Another melanistic Cattle Egret

The note by P. J. Willoughby (*Brit. Birds* 94: 390-391) on a melanistic Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis* observed in November 1995 in Goa, India, reminded me of a similar observation in southern Spain. On 2nd May 1993, while birding in steppe-like open countryside near the road between El Rocio and Almonte, northwest of the Coto Doñana, my uncle, Heinz Herkenrath, and I came across a strange-looking small egret. Its plumage was dark greyish, with some pale, almost white areas on the primaries and a white throat; some feathers on the crown and mantle were brownish, but these areas looked very dishevelled. The bill was orange with a paler tip, while the inner part of the upper mandible showed a striking yellow coloration. The iris was yellow.

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The legs were dark greenish-grey, but with yellow around the intertarsal joints. From its size and proportions, as well as its feeding behaviour, the bird was easily identified as an aberrant Cattle Egret. Unfortunately, a photograph which I took produced a poor result owing to over-exposure.

It is interesting that Willoughby also noted 'somewhat paler' primaries, 'this being very obvious in flight'. We did not have the opportunity to observe the Spanish egret in flight.

The aberrant egret was feeding in isolation from the many other Cattle Egrets, many of them associating with cattle, in the dry grass. The state of its plumage suggested that it was in poor health.

Like Willoughby, I am not aware of any published reference to a melanistic Cattle Egret.

Eurasian Sparrowhawk taking insects in flight

The note by M. R. Hopton and D. A. Richardson on a female Eurasian Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus* apparently eating insects in flight (*Brit. Birds* 90: 357-358) prompts us to record the following. At 15.10 hours on 6th July 1997, in warm, sunny weather with little wind, we were returning to our home in Harefield, Southampton, Hampshire, when we noticed a male Eurasian Sparrowhawk gliding slowly over our house towards a loose group of some 20 circling Black-headed Gulls *Larus ridibundus*. We went through to the back of the house to obtain a better view and, through 10 × 50 binoculars, watched the hawk as it circled among the gulls at a height of about 60 m. On two occasions, it lowered its legs and brought them forward as if to snatch a large insect; on the second occasion, it appeared about to transfer the food to its bill, but succeeded only in dropping it (a large insect

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was clearly seen to fall from the hawk's toes). The raptor then glided off at increasing speed as the gulls drifted slowly in the opposite direction.

We had never before seen a Eurasian Sparrowhawk attempt to catch insects in flight in this manner, which was highly reminiscent of the behaviour of some species of small falcon *Falco*.

In addition, whereas the female seen by Hopton & Richardson was described as 'weaving and turning in very tight manoeuvres', this male did not make any turning movements. It simply glided into the airspace occupied by swarming insects and, apparently, snatched food items from the air. It is also interesting that the gulls did not react to the hawk in the 'expected' way. In this area, the appearance of a Eurasian Sparrowhawk usually elicits a mobbing response from both gulls and Carrion Crows *Corvus corone*.

Reaction by European Nightjar to displaying Wood Pigeon

On 24th June 2001, on Bucklebury Common, West Berkshire, I heard the distinctive churring of a European Nightjar *Caprimulgus europaeus*, coming from the direction of a known roost site, at about 10.35 hours. The weather was warm and

bright, with some cloud cover, and the song lasted for approximately ten seconds. I approached the roost site carefully, and a few minutes later the nightjar sang again for several seconds. During this second bout of singing, I

observed a displaying Wood Pigeon *Columba palumbus* making a wing-clapping sound close to, and above, the roost site. Diurnal churring by nightjars is not uncommon, and usually occurs during inclement weather, towards dusk or after the male has been disturbed from its roost or nest. None of these explained the churring in this

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case, and I can only assume that perhaps the wing-clapping sound produced by the Wood Pigeon was the trigger. Wing-clapping is extremely important in nightjar displays, especially in territorial disputes with other males, and the roosting male may have been warning off what it perceived as an intruder in its territory.

'Catnapping' by European Nuthatches

It is recognised that, at times, birds may 'catnap' during the day (Cullen 1964). I have occasionally noticed this type of behaviour by different bird species visiting a feeder in my garden at West Bagborough, Somerset. The species concerned have been Great Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos major*, Blue Tit *Parus caeruleus*, Great Tit *P. major* and European Nuthatch *Sitta europaea*.

In the case of the European Nuthatch, the bird remains immobile, usually upside-down and with its eyes closed, while clinging to the feeder. My experience is that nuthatches remain

in this state for longer than other species. For example, I observed one nap of two minutes and another of eight minutes and 45 seconds, both in July 2001. In each case, the nuthatch resumed active feeding behaviour at the end of each nap.

Of course, this behaviour is much easier to watch in a garden than in woodland, and is presumably not uncommon. Nonetheless, there must be a high risk of predation for an individual which gets into a daytime 'catnap' habit.

Cullen, J. M. 1964. Roosting. In: Landsborough Thomson, A. (ed.), *A New Dictionary of Birds*. London.

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Interactions between Eurasian Jays and Grey Squirrels

I read with interest the note on a Eurasian Jay *Garrulus glandarius* which persistently robbed a Grey Squirrel *Sciurus carolinensis* (*Brit. Birds* 95: 26). Since this jay did not attempt to retrieve the nuts before the squirrel had found and removed them, it is fairly certain that it was not the jay that had originally hidden them. As shown by Bossema (1979), jays cannot use a sense of smell to recover food which another has hidden, as might a Red Fox *Vulpes vulpes* or a Grey Squirrel. My own observations have convinced me that jays are much more often 'robbed' of their previously hidden food by Grey Squirrels than vice versa.

Grey Squirrels frequently 'smell out' and recover acorns hidden by Eurasian Jays in open areas, often up to 50 m from the nearest tree, and often much farther from the nearest oak *Quercus*, whereas jays cannot detect hidden food (even strong-smelling cheese) by scent and cannot usually find acorns that have been hidden by another jay or by a human (Goodwin 1956; Bossema 1979). The behaviour of a jay

which finds that a hidden acorn (or other food item) has vanished is quite specific (Goodwin 1956), and those who do not share the jay's excellent spatial memory will sympathise with its apparent bewilderment.

I recall an occasion when I observed a Eurasian Jay hiding acorns on my lawn, bringing two or three at a time from a nearby oak, pushing them singly into the substrate and then carefully covering each in the usual manner. On the second or third visit, a Grey Squirrel suddenly dashed into view and began to search the area. It soon found an acorn and sat up to eat it. The jay did not attempt to interfere with the squirrel, but at once uncovered one of its previously hidden acorns and flew off with it, probably only to hide it since it was back in less than a minute for another. This it took also, but on its return the squirrel charged the jay, forcing its retreat from the lawn.

Bossema, I. 1979. Jays and oaks: an eco-ethological study of a symbiosis. *Behaviour* 70: 1-170.

Goodwin, D. 1956. Further observations on the behaviour of the Jay. *Ibis* 98: 186-219.

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