

THE LESSER REDPOLL IN SUSSEX.

BY

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IN his "Birds of Sussex" (1891, p. 134), the late Mr. Borrer wrote of this species (*Linota rufescens*) that "it is seldom met with in the Weald, and I have but once seen it there." Beyond this rather unconvincing statement he has nothing further to add about its status, except to mention that "it is often captured in very large numbers in clap-nets, and, at the time of immigration, it has frequently been taken in small traps on the roofs of the houses in Brighton and Hastings." Then, writing of its nesting, he continues, "I have never heard of its having done so in the county in a truly wild state. Mr. Booth, however, mentioned that a few nests were found in alders and willows in 1869 near Brighton; he supposes from the worn and faded appearance of the birds that they had escaped from confinement." Mr. Booth was a capital and expert field-ornithologist, yet I doubt if he was correct in this instance, seeing that Lesser Redpolls often look worn and faded during nesting operations.

Now, whether it is that, during the past seventeen years, the bird has kept on gradually increasing in Sussex, or whether it is that it was formerly overlooked, I know not, but at the present day, at all events, the Lesser Redpoll is a resident in Sussex, though, of course, very much commoner and more widely distributed in winter than in summer. In fact, during the winter there is hardly a district in the county where it does not put in a roving appearance from time to time. In the breeding season, however, things are somewhat different. For, although it nests regularly, either in scattered pairs or, and more usually, from two to eight pairs together in a very restricted radius of ground, in a goodly number of spots in the wooded districts, it is ever most partial to the Weald. I could enumerate quite a number of locali-

ties within easy touch of Horsham where this sprightly and engaging Finch rears its young annually ; but, be it noted, in *varying numbers*, for in some years (such as, for instance, 1905 and 1908) it is much more plentiful than in others.

These Sussex Lesser Redpolls affect several quite different nesting haunts. But they are *very local*, and their presence is, of course, subject to that of trees in more or less abundance. Among favourite haunts are the alders, swaying till they meet over those sluggish streams which connect with, or flow out of, many of our big mill pools ; the shrubberies and ornamental grounds of country mansions ; long "strippy" plantations of saplings ; hedgerows ; "shaws" intersecting common land with their outlying, self-sown conifers ; and, lastly, thinly-planted larch plantations of fair growth. I am intimate with one such small planting of about an acre in extent, growing on a bracken-decked slope, which some years harbours as many as six pairs. Thus it will be seen that there is no fixed rule for the haunt. But it is well worth remarking that nearly all the resorts, if not actually by a pond or stream, are in damp spots where the ground is seldom indeed anything but inclining to the boggy. And a great many haunts are close to a road. I have located many a pair as I have walked or cycled slowly along the highway, for the Lesser Redpoll draws attention to its haunt by continually flying about in the air, trilling and twittering the while.

Indeed, during the entire summer the Lesser Redpoll gives much of its leisure to the air. One minute it alights in some tree—it is particularly enamoured of conifers usually near, if not on, its actual summit, whence, after two or three minutes breathing space, it flits off, as it were, aimlessly flying to and fro for a stretch of a hundred yards perhaps, and ever and anon undertaking far longer journeys, and while it flies it trills.

These love-flights are nearly always conducted at an altitude of about twenty feet or so above the tree-tops,

unless the trees are very lofty, when they are about on a level with their summits. Besides trilling when on the wing, the bird also trills when perching, though then the performance is subdued as compared with the aerial utterance. And where several pairs are nesting very close together—as is frequently the case—all the males may be in the air together, one taking up the trilling refrain as the other ceases. I have also heard a softly modulated song from the male—always when he has been settled close to the nest. It first ascends, then descends the scale, and you must be near indeed to catch the notes at all.

As a general maxim, birds which congregate in autumn and winter, as the species under discussion does (though I have never seen very big gatherings; usually a small party, or even only two or three, whilst a single bird at those seasons is no uncommon sight), pair annually. Despite this, however, I know many haunts which are patronized each succeeding summer by Lesser Redpolls, a fact which suggests that at any rate one of each given pair returns unerringly to the old trysting place with his or her new partner, as the case may be. In fact, I have, on several occasions, found this year's nest built within a few feet of the relics of last season's. Although the Lesser Redpoll cannot claim to be gregarious in the summer, it is certainly very social, and in some districts it is nothing for three or four nests to be placed in as many trees within a radius of a comparatively few square yards.

For a resident species the Lesser Redpoll is a notoriously late breeder, as, although the gatherings disperse and pairs are formed during the early part of April and all through that month, I can never recollect finding eggs before the middle of May, and that must be reckoned as an exceptionally early record. Even here in Sussex I seldom think it worth while to look for the nests till the last few days of that month or early in June. In 1908 the first eggs I saw were on June 6th, and between that date

and the end of the month I found several with *fresh* eggs. Yet, in 1907, in much the same district, I knew of two nests on June 17th, one containing big nestlings, the other which the young left that very day, and this in spite of the backwardness of the season. Occasionally a second brood is reared late in July, but, of course, in a different nest.

As the haunt is varied, so is the position of the nest. Some examples—and they are ever the neatest—may be found in hedgerows, either in a thorn or a sloe bush, sometimes as much as eight feet from the ground, but more usually from two to four. At other times they are in the “crotch” of an alder by the stream; in a hedgerow elm or in a furze bush. Yet, in Sussex at all events, most nests are built as high up as possible in sapling conifers, birches, oaks, or beeches of from nine to eighteen feet high. They are always in a “crotch,” and, as a further protection, portions of the nest material are often woven round the branches or twigs forming the “crotch.” I have also seen nests at the end of tapering fir, larch, and holm-oak boughs, though in this case the trees have been lofty and of big girth. In one locality (in Sussex) all the nests are in stripling larches, some of which are really tall, either against the bole, resting on some tiny sprigs, or higher up on a branch projecting from the main stem, when it lies against the bole or as much as a foot away from it.

The nest, though exquisitely neat internally, always has rather a rough, not to say straggling, exterior. It varies somewhat in composition, of which the following notes, relating to four nests, will give a fair impression. The first is a very typical example, and is made of a good many slender twigs, fibrous rootlets, dry grass, and a little of the same material in a green condition, and a few flakes of moss, wholly lined with vegetable down. The second shows dried grass and plenty of greyish-green tree lichen externally, whilst the finishing off is first a layer of horsehair in strands, then a pad of vegetable down,

and, finally, a good accumulation of Wood-Pigeon's and cock Pheasant's feathers. This is a curiously beautiful nest, and it is further peculiar owing to the fact that only one patch of the snowy vegetable down showed up in the final lining. Number three is composed of grasses, roots, and a few twigs, lined with hair, down, and a few small feathers, whilst in its lowest foundations I unearthed a strip of decayed wood, a dead leaf or two, and a few spiders' cocoons. The fourth exhibits a good deal of very green moss over the usual fine grass stems and flowers, as well as a few pieces of grey lichen, and the padding is of horsehair, down, and a sprinkling of feathers, including those of a Tawny Owl and Partridge. The vegetable down is a characteristic of and is never absent from any nest, and is frequently woven into its foundation. An average nest measures $3\frac{1}{2}$ inches across by $2\frac{1}{4}$ deep, with an egg-cup $1\frac{1}{2}$ in diameter and $1\frac{1}{4}$ in depth. Should wet weather prevail during nest-building, many a home is deserted, because so waterproof is the padding of down that in some cases the nest actually holds rain for a short time, and in exceptionally severe storms this is an unlooked-for calamity which overtakes nests holding eggs or young.

Incubation, which frequently commences with the first egg laid, is principally performed by the female, and lasts from twelve to fifteen days.

The Lesser Redpoll is usually a very close and intrepid sitter. Sometimes I have stroked one or even lifted it bodily off its eggs, but more usually it slips off the nest when an intruding hand is within an inch or two of it. I have known one to perch on the hand of the man who was examining the eggs ; and I have seen another return and nestle down into the fork from which there had just been taken the nest ; whilst you can fearlessly remove a nest from its site and replace it after examination without causing desertion.

The nest is not a very easy one to discover. To find it usually means long and hard searching in a spot where the

birds are frequently seen. And in any case, especially when they are in saplings in full leaf, the nests are far from easy to see. But the birds themselves often lead to its ultimate discovery, the male by trilling and singing just above or close to it, and the female, or the two together, by repeatedly flying to one special spot in a line of covert. And if, as you scramble as best you may through a strip of closely-planted saplings, you suddenly hear the alarm-cry from somewhere in the greenery overhead, you may rest assured that a nest is close by for the finding.