



LETTERS



SPORADIC NESTING.

To the Editors of BRITISH BIRDS.

SIRS,—Mr. Bunyard, in reply to my request for information as to the grounds upon which he bases his opinion that the Hobby and Grasshopper-Warbler are sporadic in their nesting-habits, studiously avoids any attempt to substantiate his assertions by facts.

In reply to the points raised by his letter in your October issue : I did not suggest a better definition because I was discussing the term as actually applied by your correspondent to the Hobby and Grasshopper-Warbler. I did not mention Hawfinch because I agreed that this species was, like the Crossbill, a sporadic breeder in England, though in a very different degree. Mr. Witherby has ample grounds — after the latest irruption of the Crossbill as a breeding species in England, in conjunction with previous authentic records—to term this species “sporadic” ; but the cases of Hobby and Grasshopper-Warbler are totally different, and, I submit, still require to be proved.

In my opinion “sporadic,” as applied to the nesting of wild birds, implies “irregular in occurrence, as the result of nomadic tendencies or of impulse.” Thus, I should describe as sporadic the nesting of Pallas’s Sand-Grouse and Crossbill, and the appearances of the clouded-yellow butterfly in England.

The dictionary assigns such meanings to the word as “single,” “separate,” etc., but such scarcely seem to apply to the context, otherwise all birds which were not gregarious would fall under this head—excluding Crossbill and Hawfinch as semi-gregarious, or at least social, while including Hobby.

In deducing generalities from statistical records, due allowance must be made for various appearances and disappearances seemingly within the above category. Thus : First appearances are not *per se* sporadic, as some young birds will select new breeding-places. Or, a bird may be blown out of its course and accordingly remain to breed, but here the occurrence would not be primarily due to impulse or intent of the bird. On the other hand, a bird may disappear without being sporadic—it may have died or have been shot ; and as regards the survivor finding a new mate, it seems equally probable that it should have gone to join a mate, as that a mate should come and join it. Similarly, the fluctuations in the numbers of a species breeding in a

district are not necessarily sporadic, for severe seasons notoriously play havoc with some of our more delicate species, which in due course recoup their numbers.

My limited experience of the breeding of the Hobby in England is as follows :—

1. This year I visited a nest in a wood where they have bred each season for at least ten years, despite the fact that about four years ago one old bird and three young were shot at the nest, and the eggs have been occasionally taken.

2. About the same time I visited another nest in a wood in an entirely different locality, where a pair have likewise bred for many consecutive years.

3. A little later this year, in yet another locality, the Hobby reared young in the same wood where she has bred for at least three years past.

4. For at least five years the Hobby bred regularly in a wood in Shropshire, despite the fact that the first clutch of eggs was regularly taken.

5. In 1907 a friend of mine visited a nest with eggs in the same wood where young had been hatched the two previous years at least. This wood was felled the following winter.

6. In 1911 a friend of mine took eggs from a nest from which the female had just been shot. The male apparently left the locality.

Of the above instances, five demonstrate that the Hobby, though a migrant, and rarer and more local, is no less regular a breeder in England than the three other British-breeding members of the genus. The sixth record is inconclusive.

Of the several instances of nesting cited in *The Birds of Hampshire and the Isle of Wight*, the following five records similarly tend to confirm the statement that the Hobby is not sporadic :—

- (1) Doles Wood
- (2) N. Oakley (Munn)
- (3) Buckhill Wood (Wise)
- (4) Ipley (Turle)
- (5) Ringwood (Corbin),

while the remainder are isolated instances and wholly inconclusive.

With regard to the Grasshopper-Warbler, this species, though local, is so well known to nest commonly in suitable localities year after year, that it seems almost superfluous, until positive evidence is forthcoming to the contrary, to encroach further upon your valuable space.

C. S. MEARES.

[It should perhaps be pointed out that my contention on page 333 of Volume IV. (April, 1911) was that the Crossbill in England and Wales "cannot be classed as a resident, but only as a migrant, breeding sporadically." I was treating the matter broadly, having in view the status of the bird in the whole of England and Wales. By "breeding sporadically" I meant that it only bred here and there at intervals, and was not a regular English breeding bird. So far as the records went, it did not breed every year in England, and it had never bred more than two years in succession in any one locality. Mr. Bunyard has now proved that the bird has bred for three years in succession in Suffolk. He feels "convinced that the Crossbill is (and probably always has been) a firmly established English-breeding bird" (*supra* p. 89). As to what it probably was, I can only judge by the published facts which, as given in my paper in Volume IV., have not been disputed. Mr. Bunyard thinks that fewer birds nested in 1912 in Suffolk than in 1910 and 1911, and I think it yet remains to be seen whether the bird has now become really established there.

The Hobby, Hawfinch and Grasshopper-Warbler seem to me to be in a different category. They are without doubt regular English breeding birds, and the fact that they breed irregularly in certain localities does not affect their general status.

It is important that we should not confuse (1) the admission of a species to a large area like England as part of its regular breeding-range, with (2) local fluctuations of a species which is undoubtedly a regular breeder within that area.—H. F. WITHERBY.]

[I should imagine that it is a practical impossibility to say to what cause isolated instances of breeding in new districts are due; and if sporadic breeding be taken to imply nomadic tendency or impulse as opposed to natural increase of individuals or the other causes mentioned by Mr. Meares, it must remain a matter of opinion whether any bird is described as a sporadic breeder or not.

Mr. Meares brings definite proof that when suitable breeding-places are available the Hobby will return to the same spot year after year to breed. But there are many cases in which the nest of the previous year proves to be tenanted by some other species, such as the Long-eared Owl, and then the Hobby must seek a new home. There are also places where it is only known to breed at long intervals. Although some localities are always occupied by Grasshopper-Warblers in considerable numbers, there are also other districts where this bird appears only irregularly, and is absent for several years together. In one locality in Derbyshire seven or eight pairs were present within a radius

of two miles in one season, but the following year not one returned, and this was also the case for some years afterwards. This might have been due to disasters to the birds on migration, but of course this is necessarily mere supposition, and breeding is here apparently sporadic. Although both Messrs. Bunyard and Meares class the Hawfinch as a sporadic breeder, there are orchards where it has bred without intermission for ten years.

As the limit of the breeding-range of any species is approached, there must always be a tendency for nesting to become irregular and sporadic. The recorded case of breeding of the Hobby in Scotland must be classed under this head. But there can be no hard and fast line between irregular breeding due to impulse or nomadic tendency, and those cases due to accidental circumstances or natural increase.—F. C. R. JOURDAIN.]

BLAKENEY POINT TERN COLONIES.

To the Editors of BRITISH BIRDS.

SIRS,—The concluding paragraph of Mr. Rowan's note (*supra*, p. 162) might be taken to imply that the Arctic Tern has bred in past years on Blakeney Point in Norfolk. This is not the case, but of course Arctic and Sandwich Terns are often noticed there on passage.

CLIFFORD BORRER.

ORKNEY BREEDING-RECORDS OF LONG-TAILED DUCK AND GREY LAG-GOOSE.

To the Editors of BRITISH BIRDS.

SIRS,—I see, in Vol. V., p. 203, of BRITISH BIRDS, you doubt the record of the Long-tailed Duck having bred in Orkney in 1911. I have just returned from Orkney, and I am very glad that you have called attention to the unsatisfactory method of recording a species as new to any locality, because unless some competent person has seen the nest *in situ*, it is surely unwise on second-hand evidence to record it as breeding in any new locality.

I would take this opportunity of calling attention to Mr. H. W. Robinson's statement in Vol. III., p. 376, that the Grey Lag-Goose nested on Kaileylang or Keelelang, Orkney, in 1904. If Mr. Robinson saw the birds and nest himself, I will at once acknowledge its correctness; but if he did not, who did see them?

JAMES R. HALE.

A SACRED IBIS IN ESSEX.

To the Editors of BRITISH BIRDS.

SIRS,—On or about August 21st, 1912, an Ibis (apparently *I. æthiopica*, but possibly *I. melanocephala*), evidently immature, was shot at Danbury, Essex, by a game-keeper named Arthur Wheeler, employed by Mr. J. C. Spencer-Phillips, of Riffhams, Danbury. The bird was first seen squatting in a hedge, apparently in an exhausted condition. It is now stuffed and being mounted by Messrs. Leech, of Chelmsford, through whose kindness I have been able to examine it. Although it shows no signs of having been in confinement, there can be scarcely a doubt that it is really an "escape"; for there is no well-authenticated record of the occurrence in Britain, or even in Europe, of either of the white Ibises. I have ascertained that no such bird has escaped recently from the Zoological Society's Gardens: but the Duke of Bedford (who has some of these birds flying wild at Woburn Abbey) has been good enough to have me informed that one was missed at the beginning of September and might have escaped some time earlier. It seems almost certain, therefore, that this is the bird shot at Danbury. Assuming this to be the case, the fact that the bird's wanderings (extending over some fifty-five miles, the distance from Woburn to Danbury) were more or less to the south-eastward (that is, in the direction of its natal region), may be noted for what it is worth.

MILLER CHRISTY.

[It would be a considerable service to ornithology if such birds which are liable to escape or are intentionally liberated, were "ringed" by those who keep them in captivity or semi-captivity.]—EDS.]