

NOTES ON THE BIRDS OF A VALLEY IN
THE CHAMPAGNE DISTRICT, FRANCE.

BY

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DURING June 1918 I was fortunate in being stationed for three weeks with my unit at Thiel-Cérisiers, a quiet little village on the river Vanne, about seven miles from Sens, in the Yonne Department, half way between Paris and Dijon. The village is situated in a broad valley between ranges of low chalk hills which, being partly wooded, partly cultivated, and partly more or less rough and uncultivated, give a varied and charming character to the scenery. The bed of the valley is, for the most part, marshy land, through which the river Vanne flows, and is intersected by numerous deep reedy ditches. The few roads which traverse the valley are lined with poplar, plane, sycamore and ash trees, and there are several small copses around the village.

Many opportunities occurred during my stay there to see something of the bird-life of the district, and in spite of the lack of field-glasses the notes I made are sufficient to lead me to hope that a general account of the avifauna may interest readers of *British Birds*.

It is, I believe, generally thought by those who have had no experience of the birds of France, that the smaller birds are far less numerous there than they are in England. This, however, is quite the reverse of my experience, not only in regard to the district under discussion but of the rest of northern France, with which I am acquainted. At Thiel-Cérisiers many of our smaller birds were quite as common and even commoner than they are with us. Whitethroats and Garden-Warblers, Cirl Buntings, Yellowhammers, Whinchats, Stonechats, Sedge-Warblers, Willow-Wrens, Chiffchaffs, all our four common species of Tits, Linnets, Greenfinches, Tree- and House-Sparrows, were quite common. One of the features of the bird-life of the village was the large number of Goldfinches which inhabited the gardens and the trees along the roads. Several pairs of Red-backed Shrikes were nesting near the station, and at least one pair of Black Redstarts were breeding in the station buildings. On the other hand, such birds as the Song-Thrush, Mistle-Thrush, Blackbird and Starling were much scarcer than they are in similar localities in England.

In the woods Crested Tits (*Parus c. mitratus*) occurred not uncommonly, and, were by no means confined to those parts where fir trees predominated, but could be seen and heard among many other species of trees. I saw these charming little birds, both in the Forest of Fontainebleau and at Linthes, a village not very far from Troyes. Green and Great Spotted Woodpeckers also occurred in the woods, and a single pair of Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers inhabited some tall aspens near the village. Of other woodland birds, the Tawny Owl, Kestrel, Sparrow-Hawk, Magpie, Carrion-Crow, Nightingale, Jay, Wood-Pigeon, Turtle-Dove, Tree-Creeper, Wood-Warbler, and Golden Oriole (*Oriolus o. oriolus*) were all seen. I found a Golden Oriole's nest suspended from three thin branches of an alder bush just five feet from the ground. It was made of dead reed leaves and sedges lined with fine grass and bents, and contained a single fully-fledged young bird. I was struck by the remarkably clean state of this nest, which gave no indication that a brood had been reared in it. While I was near the nest both parents flew round in a great state of excitement, continuously uttering a harsh scream, not unlike the cry of a rabbit when it is attacked by a stoat.

Barn and Little Owls were not uncommon. I knew of three nesting-sites of the former species, and in one hollow tree both species were, or had been, nesting.

On a small patch of rough stony ground, about half an acre in extent, between two fields of corn, a pair of Stone-Curlews (*Burhinus æ. œdicnemus*) had reared their young. I was lucky enough to catch one of the young birds which, although fully fledged and able to fly, crouched down in a clump of grass and wild thyme on our approach. This was, so far as I know, the only pair of these birds in the near vicinity. I saw a fair number of them at Linthes, where they seemed to frequent the fields of rye or clover or lucerne rather than the less cultivated land.

Down on the marshy land in the bed of the valley many interesting birds could be seen. Reed-Buntings were quite common, and so were Quails, especially on the drier parts. Here, too, I saw a pair of Corncrakes. Among the tangle of reeds along the ditches and ponds Reed-Warblers and Great Reed-Warblers were abundant, and there were a fair number of Sedge-Warblers. I searched diligently for signs of the Spotted Crake and Little Bittern, but without success. The country was not easy to work on account of the dense tangle of reeds and the deep ponds and ditches into which one

ran considerable risk of falling. At least two pairs of Grass-hopper-Warblers frequented the marshes round the village, and I discovered two broods of Mallard on the stream. Several pairs of Lapwings (*Vanellus vanellus*) appeared from their behaviour to have young, though I hesitate to say definitely that they had, as the Lapwing is, from what I have seen, a rare breeder in northern France. Indeed, the only definite evidence I have of its nesting is a single pair which I saw at Etaples, and whose nest I found. What made me think that the Lapwings at Thiel-Cérisiers might have young was the vigorous way in which they mobbed a pair of Hen-Harriers (*Circus cyaneus*) which were undoubtedly nesting in an inaccessible part of the marshes. In this part of France the Hen-Harrier is not by any means a rare bird. It was seen quite frequently all along the country between Sens and Troyes, usually in the lower and marshy parts of the valleys, and I saw at least six birds during a stay of three days at Linthes.

But by far the most interesting bird I saw at Thiel-Cérisiers was the Little Bustard (*Otis tetrax*). We discovered it first by seeing a single bird fly past the station one evening. Next day, during a walk over the fields, not a mile from the village, a fine cock bird was seen on a strip of rough land surrounded by corn and lucerne fields. He was surprisingly tame, and allowed us to get within thirty yards before he took wing. We could plainly see the curious backward and forward jerk of his head as he uttered his call—"prutt-prutt" or "chwyrk-chwyrk." As soon as he spread his wings and rose from the ground he flashed out into a mass of pure white feathers, the only dark parts which showed being the black neck and a thin dark line along the outer margin of the wings. When he flew his wings made a remarkably loud whistling noise, which was audible for an astonishing distance. By hiding in a patch of lucerne we had a magnificent view of this old cock and three other birds, a hen and two cocks, which flew quite close and settled in a field of standing corn about a quarter of a mile away. That these magnificent birds breed in this part of France is well known, but I was almost as much surprised as I was delighted to see them for the first time in my life, and to find them apparently unmolested so near to human habitations.

During the three weeks I was at Thiel-Cérisiers I identified eighty-two species of birds, either by sight or sound. That I could have added to this list had I had my field-glasses I have no reason to doubt. I append the list, as it may add

to the interest of this account of the birds of the best bird country I was in during my time in France.

Song-Thrush, Blackbird, Wheatear (one), Whinchat, Stonechat, Black Redstart, Robin, Nightingale, Whitethroat, Blackcap, Garden-Warbler, Chiffchaff, Willow-Warbler, Wood-Warbler, Reed-Warbler, Great Reed-Warbler, Sedge-Warbler, Grasshopper-Warbler, Hedge-Sparrow, Longtailed Tit, Great Tit, Coal Tit, Marsh-Tit, Blue Tit, Crested Tit, Tree-Creeper, Pied Wagtail, Yellow Wagtail, Wren, Tree-Pipit, Meadow-Pipit, Golden Oriole, Red-backed Shrike, Spotted Flycatcher, Swallow, House-Martin, Sand-Martin, Greenfinch, Goldfinch, House-Sparrow, Tree-Sparrow, Chaffinch, Linnet, Bullfinch, Corn-Bunting, Yellow Bunting, Cirl Bunting, Reed-Bunting, Starling, Jay, Magpie, Jackdaw, Carrion-Crow, Rook, Sky-Lark, Crested Lark, Swift, Green Woodpecker, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, Kingfisher, Cuckoo, Barn Owl, Tawny Owl, Little Owl, Hen-Harrier, Common Buzzard, Sparrow-Hawk, Kestrel, Mallard, Wood-Pigeon, Turtle-Dove, Partridge, Quail, Corncrake, Moor-Hen, Stone-Curlew, Lapwing, Woodcock (one), Little Bustard.