

SURREY FIELD NOTES.

BY

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HOUSE-SPARROW (*Passer d. domesticus*).—For the last two springs in one district these birds have taken possession of small clumps of thorn, the nests being easily reached from the ground.

CROSSBILL (*Loxia curvirostra*).—Evidence of recent visits in the spring of 1919 to clumps of Scotch pines in the south-west districts was found, quantities of cones having been attacked, though the birds had evidently passed on as none was heard or seen.

CIRL BUNTING (*Emberiza cirius*).—On June 8th, 1919, I found a nest with four highly incubated eggs. The nest was placed at the bottom of a small beech growing on a bank by the road-side. I flushed the female several times, and on one occasion had a good view of the male, which came and settled on a fence opposite the nest. The eggs are typical Ciril's, but with the whitish ground-colour. This is the first time I have found the bird breeding in the county.

WOOD-LARK (*Lullula arborea*).—Though I have heard the Wood-Lark several times in the south-west districts, it was not until 1919 that I had the pleasure of finding it nesting in the county. On April 18th, 1919, I visited this district with Mr. Clifford Borrer and Mr. G. K. Baynes, and while we were walking on the edge of a large common, Mr. Baynes called my attention to two birds on the ground about 20-30 yards ahead, which he thought were Wood-Larks. Owing to previous experience with the species in Suffolk and with the aid of my glasses I had no difficulty in confirming his suspicions. We watched the birds for some time, when they both flew in the direction of a small bank between two sand tracks. We gave them some time before following up and in the meantime I heard the unmistakable note, and saw one of the birds on the opposite bank. We then visited the spot where they first alighted and I put up a bird almost at my feet. After a careful search Mr. Baynes discovered the nest with four fresh eggs, all of which were absolutely typical. The nest was placed among very short patchy ling in a very deep scratch-out exactly as I had found them in Suffolk. I visited the spot again in the evening and following day, and the birds were singing beautifully. There are Scotch pines within

40-50 yards of the spot. I mention this because I have found the birds show a distinct preference for Scotch pine localities.

Messrs. Borrer and Baynes having returned to London I was left to investigate further this interesting discovery. On the following day I visited a warreny spot which I considered a likely one for Wood-Lark, and it was not long before I heard the now familiar song. I searched in vain on the common side of the hedge, which was a turf wall on which small bushes and trees were growing. I then re-started my search on the field side which was of a warreny nature with short grass and bracken, and among the latter within a few yards of the hedge I spotted an undoubted Wood-Lark sitting close. She flew off on my stooping to the nest, exposing to view three typical eggs; the nest was neatly tucked away under a bower of bracken. I followed up my success on the following day by finding another nest with three eggs in the adjoining field in almost an exactly similar position, in this case the bird had not commenced to sit.

On May 4th, I revisited the district with Mr. Baynes and found another nest with four eggs, from which we flushed the bird. This was almost in the centre of the same field in which I found the third nest mentioned above, it was on a piece of uncultivated ground between two cultivated patches, very similar to the Suffolk ground, but there were no pines within 200 yards of this spot except a few isolated ones. On nearly every subsequent visit to this district I heard and saw Wood-Larks, and in June I put up several small parties which by their flight and pale colour appeared to be birds of the year.

Quite apart from the satisfaction of finding these birds plentiful in the county it is also satisfactory to know they were not entirely exterminated by the winter of 1916-1917, as reports from Suffolk (which I afterwards confirmed) led me to believe. I consider, however, that it is not at all improbable that the birds were driven south, and having found food and conditions suited to their requirements have remained. I am quite convinced that their present status in Surrey is not of long standing, at least not in this particular district, and it may prove to be temporary only. It is certainly a rare bird in Surrey. Bucknill apparently had no personal acquaintance with the species as a breeding bird, and says that the bird has not been noticed at all in Surrey by most of the modern observers (*Birds of Surrey*, p. 144). It certainly could not be easily overlooked by those who have had previous

experience of it, the note alone being sufficient to reveal immediately its presence and identity.

I have several times inspected "Wood-Larks'" eggs taken in Surrey and have found them to belong undoubtedly to the Sky-Lark, and in one case a whole series of the red mottled form of the Tree-Pipit were labelled "Wood-Lark" and the happy possessor was quite indignant when I informed him they did not belong to that species. I have only once seen a clutch of Wood-Larks which might possibly have been mistaken for Sky-Larks'—one egg however was almost typical, this and the size settled the question. I have usually found the Sky-Lark almost absent on typical Wood-Lark ground, which is generally of a sandy and stony formation.

GREY WAGTAIL (*Motacilla c. cinerea*).—Successfully nested this spring in the locality already recorded by me in *British Birds*. Previous to the winter of 1916-1917 I had three breeding pairs under observation—a very satisfactory increase. This year's nest was discovered by Mr. G. K. Baynes.

COAL-TITMOUSE (*Parus a. britannicus?*).—On December 31st, 1918, I saw at Shirley near Croydon, a flock of about thirty Coal-Tits feeding under a large beech. I watched them with my glasses turning over the leaves apparently in search of food. The weather at the time was fine and mild. I have never before seen so many of these birds together, and cannot believe this was due to any recovery from the winter of 1916-1917. Did they belong to the Continental form, and were they on migration?

RED-BACKED SHRIKE (*Lanius collurio*).—I found this species breeding commonly in 1919 where at one time they had almost disappeared. All the nests, with the exception of three, contained clutches of 5 and 6. I was disappointed in not finding the Cuckoo again using their nests.

DARTFORD WARBLER (*Sylvia u. dartfordiensis*).—I very much regret to report that these birds have not yet again put in an appearance. Messrs. Borrer and Baynes with myself were all over their old breeding ground and we did not see or hear a single bird. Will they return and reinstate themselves?

GRASSHOPPER-WARBLER (*Locustella n. naevia*).—Very plentiful this year, or it may be I have got to know them better or at least their favourite haunts—the better one knows birds the easier it becomes to locate them and a rare bird becomes almost common to the initiated. On May 8th, 1919, I located two Grasshopper-Warblers and on May 23rd discovered both nests. The first was situated in a fairly large clump of dead

grass among gorse bushes, and the bird crept out as I tapped and kept creeping about with half-spread wings among the herbage in full view, and did not take flight until I commenced to inspect the nest which contained six fresh eggs. I then stepped back a few feet and in a moment the bird was back on the nest. The bird belonging to the second nest went right away in spite of the fact that incubation had commenced and though I remained near the nest for some time she did not put in an appearance or show any anxiety, affording a good example of two birds of the same species behaving in a totally different manner. This nest was in a similar position to the first, though the clump of dead grass was very much smaller. On June 6th the first pair of birds had completed their second nest and clutch of six, which I found only a few yards from their first, and the female again behaved in exactly the same manner.

MISTLE-THRUSH (*Turdus v. viscivorus*).—My personal experience is that these birds are still very scarce, and their recovery from the disastrous winter of 1916-1917 has only been slight. A few small flocks were seen about the pines in June 1918 and 1919.

STONECHAT (*Saxicola r. hibernans*).—A slight recovery from the severe winter was noticeable during the spring of 1919, but at least two males appeared to be without mates. On their favourite common near Croydon they have not yet turned up again.

HEN-HARRIER (*Circus cyaneus*).—Mr. Borrer, Mr. Baynes and I watched a pair in the south-west district for some considerable time on April 18th, 1919. They were both playing in the air over a fairly marshy part of the common.

HOBBY (*Falco subbuteo*).—My first introduction to this species in the county was in 1906. While watching Dartford Warblers a bird settled on the ground only a few yards away from where I was concealed. I have seen them in the south-west district every year since. They generally arrive on the ground about May 4th, and may be seen every day right up to the end of the nesting season, sometimes wheeling about high in the air in their customary fashion, sometimes only just skimming the tops of the ling or water, hawking for dragonflies. As the breeding season approaches their Wryneck-like call may be heard at all times of the day, mostly in the neighbourhood of their prospective nesting sites. I am surprised to find that very few of the recent writers on this beautiful bird make any mention of the similarity of the call to that of the Wryneck—to my ears it is almost exactly the same, but of course in a much higher key.

On June 17th, 1916, I succeeded in locating my first nest in a Scotch pine. The bird left the nest, which was that of a Crow from which the eggs had been taken, without making a note of any kind and almost at the first tap on the tree. While I was climbing the tree the bird came quite close in her swoops and finally settled in the next tree in full view and remained there continually making her alarm-note while I was at the nest. The nest contained three typical eggs which were quite fresh, and deeply embedded in the lining of the nest. I waited near the tree for some time but without again seeing either of the birds.

In 1918 the birds were on the ground, but owing to the extensive tree felling going on in the district they were very much disturbed and apparently did not settle down to nest. On June 29th, 1919, I located my second nest as a result of three previous week-ends watching. My companion had already made several fruitless climbs when I got my glasses on to an old nest nearly at the top of a Scotch pine, on which I could quite easily distinguish the bird sitting, her white cheeks showing up conspicuously. We hit the tree several times but she refused to budge. My companion then threw up a piece of wood nearly hitting the nest, and the bird went off with a characteristic dip and away over the tops of the trees and again without a note. The nest contained three very beautiful and typical eggs, quite fresh. From the time she left the nest we neither saw nor heard the bird again. My experience with the Hobby's nest is limited to these two occasions, on which it will be seen that the sitting birds behaved in a totally different manner in spite of the incubation being in precisely the same stage.

The Hobby is by no means a rare bird in Surrey though one must be on the ground continually to appreciate its presence and I agree that it is most conspicuous in the afternoon and evening, though the alarm-note may be heard at all times of the day providing it is not too hot. It is very strange that there are so few records of its breeding in the county. I, however, apply the same remark to this species as I have to the Grasshopper-Warbler.

REDSHANK (*Tringa totanus*).—Several birds remained right through the spring of 1918 and 1919 in the south-west district, and from their behaviour I have no doubt that they bred somewhere on the commons.

CURLEW (*Numenius arquata*).—Curlews show a decided increase in the south-west district, and I have counted ten or eleven birds in a day. I have known them here since 1906

and though always suspecting that they bred, I had no proof until the fact was recorded by Mr. J. M. Goodall. I know one keeper who assures me that he has known them to breed for the last fifteen years, and he related a story of how a dog of his had destroyed a nest by nearly catching the bird. I mention this for what it is worth.

LAPWING (*Vanellus vanellus*).—Many of the nests were placed on ground which had been cleared by the felling of the Scotch pines for trench logs. The ground was littered with the peelings and on these the birds deposited their eggs, after having made a deep scratch-out. One was placed right on the top of a large heap about fifteen inches high, the eggs being very conspicuous even from some distance. I noticed nearly all the eggs found on this material had a peculiar ochraceous ground-colour, which was possibly only a coincidence?

A clutch of four of these together with the nest were exhibited by me at the May meeting of the British Ornithologists' Club (*Bull. B.O.C.*, CCXLIII., p. 89).