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LETTERS.

THE " BRITISH BIRDS " MARKING SCHEME.

To the Editors of BRITISH BIRDS.

SIRS,—Dr. Landsborough Thomson in his " Critical Note " in the December issue (pp. 146-150) undoubtedly gives a very true criticism of the value of bird marking from the ideal scientific point of view. Whether his constructive suggestions are practicable for the *British Birds* Scheme is open to doubt.

This contribution to the discussion is the expression of opinion of an enthusiastic marker for *British Birds* who has very limited opportunities. It is given to very few to be able to devote their whole time to scientific research work, and I feel sure that there are many who can only devote week-ends and a short summer holiday to their hobby who hailed the *British Birds* Marking Scheme, when it was first brought to their notice, as a long wished for opportunity of helping the great work of the advancement of science. It is an invitation to the amateur, and a great encouragement to him to feel that he can be of real service. But the scheme has done a great deal more for those who have taken part in it than merely provide data on which the experts can work; the markers have found out many secrets of bird life which would never have been noticed by them otherwise and, in particular, have learnt how to read the signs which birds give when their nests are near and that in the case of many species it is even possible to gauge the age of the young birds before the nest is found.

The *British Birds* Magazine exists for its readers. The success of the Marking Scheme also depends on those readers. These factors have to be borne in mind as well as the three requirements for success mentioned by Dr. Thomson, when any serious restriction in the range of the Scheme is considered. But does not Dr. Thomson's third requirement—that the species should exhibit some interesting problem—rather beg the question? The report which is published yearly by Mr. Witherby includes a note of the numbers of birds marked in the year by each member. This has produced a healthy rivalry, but in order to retain that rivalry there must be permission for each marker to work on those species which in his district are most easily procurable. Having at one time lived near London for some years, in the vicinity of one of the large wooded commons which are over-run each week-end by boys who destroy the nest or take the eggs from any nest which they find, and where only the small warblers are able to bring off their broods successfully, I know how discouraging it would be to the marker who works six days a week in the City, if he were to be restricted to Lapwings, Song-Thrushes, and two or three other species. If he could only mark twenty birds a year his interest would very quickly fall off. If we are asked and encouraged to concentrate on certain species as far as possible, while permission is granted as at present for the marking of other species, the tendency will all be for good.

Dr. Thomson deprecates promiscuous marking on account of (1) expense, (2) time wasted. The *British Birds* markers must consider both these aspects. So far as the Magazine is concerned both aspects are measured in terms of money. If each marker is his own judge whether he is wasting his time on unremunerative species, the likelihood of waste will not be great, he will bear his own penalty and some unforeseen and most interesting record may justify him—and justify the retention of indiscriminate marking!

As regards the expenses of the Scheme, promiscuous marking involves manufacture of more rings, printing of card schedules, provision of filing cabinets, clerical expenses in connection with the issue of rings

and sorting of cards. As "unremunerative" species show few recoveries, the cost of recording recoveries will not be materially increased. The following suggestions are made for reducing the financial strain on the Magazine to a minimum :—

- (A) A charge to be made per 100 rings issued to cover cost of rings, cost of schedules, and cost of filing accommodation. Mr. Witherby might tell us what charge would cover expenses.
- (B) Schedules to be filled up in strict numerical order and to be sent in only at the end of the summer season, or twice yearly in the case of those who can mark in winter.
- (C) A synopsis of the number of each species marked to be sent in by the marker with his schedules in order to save clerical work for the Magazine staff.

It would stimulate interest if this synopsis were published in the case of some of those who have marked large numbers.

To obtain homogeneous data for comparison would appear to be impossible unless trained whole time scientists in sufficient numbers are available in the districts selected. This is an ideal which is unattainable. The best approximation to the same result will be obtained from an indefinite increase in the number of markers and this can only be brought about by making the scheme popular. To restrict the scope to a few species would tend to make it unpopular and defeat the object to which we are striving to attain.

R. O. BLYTH.

[With reference to Mr. Blyth's suggestions numbered (A) (B) and (C). *British Birds*, with the generous assistance which is provided from time to time by voluntary subscriptions towards the expenses of the scheme, is quite willing to continue to issue rings and schedules without charge. A charge for rings would be unfair, since it would fall heaviest on those who help the Scheme most by ringing most birds. Suggestion (C) however, would save a great deal of clerical work and is warmly welcomed. Suggestion (B) would be little saving of labour as all the schedules have to be cut up into separate sections before they can be arranged numerically and filed. The financial considerations being thus disposed of, I hope that other "ringers" and readers will give their opinions with reference to promiscuous *versus* special ringing.—H.F.W.]

THE GREATER SPOTTED WOODPECKER IN ENGLISH POETRY.

To the Editors of BRITISH BIRDS.

SIRS,—I believe the following is the first—and perhaps the only—reference to the Greater Spotted Woodpecker (*Dryobates major*) in our poetry. It occurs in John Bartlett's "A Booke of Ayres with a Triplicite of Musicke. . ." (1606):

"The little daw, ka-ka, he cried;
The hic-quail he beside
Tickled his part in parti-coloured coat.
The jay did blow his hautboy gallantly."

Hick-way or Hecco ("The laughing hecco"—Drayton's *Polyolbion*) was a popular Elizabethan name for the Green Woodpecker (*Picus viridis*). Hic-quail is, no doubt, a corruption of the same word and has nothing to do with the Quail. But "parti-coloured" suggests the Greater Spotted Woodpecker, especially as its double chirp follows upon the "ka-ka" of the daw.

H. J. MASSINGHAM.

FORMER BREEDING OF THE OSPREY IN IRELAND.

To the Editors of BRITISH BIRDS.

SIRS,—In the *Birds of Ireland* by Ussher and Warren, 1900, is the statement on p. 149: "There is no record of the Osprey ever breeding in Ireland." Since that date I have come across two references to the former breeding of this species in Ireland which are, perhaps, worth putting on record in *British Birds*.

1. In the *Field* for November 13th, 1915, p. 839, appears the following from an old letter of April 23rd, 1683:—

"In this county (Leitrim) are several eyries of Eagles as also of Ospreys. The latter build on old walls near great rivers and lakes."

2. In a letter dated July 24th, 1790, from Robert Marsham to Gilbert White, the writer states that when he was on the Lake of Killarney he was told that a pair of Ospreys that yearly nested on an island of rock in that lake used to drive off their young as soon as they were able to provide for themselves. Robert Marsham lived 1708–1797, and the letter referred to is printed in *The Life and Letters of Gilbert White*, Vol. 2, p. 220 (R. Holt-White). In the *Birds of Ireland* are notices of Ospreys in summer on the Lakes of Killarney, and these were probably visiting a former breeding haunt of that race.

F. L. BLATHWAYT.

MELBURY OSMOND, DORCHESTER, Nov. 30th, 1921.