

# NOTES

## VARIETY OF COLORATION OF EGGS OF TREE-SPARROW.

FOR many years the majority of my bird nesting-boxes have been occupied by the Tree-Sparrow (*Passer m. montanus*), and the variety of colouring of the eggs of this bird is remarkable. Perhaps the average colour of the eggs may be described as rufous-brown with specks and streaks of a darker shade, but in every clutch there is invariably one egg of grey-white or very light-brown colour, speckled, and streaked. This summer (1925) I have had one whole clutch of five eggs almost pure white, which is, I believe, very unusual, and another clutch of the same number of eggs of a very dark reddish-brown with one, as usual, much lighter than the others.

JOHN R. B. MASEFIELD.

## PIED WAGTAIL LAYING FOUR TIMES IN THE SAME NEST.

IN the latter part of May, 1925, a birds-nesting lad showed me two sets of eggs (a "four" and a "five") of the Pied Wagtail (*Motacilla alba yarrellii*), which he had taken—with an interval between, of course, and from the same nest in an ivy-covered wall in Dorsetshire. On going to the site I was surprised to see the bird leave the nest, which, on examination, contained another clutch of four eggs. These I told the lad to leave untouched, and allow the bird to hatch and rear her young without further disturbance. I was unable to visit the nest again until a month later, when I heard that the young had hatched safely and left the nest. I again examined the nest, which now held two fresh Wagtails' eggs and a Cuckoo's; the latter I took and unfortunately the Wagtail deserted. There is no doubt that all the four clutches, which were of the same type, were laid by the same bird.

W. J. ASHFORD.

## STATUS OF MARSH- AND WILLOW-TIT IN DENBIGHSHIRE AND PEMBROKESHIRE.

THE *Practical Handbook* under British Marsh-Tit, "distribution" (Vol. I., p. 243), states: "In northern parts of North Wales probably only accidental"; however, I have no hesitation in stating that this species breeds in the Vale of Clwyd,

North Denbighshire. Although I have not obtained specimens of the birds themselves, I have found nests as follows: (A) Behind a piece of loose bark of a growing oak tree; (B) in a wall of loosely put together limestone. I have found no trace of the bird-made nesting holes of the Willow-Tit (*Parus atricapillus kleinschmidti*) in Denbighshire. As regards Pembrokeshire, I have no hesitation in stating that both species breed. My friend, Mr. James Wynne, late of Pembroke, gave me his egg-collection some years ago and the data as regards some sets of Marsh-Tit eggs appears to me conclusive. All eggs were from nests in natural holes of solid, growing trees—all near Pembroke. As regards Willow-Tit, I once found a nest, which I attribute to this species, near Haverfordwest. It was in an extremely rotten three-foot high willow stump standing on swampy ground. The entrance hole was neat and round and obviously bird-made. I did not examine the nest materials because it contained young, and I also did not realise the particular interest of my find.

W. M. CONGREVE.

[It will be noted that the above notes are based on observations on nesting habits and breeding places and not on records of the birds themselves. The theory that the Willow-Tit is responsible for the Woodpecker-like holes cut out in soft wood by the birds themselves has, however, been recently confirmed by examination of birds caught on the nest.—EDS.]

#### WILLOW-TIT BREEDING IN CUMBERLAND.

IN view of the absence of any breeding records of the Willow-Tit (*Parus atricapillus kleinschmidti*) for Cumberland, the following note may be of interest.

I was asked by Major W. M. Congreve in the spring of 1924, to endeavour to work out the status of this species and the Marsh-Tit (*P. palustris dresseri*) in the neighbourhood of Carlisle, but did not locate a nest of either species until this year, when I had two nests of the Willow-Tit under close observation. The first was situated in a rotten willow tree, the nesting-hole being about two feet from the ground, the entrance hole about the size of half-a-crown, the depth of the hole about six inches, with a nest cavity at the bottom. The excavated chips were lying at the foot of the tree. The nest was composed of rabbit fur, a small quantity of willow-down, wood chips, and narrow strips of birch-bark up to two inches in length with a *complete* absence of moss. This nest contained eight eggs on May 3rd; the hen was then sitting and I caught and carefully examined her. The male was

on a tree close at hand, the light buff edge of his secondaries being very conspicuous.

The second nest was in a rotten birch, the nesting-hole being about 18 inches from the ground and in size and depth similar to the first one; the excavated chips were lying on the ground below the hole. The nest was composed of the same materials as the first, with again a complete absence of moss.

I visited this nest on various occasions, and the time from the commencement of excavation until the final egg was laid was thirty days. During the laying period the eggs were covered when the hen was not on the nest.

This nest contained eight eggs on May 9th; the hen was caught and sent to Mr. H. F. Witherby, who pronounced it to be an undoubted Willow-Tit.

As to the presence of the Marsh-Tit in Cumberland, I can at present produce no evidence. T. L. JOHNSTON.

[I have a specimen of the Marsh-Tit from Alston, Cumberland, taken by Mr. G. Bolam in January, 1913.—H.F.W.]

#### CHIFFCHAFF SINGING ON THE WING.

ON April 11th, 1925, in Wormley Wood, Herts, I saw a Chiffchaff (*Phylloscopus c. collybita*) chasing another one on the wing. At the same time one of them was singing. SYDNEY G. POOCK.

#### MULTIPLE NEST-BUILDING BY BLACKBIRD.

WITH reference to Mr. Hawkins's note (*antea*, p. 72) on multiple nest-building by the Blackbird (*Turdus m. merula*), in April, 1925, I found a similar instance on the ledge running round the interior of a cow-shed near Dumfries. Six nests were completely finished and lined, while a platform of moss and other building substances extended for about two feet beyond the sixth nest.

In one of them the Blackbird (which had evidently built all the six nests) brought out a family of four nestlings, which my brother and I ringed when they were about to fly.

WALTER DUNCAN.

[The habit of multiple nest-building has now been recorded in the case of five species, *viz.* Blackbird, Song-Thrush, Robin, Redstart and Chaffinch, but an analysis of the records shows that none of these cases have occurred when the birds have been breeding under purely natural conditions, but invariably when in contact with objects constructed by man, such as the rungs of a ladder, or the spaces between the rafters inside a shed. It is evident that the intelligence of the bird is incapable of coping with the situation, and that they fail to distinguish between sites close at hand which are exactly similar in

character. Even in meadow and moorland nest-sites many birds take advantage of some prominent object as a guide to the nesting-place.—F.C.R.J.]

#### SOME RESULTS AND METHODS OF MARKING WHEATEARS.

It may be worth putting on record that I have had further evidence of the return of a Wheatear (*Enanthe æ. ænanthe*) to the place where it was hatched, and also a curious instance of its deserting both nest and territory. The facts are as follows:—Ring A 2,918 was put on a nestling Wheatear near Seaford, Sussex, on May 18th, 1923. The same bird, a female, was caught on May 17th, 1925, sitting on eggs half a mile from where she was hatched. She deserted the nest and on June 3rd, 1925, was caught again on a fresh nest two miles away. This time she did not desert, and from the great difference in the size of the nestlings, when I went to ring them, I should say that she started incubation after the first or second egg was laid.

I should like to suggest that of all the smaller summer migrants the Wheatear is one of the most suitable for an intensive study by the marking method, for one is not likely to mix up the parent birds of two different nests as is possible with Swallows and more than probable with House-Martins. Then again, so far as my experience goes, and I have ringed 275 Wheatears, of which 10 per cent. were adults, they never desert if caught on young and seldom if caught on eggs.

The easiest holes in which to catch the adults are those that go in about a foot, for the bird when in the hole will get out of reach if it can (even so, I have caught one or two simply by leaving an open palm for it to settle on). The female should be caught on the young when the latter are one or two days old, for then she covers them most of the time. The males are a more difficult problem; probably they could be caught with a spring net trap when the young are several days old.

Summarizing the results already published in *British Birds*, and including the case mentioned above, three nestlings and one adult marked in Lancashire and Sussex returned to the same place the following year or the year after (*vide* Vol. XII., p. 155; Vol. X., p. 61; Vol. XVIII., p. 187). Two nestlings, one marked in Lancashire, the other in Yorkshire, were recovered the following September near the River Gironde, S.W. France (*vide* Vol. VII., p. 11; Vol. XIX., p. 14). A nestling marked at Seaford, Sussex, was found six weeks later on the north coast of Kent (*vide* Vol. XVII., p. 79).

J. F. THOMAS.

## INCUBATION- AND FLEDGING-PERIOD OF THE HOUSE-MARTIN.

THE incubation-period of the House-Martin (*Delichon u. urbica*) is estimated by Mr. W. Evans as fifteen to sixteen days and by Mr. R. H. Brown as fourteen to fifteen days; the fledging-period at nineteen to twenty-one days (R. H. Brown). The combined totals therefore range from thirty-three to thirty-seven days.

On June 11th, 1925, a pair of House-Martins appeared in the morning at an old nest under the verandah of my house. By the evening of that day appreciable progress had been made in building. By June 18th the nest was finished and I could feel an egg, but without damage to the entrance it was not possible to ascertain whether others had been laid, as I suspected.

The young remained in the nest till the morning of August 7th, when they all left, and since that time the nest has not been revisited.

On the supposition that only one egg had been laid on June 18th, the full clutch (four) would have been completed on the 21st, and the combined incubation- and fledging-periods extended to forty-seven days, ten days longer than the maximum as previously estimated. As the nest is a solitary one and the dates were noted at the time no mistake is possible, but we all noticed that the young appeared to remain in the nest for an unusually long time. F. C. R. JOURDAIN.

## GREEN WOODPECKER IN AYRSHIRE.

WHILST walking up the wooded sides of the Girvan Water in the policies of Blairquhan on July 19th, 1925, I heard the unmistakable cry of the Green Woodpecker (*Picus viridis*).

Had I been anywhere in the south, where this bird is well known to me, the laughing cry would have passed without note, and it is a pity that there was no ornithologist with me at the time to corroborate. The Green Woodpecker, of course, is rare in south-west Scotland. The Girvan valley, however, is eminently suitable for the tastes of the species. E. RICHMOND PATON.

## WRYNECKS IN S. DEVON.

ON June 17th, 1925, I found, for the first time, one or two pairs of Wrynecks (*Jynx t. torquilla*)—possibly more—at Branscombe, between Beer and Sidmouth, S. Devon.

It has always been regarded as a rare bird, even on migration, anywhere in south Devon. Capt. L. R. W. Loyd told

me that it was a new bird to Branscombe, and the records of breeding in Devon are very few and far between.

M. STUART CURTLER.

#### YOUNG CUCKOO FED BY SEVERAL BIRDS.

A YOUNG Cuckoo (*Cuculus c. canorus*), which can fly well, has, during the past week (July 21st, 1925) in my garden at Hawkhurst, Kent, been assiduously fed by two Pied Wagtails (*Motacilla a. yarrellii*) and two Hedge-Sparrows (*Prunella m. occidentalis*), and on occasions by a fifth bird, which I have not seen, but from a description appears to have been a Blue Tit.

Often while a Hedge-Sparrow is feeding the Cuckoo the Wagtail stands by and immediately after feeds it too and *vice versa*. Once while the Hedge-Sparrow was feeding it the Wagtail jumped on the Cuckoo's back and the moment the other (the Hedge-Sparrow) issued its ration, stood on the head of the Cuckoo and bent over and did the same.

I do not know which are the rightful foster parents in this case.

A. HARDCASTLE.

#### FOOD OF TAWNY OWL.

WITH reference to my note on the Tawny Owl (*Strix aluco sylvatica*) preying on a Little Grebe (Vol. XVII., p. 250), I should like to report that the young Tawny Owls this year have dropped beneath the tree where they are perched remains of the following animals, besides quantities of pellets of mouse fur and beetles' wings: Water rat; brown rat; young Pheasants, twice, one bird about a fortnight old, the other, a fortnight later, about a month old, both half eaten; feathers of young Jackdaw; feathers of Great Spotted Woodpecker, young Sparrows and a young Starling.

C. F. D. SPERLING.

#### LARGE CLUTCH OF BARN-OWLS' EGGS.

ON May 5th, 1925, I found the nest of a Barn-Owl (*Tyto a. alba*) under the floor-boards of a ruined house in Lode Fen, Cambridgeshire. It was ten feet from the hole from which the old birds escaped, and contained two newly hatched young ones, and two eggs, one of which was chipping. By May 26th, when I next visited the nest, the young had disappeared. I searched the house for a second nest as the two old birds were still about, but I was unsuccessful. On July 2nd I again explored the house, and I found a second nest containing two newly hatched young ones and seven

eggs ; there had been no eggs here before, as it was an open site on the floor of the attic. I never saw more than two birds, and I do not think this was the product of two hen birds. I believe, from subsequent observation, that the eggs were laid at intervals of four days. G. W. THOMPSON.

[Although the ordinary clutch of Barn-Owl ranges from four to six, there are three recorded instances of clutches of nine ; three of ten and two of eleven. Some of these cases will be found recorded with details in Vol. VII., p. 18.—F.C.R.J.]

#### KESTREL AND HOUSE-SPARROW USING THE SAME NEST.

On May 7th, 1925, I found three eggs of a Kestrel (*Falco tinnunculus*) in a recently renovated Magpie's nest in Cambridgeshire. On June 5th there were five eggs, three of which were chipping. In the side of the dome was the nest of a House-Sparrow (*Passer d. domesticus*) with three eggs, built so that the back of the nest, which was small for a Sparrow's, could actually be touched from the inside (just where the top of the mud lining joined the dome). There was a cock Sparrow hopping on the dome.

On June 19th I had almost climbed to the nest, which was 45 feet up in an elm, when I saw the cock Sparrow hopping about on the dome, and regarding the five young Kestrels, now thirteen days old, with interest rather than fear. I expected to find the three eggs still in the Sparrow's nest, which was intact, but they had been removed, whether by a boy or not I cannot say.

It is to be noticed that the nest was built and the eggs laid actually while the hen Kestrel was sitting on her own eggs, within less than a foot. G. W. THOMPSON.

[It is not very unusual for House-Sparrows (and occasionally also Tree-Sparrows) to make use of Magpies' nests as breeding-places in England, but it must be very unusual to find a Kestrel and a Sparrow incubating simultaneously. In Spain the Spanish Sparrow (*P. hispaniolensis*) frequently breeds in occupied nests of the Black Kite and the Stork.—F.C.R.J.]

#### GREAT NORTHERN DIVERS OFF WEST COAST OF IRELAND IN JULY.

ALTHOUGH the Great Northern Diver (*Colymbus immer*) has been met with off the coast of Ireland on more than one occasion in July, the following occurrence is worth recording.

On July 15th, 1925, I observed two large Divers in Clew

Bay, co. Mayo, at some distance. Closer examination revealed four birds, and with the aid of binoculars they were seen to be Great Northern Divers. Three of the birds appeared to be in full breeding plumage whilst the fourth was in plumage similar to first winter. They moved about in pairs and while watching them, the pair, of which both birds were in breeding plumage, swam nearer inshore. I now noticed that the sides of the head and neck of each of these birds were somewhat mottled, which was explained by the presence of grey feathers intermixed with the dark ones, this being due perhaps to an early assumption of winter plumage.

G. R. HUMPHREYS.

#### BREEDING OF THE CURLEW IN OXFORDSHIRE.

FOR some years past Curlew (*Numenius a. arquata*) have been observed in spring at Otmoor, a low lying expanse of rough pasture about five miles north-east of Oxford. Thus, on April 28th, 1921, the calls of a pair were heard here by Mr. B. W. Tucker, Mr. C. J. Pring and myself. In 1923, Mr. J. F. Madden recorded a pair on March 17th and Mr. R. J. Clough met with one on May 26th, 1924. (See *Report of the Oxf. Ornith. Society, 1915-1922 and 1923-1924.*) During the present season Curlew have been reported from Otmoor by Messrs. Clough, Dobson and Sellar on numerous occasions from April 27th onward, and on June 8th, 1925, accompanied by Mr. R. Dobson, I paid a visit to the ground where we had heard the birds before. They were calling excitedly and one bird was observed to settle once or twice at a spot some 200 yards distant. Walking directly towards it we came within a yard or two of the nest, which contained a nestling still quite wet and the remains of the shells of two eggs. Another nestling, fully dried, was crouching on the ground among the long grass about 2 ft. 6 in. away. We satisfied ourselves that at least three Curlew, probably four, were present. This is the first recorded instance of the nesting of the Curlew in Oxfordshire, the nearest known breeding places being in Wilts, Hants and Surrey.

F. C. R. JOURDAIN.

#### POMATORHINE SKUAS IN CARNARVONSHIRE.

IT may be worth recording that on May 31st, 1925, after several days of high winds from S. and W., nine Pomathorhine Skuas (*Stercorarius pomatorhinus*) came close in to the shore at Criccieth, N. Wales.

The species was new to me, but the distinctive tail struck me immediately. I was able to look at the birds both with binoculars and telescope as they came to rest on the sea. I believe I am correct in saying they were all adults and of the light variety, but the sea was very rough at the time and observation somewhat difficult in consequence.

R. M. GARNETT.