

LETTER.

ROOK ROOSTS IN NORTHUMBERLAND.

To the Editors of BRITISH BIRDS.

SIRS,—It is extremely interesting to have Mr. Dewar's notes on the Roosting of Rooks, taken thirty years ago, over the same area that I dealt with in the August number of *British Birds*. It is of great importance that the two sets of notes agree so closely in all essentials. The roost Mr. Dewar records as being east of Corbridge might well have been the main roost in that area, as I had heard that my Dilston roost is of recent formation, the birds having moved because of tree felling.

I am very much in sympathy with Mr. Dewar's theory that the flight lines might indicate the original mode of extension from the primary centre, as it is one which I had constantly before me while making my observations. But I did not include it in my account, as the detailed observations I made on the morning and afternoon flights (fortunately in the Ponteland district, as were Mr. Dewar's) did not appear to bear this out, and for these reasons. The collecting places to the south and east of Kirkley were constant at Ponteland and near Dinnington respectively. Rooks from Wolsington, between these two collecting places, flew to the roost either by Ponteland or Dinnington. At least a preference for one flight line would be expected on Mr. Dewar's theory, but I could not detect this. But I rejected the theory for a more radical, if theoretical, reason, viz., that the rookeries should not be considered as growths out from the roost; some at least will be equally or, perhaps, more ancient. The flight lines cannot be considered as the lines of a genealogical table, if such a table does not exist.

Admittedly, the growth of new rookeries can be observed from older ones and these might be expected to go to roost via the parent rookery. But the birds from the truly ancient rookeries would be expected to fly to roost independently of their neighbours. That they do not do so directly but join forces with other flocks is due, at least in part, not to a genetic relation between the flocks, but merely to the strong gregarious habit of Rooks, which could not be expected to pass unheeded large flocks of their fellows. This view is supported to some extent by some of the great collecting places not being on the sites of rookeries but at the junction of flight lines.

In this connexion the paper by T. H. Harrison in *Rept. Cambs. Bird Club* for 1931 is of importance. Here it appears that the Fen area has been added on to the Maddingley roost as the land was drained. In this case it might be expected that the lines of flight would show the derivation of the rookeries, one from the other. But this is surely an exceptional case, and even here it is difficult to see how enough data could be collected to substantiate the theory.

I think Mr. Dewar's observations on the Stella rookery, where half the birds go to different roosts, are of exceptional interest; here the genetic factor can hardly be excluded because of the probable newness of the rookery. However, my main thesis, that all flight lines cannot be interpreted to show the derivation of rookeries, must, I think, stand.

Finally, I regret, with Mr. Dewar, the incompleteness of my observations, which is inevitable with the aid only of a push-bicycle.

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