

LETTERS.

A CHART OF BIRD-SONG.

To the Editors of BRITISH BIRDS.

SIRS,—I have studied with considerable interest, in the December issue, Mr. H. G. Alexander's article and chart on the song-periods of birds, and all the more so as the songs and notes of birds have been an engrossing study with me (in Cheshire) practically all my life. This is the best attempt I have come across to express the times and duration of birds' songs, and in the case of many items I consider the chart both precise and thorough. With many of its records my own entirely agree; with others there are differences, a few of which I mention later. Of several unusual species I have no "song" records. In my opinion the study of the songs and varying notes of birds is one that has not received quite as much special attention on the part of bird students as some other branches, and this weakness is shown from time to time both in newspaper articles and books. Mr. Alexander's difficulties in compiling his chart can be well appreciated—the "great difference as between district and district, season and season, and one bird and another". The result, of course, is not perfection, but much concise information is set forth, the "niceness" of which in many cases can only be fully appreciated by those who, like Mr. Alexander, have accumulated data at all times and seasons over a long series of years. I find the dots and dashes ("occasional song or sub-song" and "irregular but frequent song", respectively) sometimes rather confusing; and would not the chart have been still more effective if, by a thickening of the line, conspicuous song-periods had been shown? Another point, it would be of great interest to see a chart confined to seasonal notes alone. In the present chart, even if they were intended to be included, they must be swallowed up in the song-periods of song birds generally. There is that conspicuous spring call of the Chaffinch, for example, heard most noticeably during April. In most parts of the country, perhaps, it may be described as "weet", but in several counties round London the note seems to be a much more metallic "zweet".

Greenfinch.—I have several song-records in September, which the chart shows blank.

Chaffinch.—I think the chart cleverly expresses the chequered song throughout the year. This bird excels in sudden outbursts of song at unexpected times, and I have various records on the part of individual birds quite detached from the usual summer period. An extraordinary instance occurred in 1926, when, on August 3rd, a Chaffinch was heard singing with great vigour in a garden tree. This was repeated on the following and succeeding days, in the same garden, and usually in the morning hours, till the month end. And not only so, but throughout September as well, and even till October 8th. The strength and vigour of the song was maintained throughout. Perhaps stimulated by this particular bird, other Chaffinches began, early in October, with the customary sharp and excited notes and half-songs, to practise their autumn music, and the voice of the hitherto untiring songster was lost. The following year a Chaffinch, perhaps the same bird, sang just as lustily day after day, all through August, till September 5th. The usual autumn song of the Chaffinch is a variable quantity, some years extremely slight, other years fairly conspicuous.

Yellow Hammer.—The autumn song of this most uncertain autumn songster is neatly indicated in the chart by some dots in October and early November. I have a few records during late November, and one early in December.

Reed-Bunting.—The complete cessation of song for the year is shown about the middle of August, and this tallies exactly with my own observations. The comparatively short yearly song-period of this bird is a curious contrast to that of the Corn, Yellow and Cirl Buntings.

Skylark.—A long and sunny autumn occasions a wealth of song. In autumns of broken weather Skylarks seem satisfied, for the most part, with constant trilling, often low over the ground. In a fine September the song is much more notable than the chart indicates.

Tree-Creeper.—The Chart shows a blank of a month till late August. I find records of song for August 8th, 12th and 16th, and several later.

Goldcrest.—I have several song-records for January and February, and for August, and, of course, many in September and October.

Willow-Wren.—In my experience the chart makes too much of the July song. During that month the song becomes extremely frail and infrequent, and fades practically to vanishing point, then rallies towards the month end. It is during the first half of August that the autumn song is at its best, and it is not necessarily confined to the morning hours; later in the month it fades and weakens, and it is usually lost after the first week in September, though I have stray records up to the 20th.

Reed-Warbler.—I have numerous song-records from the Cheshire meres during August, which month is a blank in the chart.

Sedge-Warbler.—The chart song-record ends with July. I happen to have many August dates.

Mistle-Thrush.—My experience tallies with the chart, that this bird ceases to sing most years about the end of May or in the first week in June. In June, 1917, however, Mistle-Thrushes maintained their song much later, and I heard the last on the 20th. Perhaps this was due to late nesting consequent upon the preceding very long and severe winter.

Blackbird.—That this bird "goes on singing much later in the summer in some districts than in others", is a curious fact. Even in districts not many miles apart. It sings all July in rural Cheshire, but in certain wooded suburbs it continues well into August. This is confirmed year after year. The chart shows a blank for October and November, but I have several October records, including the light sub-song. In October, 1934, a Blackbird surprised me considerably by singing most days, sometimes in the morning, sometimes later, and in full view. This continued until early November.

Robin.—The lengthy song-period, with that never-failing quiet interval about midsummer, is well expressed in the chart. The Willow-Wren and Robin keep company with their frail snatches of song during that quiet interval.

Hedge-Sparrow.—This is a conspicuous October songster in Cheshire. And it expresses the coming spring, as January advances, with unusually warm and fervent song, even in winters of outstanding severity.

Dabchick.—The chart records a blank from mid-October. I find a few records during early November.

Quail.—In the long, hot summer of 1893 (and occasionally since) we had many Quails in Cheshire, and I heard the notes frequently from

May 20th. The chart shows June and July only. My latest date was July 18th.

Mr. Alexander's attempt to classify birds' songs according to merit (he describes it as "a rough attempt") I think is scarcely satisfactory, and this will be evident if chosen birds under each of the four classes are compared with others of their class. It is surely rather rough on the House-Martin, for example, to be put in Class 4, whilst the Corncrake appears in Class 3!

LYMM, CHESHIRE.
January 4th, 1936.

JAMES J. CASH.

A CHART OF BIRD-SONG.

To the Editors of BRITISH BIRDS.

SIRS,—I have read Mr. Stanley Morris's letter several times, but I am still at a loss to know what it is all about. I can only suppose (a) that he has not realized that the purpose of the chart (what he calls the "main issue") is to show the *periods* of bird-song, not their musical value; (b) that he has not read the introduction. In the introduction I thought I made it clear that in my *rough* attempt (which was almost an afterthought) to divide the songs and seasonal cries into four classes according to merit, I was not only thinking of musical value, but was also taking into account such factors as strength and persistence of song. In any case, as Mr. Morris himself says, "differences of opinion are inevitable", so I don't quite see why he wants to insist that his opinions are better than mine. If he had published a paper classifying according to merit, and had put the various birds in the classes he suggests, I think I could have accepted all his "corrections" without much question. They are all border-line cases. By the way, I did not put Reed Bunting in Class II., as he alleges. But how he thinks I could avoid having the Nightingale and the Tawny Owl on the same page quite beats me. In the table I naturally followed the order of *The Practical Handbook* and other books of reference. If Mr. Morris finds this juxtaposition painful, I hope he will draw a thick line at the end of the *Passeres*, after Sand Martin, to show that "song proper" now ends and "seasonal calls" are about to begin.

His last paragraph, about the Snipe and Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, shows conclusively that he had not bothered to read my introduction, in which I stated my reasons for preferring to give the non-vocal music of these two species. It is clear from both the letters you publish, and from other correspondence I have had, that I ought to have explained further about some of the seasonal cries of the non-passerine species. Thus, for the Little Owl, I was giving the period, not of its yapping cries, which are no doubt partly seasonal, though they seem to be uttered in every month, but of the curious, rather faint "snoring", often uttered with great persistence by day in the spring-time, but as far as I have been able to observe, at no other time. Then, as to the Waders; in almost every case these have trilling cries, often uttered in the air with trembling wings, or with slow wing-beats, nearly always based on the ordinary call and alarm-notes, but quite distinct. Similarly, the Green Woodpecker's laugh, though closely resembling its ordinary cry, is higher-pitched and usually longer. For the Great Crested Grebe, I have given the period of its challenging snort, usually accompanied by "display" of some kind, for the Dabchick its twitter, and for the Pigeons their coos. The rest are, I hope, self-explanatory.

I am interested in Miss Hibbert-Ware's considerable extension of the period of the drumming of the Great Spotted Woodpecker. In

my experience, most of their drumming is in the early morning; perhaps Miss Hibbert-Ware is an earlier riser than I am. Mrs. Hodgkin had also told me that she heard one in the late autumn this season, in the north of England. Mr. Armitage sends me word that, as a result of further observations on moorland song, September, October and November should all have dots in the case of the Red Grouse, and November in the case of the Twite. Probably other observers can also extend the dots. On the day after I had returned the final proof of the article (November 21st) I heard a Blackbird sing—apparently my first November record; and for the past fortnight (I write on January 2nd), several local Tawny Owls have been doing their best to point out that their “hooting” line should be quite unbroken at this time of year, in spite of frost, fog and snow.

The Editor has also kindly allowed me to see Mr. Cash's interesting letter, with its valuable supplementary information which tends to illustrate the variety of song-periods in different districts. What Mr. Cash says of the Willow-Wren in Cheshire, for instance, certainly does not apply in districts known to me. Mr. Cash, like Mr. Morris, seems to have been misled by my use of the expression “classification according to merit”. If he will look again at the paragraph in which I expounded this, he will see why the Corncrake, with its harsh, persistent cry, is in group 3, the House-Martin, with its sweet, but feeble and infrequent ditty, only in 4. The word “merit” was probably not the best word to use.

I agree with Mr. Cash that too little attention has been given to bird-song, in comparison with other aspects of bird behaviour. Perhaps some ornithologist will soon undertake a serious inquiry into the significance of bird-song, and of other noises that birds make, some of which, as Mr. Cash notes, are largely seasonal. I may point out that the first essential of such a scientific study will be the dismissal of our besetting human preconceptions about the musical quality of the various sounds.

H. G. ALEXANDER.

P.S.—The Firecrest's song I should have described as of lower *pitch*, not lower *tone*, than the Goldcrest's.

MOVEMENTS OF JAYS IN FRANCE.

To the Editors of BRITISH BIRDS.

SIRS,—In the November number of *British Birds*, in your editorial note on page 175, you express a wish to have further observations on the movements of Jays noticed in some parts of England during the autumn of 1935. Although writing from a region outside the British area, I think the following facts will interest you as showing the magnitude of the migration of this species in October, 1935. I am writing from my home, near Cognac, in the south-west of France, about eighty miles north of Bordeaux, fifty miles east of the Atlantic coast, in the valley of the river Charente.

The first movements were noticed here on September 25th, but it was difficult then to say whether they had more than a local character, as it happens frequently in this country that a certain number of Jays leave their breeding places in the autumn to go and feed on acorns and beech-mast in more densely-wooded neighbouring areas. However, during the first days of October, 1935, there was a marked increase in the numbers of Jays flying overhead in a southerly direction. On October 8th, the sky being overcast, a light wind blowing from the south, a considerable “rush” took place, the stream of migration

passing continually from due north to south in the direction of the Pyrenees, the greatest intensity being between 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. The next day, October 9th, at daybreak, the woods around us were literally swarming with Jays feeding on acorns and chestnuts. Their migration was at its climax on that day, lasting practically all day until about 3 or 4 o'clock in the afternoon, with more or less definite "rushes".

On October 10th, 11th and 12th there was a decrease in the movement which came to an end on the 14th and 15th.

During their migration, the Jays travelled generally at a height of between fifty to a hundred yards and in a more or less scattered order. Sometimes a dozen birds would fly together, as Rooks or Crows will do, to be followed at some distance by two or three or by a solitary bird at fifty yards' interval. Then a more important group would again appear. A good many individuals would alight on trees in wooded parts.

Thousands of Jays must have passed over the area which I had under observation. Local "sportsmen" made wonderful "bags". I am sorry, however, that I cannot give any information about the width of the front of migration.

I can only recollect one single instance, about thirty years ago, when movements of a similar importance took place in the autumn. I am sorry I have no data about the year. As a rule there is no real migration of Jays in this country in autumn and no return movement in a northerly direction is noticeable in the spring. JACQUES DELAMAIN.

[*cf.* also *L'Oiseau*, Vol. IV., N.S., p. 192 (1934) F.C.R.J.]

THE MOVEMENTS OF SEA-BIRDS.

To the Editors of BRITISH BIRDS.

SIRS,—I was particularly interested to read Mr. P. H. Trahair Hartley's article on this subject (*antea*, pp. 203-210), as I have studied the flights of sea-birds at the other end of the English Channel—off Dungeness—for many years past. From November to March or April great numbers of Red-throated Divers (*Colymbus stellatus*), Auks (chiefly Guillemots), Scoters and other sea-birds haunt the narrow parts of the Channel, as passengers from Folkestone to Boulogne especially, may often see. The Scoters, however, tend to keep closer in shore, both off Littlestone-on-Sea and in Rye bay.

My visits to Dungeness have usually been either just after Christmas, or in late March and early April, and they have been irregular; so that, although I have a number of records of birds seen flying past Dungeness point at various hours of different days in the past twenty years, it would be difficult to reduce them to any very serviceable graph or table.

In the early years of my observation I assumed that when I saw large numbers of Red-throated Divers (sometimes over 100 in ten or fifteen minutes), or flock after flock of Scoters flying steadily in one direction for an hour or more, it must be part of a long-distance migration. But recently I have changed my mind, and now I agree with Mr. Hartley's view that these flights are local movements. At Dungeness, as in Cornwall, they vary considerably from day to day; but at Dungeness, in contrast to the Cornish observations, they also vary in direction. Thus, sometimes I have seen a large south-westerly flight in the morning, and then, later in the day—sometimes even before mid-day—the main direction is changed, and dozens may be seen going in the opposite direction, north-east. At other times the movement gradually

peters out, partly because numbers come to rest on the sea close to Dungeness point.

The tentative conclusion I have reached is that these movements may be partly related to wind, but (about Dungeness at any rate) still more to tides or currents. The currents in the Straits of Dover are, as is well-known, very strong and rather complex. It would seem that during the night the birds may get carried up (or down) channel until they are outside their normal feeding-grounds; accordingly, from dawn onwards, they fly south-westward again (or north-east, as the case may be). Sometimes, with the change of tide, they then get carried too far the other way, and so they fly back again. It looks as though they tend to fly right across their feeding-grounds, so as to begin again at the far end. This applies especially to the Divers and Guillemots (*Uria aalge*), whose feeding-grounds include a considerable zone of water to east and west of Dungeness, and the part of the Channel opposite the point. The Scoters feed, as I have said, in the shallower water to north and west of the point. It is all the more noteworthy, therefore, that when a strong movement is proceeding, there are usually as many Scoters of both species (*Oidemia nigra* and *O. fusca*) participating in it as there are Divers or Auks.

As to correlation with the wind, my notes seem to indicate that the main flights are usually against the wind, but certainly not always. Thus, on a certain December day, with a strong south-west wind blowing, I watched for twenty minutes in the middle of the morning, and all that time birds of the four commonest species were flying up-channel, that is, with the wind, only three or four going the other way, as against sixty to seventy flying north-east. In the afternoon of the same day, the wind still the same, the movement, on a rather smaller scale, was reversed.

I do not pretend that I have fathomed the whole complex of causes that leads to these great daily flights. I have sometimes been inclined to think, however, that the birds fly across and across their feeding-grounds once or twice a day for the sake of what a human being would call "exercise". As far as my observations go, I should say that, in normal conditions, nearly all birds undertake far more activity than is necessary for the mere obtaining of food. In the case of sea-birds, no doubt winds and tides affect these movements—also, probably, the movements of shoals of fish. But there perhaps remains a good deal that is not directly caused by any external factor.

H. G. ALEXANDER