

# Notes

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## Eurasian Sparrowhawk taking nestling Song Thrushes

Bryan Sage (*Brit. Birds* 102: 405) reported a Eurasian Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus* feeding on nestling Collared Doves *Streptopelia decaocto*, presumed to have been taken successively from a nearby well-concealed nest. An appended editorial comment cited a statement by Ian Newton that this behaviour has previously been suspected but not proved. This note reports direct observation of the behaviour.

Just before 20.00 hrs on 7th May 2008, a male Sparrowhawk was seen to make an unsuccessful lunge at an adult Song Thrush *Turdus philomelos* returning to its nest in a dense *Rhamnus* bush in my garden. (The nest was being monitored for the BTO Nest Record Scheme, and at 10.50 hrs on 5th May it had contained four or more live young.)

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The Sparrowhawk returned shortly afterwards and entered the bush, which is clearly visible from my sitting room. It emerged with a small prey item, which it did not carry off but processed on the ground at the base of the bush. It repeated this procedure several times until (presumably) the nest contents were exhausted. Occasionally it would fly away between courses, but never for long.

These events were witnessed by myself and four other trustees of the North Cotswold Ornithological Society (Geoff Bailey, Tim Hutton, Andy Lewis and Dave Pearce), who were gathered in my sitting room for a committee meeting. The following day no traces of the incident could be found on the ground around the bush, and the nest was empty.

## Wood Pigeons and the saltmarsh habitat

In the extensive account of the habitats and food of the Wood Pigeon *Columba palumbus* in *BWP*, no mention is made of this species utilising the coastal saltmarsh habitat or of feeding on saltmarsh plants. From 1981 to the present I have carried out research on the Warham saltmarsh near Wells-next-the-Sea, Norfolk, and have noted that small numbers of these pigeons (<10) are of common occurrence in that habitat. Larger numbers, however, appear to be quite rare, with only five observations during almost 30 years. Since it was not possible to obtain specimens for crop analysis, it was not always possible to be sure what the birds were eating. A pair seen on 28th May 1995 on a Thrift *Armeria maritima* sward, which also had some Seapurslane *Atriplex portucaloides*, was clearly

eating the new leaves of the latter.

On 17th June 1994, a flock of c. 200 was watched feeding on a Thrift sward. On 12th May 2000, a flock of 16 was on a level sward dominated by Thrift and the new leaves of Common Sea-lavender *Limonium vulgare* (some birds were eating these), together with scattered Sea Plantain *Plantago maritima*. On 27th April 2004, a flock of 21 was feeding on a sward on the upper saltmarsh that was dominated by Common Saltmarsh-grass *Puccinellia maritima* but with some Red Fescue *Festuca rubra* also present. The penultimate observation was on 11th May 2006, when a flock of 90–95 was feeding on a Thrift sward. Finally, on 21st May 2009, some of a flock of 38 on a Thrift sward were seen eating the young flowerheads.

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## Wood Pigeon diet

The varied diet of the Wood Pigeon *Columba palumbus* comprises mainly plant material from a wide range of genera and species, but

the following observations (all at Wells-next-the-Sea, Norfolk) concern species not listed in *BWP*: Rowan berries *Sorbus aucuparia*

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(single birds observed on both 22nd June 1995 and 24th July 1997); Himalayan Tree Cotoneaster *Cotoneaster frigidus* berries (a group of four birds, on 18th December

2003); and Entire-leaved Cotoneaster *C. integrifolius* berries (one bird, on 15th October 2006).

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On 7th November 2009, in my garden in West Bagborough, Somerset, I noticed that some of a small group of young-stage Meadow Puffballs *Vascellum pratense*, which were growing on the lawn, had been partly eaten. That afternoon, I saw a Wood Pigeon walk towards one of the puffballs and start to peck at it, removing pieces of the soft, white flesh and swallowing them; having eaten one

puffball down to the base, the bird started to peck at a second one before it was disturbed and flew off. Inspection of the fungi showed no sign of associated invertebrates. Meadow Puffballs are edible to humans, at least before they turn brown because of spore formations. The eating of fungi by Wood Pigeons must be unusual, however, and is not mentioned in *BWP*.

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## Goldcrest flycatching

On 2nd March 2009, while walking in woodland along the Thames Path near Ashton Keynes, Wiltshire, I watched a small passerine flycatching from a deciduous tree. Closer inspection revealed a Goldcrest *Regulus regulus*, which made sallies on at least five occasions, twisting in the air in the manner

of a flycatcher and returning to the same or a different perch. I have not recorded this behaviour before and the only reference in *BWP* is 'flying insects taken in hovering flight but not pursued.' The weather was mild and dry, with sunny periods and a light south-westerly wind.

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## Male Barn Swallow passing food to female

On 26th June 2009 at Chare Ends, Holy Island, Northumberland, I watched a brood of five recently fledged Barn Swallows *Hirundo rustica* lined up on a dead branch of a willow *Salix*. Both adults were coming to feed the young, which, in typical fashion, were calling and wing-shivering as they approached. During one approach by the male, he was intercepted in mid-air by the female. She hovered in front of him, took a ball of food from his beak and then flew to

feed the youngsters with it while the male went off again to hunt over the dunes. After that both parents continued to return and feed the brood individually.

Turner (2006) referred to rare reports of males passing food to females at the nest but this incident was at least 250 m from the nearest nest-site at a local farm.

### Reference

Turner, A. 2006. *The Barn Swallow*. Poyser, London.

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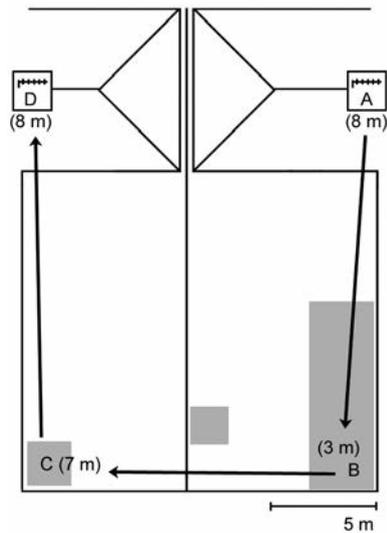
## Behaviour of a male Blackbird giving 'ultra-crystallised' song

On 13th March 2009 at 16.30 hrs, I was recording a male Blackbird *Turdus merula* that was singing from the aerial on the roof of my house in Liverpool (fig. 1A). A second male soon flew in and landed on the opposite

end of the aerial to the first male, which instantly stopped singing. Although there was no directly aggressive behaviour between the two, both adopted an upright position and remained motionless for a few seconds. The

first male then changed its posture, spreading its tail and flattening its body so as to be parallel with the aerial, and began to sing again. This time, however, it gave a much quieter song consisting of a large number of short but intricate phrases (see [www.britishbirds.co.uk/sounds/Blackbird130309.mp3](http://www.britishbirds.co.uk/sounds/Blackbird130309.mp3)).

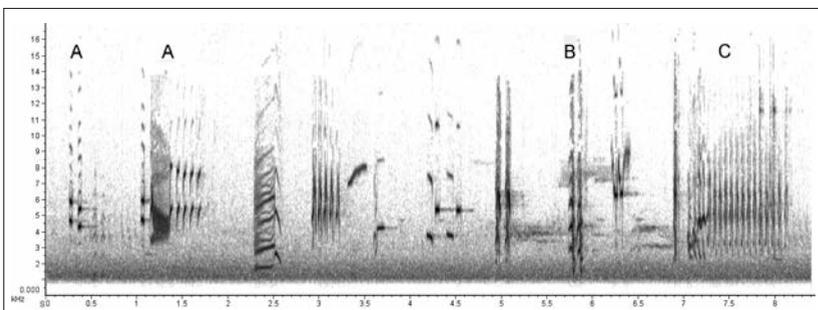
After singing from the aerial for c. 15 seconds, the first male flew to a tree some 17 m away. Its flight was slow, with its wings and tail spread, and it sang continuously throughout. It alighted on an exposed branch about halfway up the tree (fig. 1B), where it remained for c. 20 seconds. It then flew to another tree nearby (fig. 1C), again with no break in its song and flying in the same manner as before. The top of this tree consisted of two lone branches and, as if trying to reach the very highest point, the bird crept along one of the branches towards its tip, still singing and still in a flattened position with its tail fanned slightly. Once it had reached the tip of one branch, it made its way back down the branch in similar fashion and crept towards the tip of the second branch. This was repeated several times for almost two minutes. The bird then flew, as before, to the aerial on my neighbour's roof (fig. 1D), some 18 m from the second tree and 16 m from the second male, which was still sitting upright on the original aerial. Here again, the first male was constantly on the move, shuffling from one end of the aerial to the other and back again, its body flattened and its tail fanned slightly. Periodically, it altered the position of its head, from pointing down at an angle of about 45° to pointing upwards at about 45°. It spent the next two minutes singing and behaving in this way. The second



**Fig. 1.** Location of song-posts used by a male Blackbird *Turdus merula* giving ultra-crystallised song, with approximate height of each song-post shown in parentheses; shaded regions represent locations with vegetation over 3 m in height; arrows show direction of movement.

male then left its perch and flew to neighbouring gardens; about 20 seconds after it left, the original bird stopped singing and flew, in a more 'normal' and direct manner, to nearby bushes.

Altogether, the first male was singing continuously for a little under four and a half minutes (the second male did not sing). While this type of song is no doubt not uncommon, it seems to have been largely overlooked and is not well documented. Perhaps this is in part down to the misconception that this quiet singing is a form of 'subsong'. Constantine *et al.* (2006) made an



**Fig. 2.** 'Ultra-crystallised' song of a male Blackbird *Turdus merula*. This 8.5-second section of song contains mimicry of Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis* (A) and Magpie *Pica pica* (B), and a subdued rattling alarm call (C) ([www.britishbirds.co.uk/sounds/Blackbird.mp3](http://www.britishbirds.co.uk/sounds/Blackbird.mp3)).

excellent job of explaining the concept of 'ultra-crystallised' song (a song that is typically of greater length, more varied in nature and given at lower

volume than ‘typical’ territorial advertisement, and which may be uttered in ‘highly charged situations’, such as in territorial disputes or immediately prior to copulation). They also presented an example using a male Blackbird, which gave a song very similar to that I recorded. However, there is no mention of the bird they recorded giving this song in flight, or of it using multiple song-posts, and no detail as to how long it sang like that for.

The song of the Liverpool bird contained much mimicry, including what appeared to be imitation of Long-tailed Tit *Aegithalos caudatus*, Great Tit *Parus major*, Common Starling *Sturnus vulgaris*, Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis*, Magpie *Pica pica*, and even Greater Canada Goose *Branta canadensis*. It also contained phrases similar to those used in ‘typical’ Blackbird song and short snippets of subdued alarm calls and rattles – whether these were from the bird’s own repertoire or mimicry of other Blackbirds is not known. Many notes in the song were repeated after each other, similar to those in the song of Song Thrush *T. philomelos*. On a sonogram (fig. 2), the notes show up as being well defined and further add to the evidence that this is ‘highly crystallised’ song.

BWP states that male Blackbirds ‘occasionally sing in flight between perches’ but does not mention anything under ‘voice’ that quite matches this song. The nearest description seems to be for ‘courtship song of male’, described as a ‘quiet “strangled” song, made  
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up of alarm-rattles, rough warbles, and subdued snatches of what sounds like territorial-song’. The name suggests that this song is most likely to be given during courtship with a female, though it is not stated explicitly when exactly this song has been recorded.

On 22nd April 2008 at 18.35 hrs, I had recorded a male Blackbird giving a song almost identical to that given by the male on 13th March 2009 (see [www.britishbirds.co.uk/sounds/Blackbird220408.mp3](http://www.britishbirds.co.uk/sounds/Blackbird220408.mp3)). As on 13th March, the bird on 22nd April was singing ‘typically’, this time from the top of a tree around 9 m high. On this occasion, however, the change in song type was initiated by the arrival of a female. The male quickly flew to join the female and out of view, so its behaviour could not be seen, but the song lasted for several minutes.

It seems likely that this ‘ultra-crystallised’ song can be given by male Blackbirds in a variety of ‘highly charged’ situations, in response both to females and to rival males. Its similarity to ‘subsung’ – an often undeservedly ignored area itself – has probably led to it being overlooked somewhat, whilst the associated singing behaviour has also been passed over. Hopefully, a greater awareness of ‘ultra-crystallised’ song will lead to more observations being made relating to this sort of behaviour.

### Reference

Constantine, M., & The Sound Approach. 2006.  
*The Sound Approach to Birding*. The Sound Approach, Poole.

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## Aerial courtship-feeding by Spotted Flycatchers

In June 2009, a pair of Spotted Flycatchers *Muscicapa striata* nested in a wall at West Bagborough, Somerset. During egg-laying and incubation, courtship-feeding was common, with the female begging from the male while either perched or (mainly) on the nest. After the eggs hatched, courtship-feeding continued, although at a reduced frequency, with the female begging mostly while perched on a roof ledge or while brooding. On at least four occasions, however, the female was seen to gape and beg in flight when the male flew close while carrying food.

Sometimes the male hovered before the female to transfer the food, which was quickly swallowed by the female; the food was certainly not carried to and fed to the young. After the young were six or seven days old, I saw no more courtship-feeding.

Courtship-feeding is known to be common in breeding Spotted Flycatchers, but aerial begging and prey transfer must be unusual. This behaviour is not mentioned in BWP, although it is stated that the male sometimes hovers when feeding the female.

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