

THE MARSH-WARBLER AS A SUSSEX SPECIES.

BY

JOHN WALPOLE-BOND.

NOTWITHSTANDING arduous, unremitting and wide-spread field work, I did not discover the Marsh-Warbler (*Acrocephalus palustris*) nesting in Sussex until 1920. Since then I have known it to breed in the county every year, and I have now found a fair number of haunts, to which Dr. C. H. Bryant can add at least three and several other observers, notably Messrs. E. C. Arnold and D. W. Musselwhite, one apiece. But by no means every habitat is tenanted annually. On the contrary, some of the haunts have been minus Marsh-Warblers for several summers in succession. In fact, there is but one spot in which the bird can be welcomed regularly, and even here it failed to appear in 1931. Indeed, there is considerable fluctuation. Thus, in 1927, I could only place two pairs, though, on the other hand, in 1922 there were over twenty and in 1925 nineteen. The greatest number of pairs in any one haunt in one year has never yet exceeded five, whilst there are often solitary couples, though in such cases a second pair is often near by.

Whilst plantations, shaws and hedgerows quite devoid of osiers, and even cornfields, are not utterly neglected by this species for nesting purposes, by far its favourite nesting-sites in Sussex (as, I believe, everywhere) are withy-beds or at least spots with some pretensions to that title; and although weeds are not of vital import to the bird's welfare, there yet flourishes in nearly all its habitats a wild wealth of meadow-sweet, nettles, willow-herb, cow-parsnip and such like unmatted, tall-growing, upright vegetation. In certain haunts, indeed, the merest handful of trees or bushes is present. Some haunts, too, are most insignificant—just a few square yards of suitable terrain—but in such circumstances never more than one pair is in evidence; and nearly all are very close to water, though one stands high and dry a hundred yards up a steep down-slope and perhaps twice that distance from water of any description.

In forward seasons most Marsh-Warblers are with us between May 19th-26th. Exceptionally, an arrival is noticeable a day or two earlier, whilst in 1923 I met with a bird on May 8th, though this, of course, must be regarded as phenomenal. In backward seasons, however, hardly any birds can be expected before the very end of May or early in June. Sometimes, naturally, whatever the state of the elements, there is the late comer; in one case, indeed, a pair was not installed in nesting-quarters until June 15th. The males reach their homes to be a day or two before the females, and

now, where several individuals share the same area, their long-sustained, estatic outbursts of passionate and superlative song, each bird striving to outvie his fellows, must be heard to be properly appreciated.

Most summer migrants do not breed for about a month after making their haunts, but in the case of the Marsh-Warbler the nest is commenced very shortly after the female's arrival. Both sexes participate in its construction, which usually takes about a week, and laying begins on the day following completion. Consequently, in early years most Marsh-Warblers have fresh clutches between June 1st-9th (in 1925 one hen had "laid out" by May 31st), though in backward ones not until between June 10th-18th. Repeat-nests, when needed from misadventure—for only one brood is reared in a year—are often put together in four days and sometimes in three. Both sexes together seek a site, often spending some little time over several spots before coming to a decision, and building sometimes starts in the evening.

Of the 144 nests seen *in situ* up to and inclusive of 1932, fifty-one have been attached to meadow-sweet; twelve to stinging nettle; eight to *Salix triandra* (one tree was quite dead); six to elder; five to whitethorn; four each to guelder-rose, thin thistle, and bramble and stinging nettle; three each to greater willow-herb, wheat, sallow and meadow-sweet and dead reed; two each to lesser dock, ragged robin and meadow-sweet and live reed; and one apiece to *S. triandra*, cleavers, coarse dead grass and stinging nettle; *S. triandra*, coarse dead grass and greater willow-herb; dead and living reeds; elder and nettle; elder and cleavers; elder and bramble; bramble, guelder-rose and nettle; bramble and dead grass; bramble, nettle and ash; bramble, cleavers and *S. triandra*; *S. triandra* (dead) and nettle; blackthorn and nettle; bracken; bracken and nettle; meadow-sweet and ash; meadow-sweet and bramble; meadow-sweet and cow-parsnip; meadow-sweet and male equisetum; meadow-sweet and nettle; ash and nettle; wild cherry and cleavers; valerian and coarse dead grass; wood-betony; water-hemlock; cow-parsnip; a species of vetch; wild hop; convolvulus; hazel; figwort; lesser willow-herb and lesser sorrel.

The above list demonstrates that the Marsh-Warbler quite often builds in bushes and trees (generally saplings), a habit which, in England at any rate, is, I fancy, not widely recognized, save in the case of *Salix triandra*. Some such examples, as, for instance, those in guelder-rose and elder, are actually as much as between seven and eight feet from the ground! In weeds, of course (nettles and greater willow-herb excepted), an altitude of more than two feet six inches is rarely attainable,

and, in these, nests are normally found at a height of from one foot to two feet from the ground. A few specimens have been under a foot, as a start at all events, since naturally they rise with the growth of their anchorages.

The typical nest is slung hammock-wise between two or three and even four good, firm, perpendicular supports, to which it is tethered in such a fashion that the material entwining them is forced somewhat outwards, causing thereby slight bulges. These take to themselves at or near the rim of the edifice (though I have twice noticed the anomaly half-way down it) the appearance of loops, owing to the stuff there being more or less uptilted and so the more outstretched. These quasi-handles are as a rule quite pronounced, but nevertheless very seldom exceed half an inch in length or breadth, though in two cases they were actually over three inches in length! In some nests there also occur from one to four extraneous props, but these are almost invariably tenuous, not to say rickety. Ordinarily, they pass straight up through the walls of the structure, without, however, spoiling its contour; though just occasionally, and this may induce slight disfigurement, one or more, especially if of bramble, are caught into the fabric transversely. A very rare type of nest has but one good support and consequently but one handle; in one instance of this kind, so frail was the anchorage on the unhandled side, that the nest was slightly leaning. One example, whilst being moored to its stays (withy-feebers) in regulation style, was also suspended from long half-hoops of unmatted goose-grass with which the site was lavishly festooned. Normally, there is no support whatever to the nest below, but very exceptionally an example in a sapling lightly rests in the bottom of a cup-like crotch or just lies on a more or less horizontal branchlet, though, even so, mooring to adjacent uprights is never absent.

Nests are apt to vary in size for no particular reason. They are never above obvious water, though sometimes over slightly soggy soil. Their usual composition, handles and all, is of bents (stems nearly always, blades hardly ever), the finest being reserved for the lining. But a fair number show, in addition, a modicum of some dead, woolly-looking plant externally, whilst in the lining of some are found slender fibrous rootlets and strands of horsehair (either or both), though the latter substance is rarely used more than most stingily. Every now and then I have seen horsehair in the foundations and walls, as also wool (once, a handle was wooly), green grass, spiders' cocoons, willow-down, rag, paper, moss, curly lichen and small, withered leaves, but never in profusion, any of them, nor all in any one nest. It

is true, of course, that in one case dead convolvulus leaves were used liberally, but these were attached to their stalks with which the nest was largely wrapped.

In weeds the average nest is beautifully hidden until the growth enshrouding it is parted, but most sapling specimens are more or less unmasked. Sometimes two nests are within twenty yards of one another, and twice three were in a line of about fifty yards. Now and again, close to the nest, are found even three "beginnings", though such are very seldom more than one day's work and often only a few minutes'!

Glanced at negligently from above, the nest, putting aside the handles, is slightly reminiscent of the Garden-Warbler's or even the Whitethroat's. But the general appearance is that of the Reed-Warbler's, though this is seldom "looped" and more often than not lacks the substructure nearly always a feature of and generally substantial in the rarer species'. Additionally, the Reed-Warbler's nest is neater and more compact, appreciably smaller all in all (though generally rather deeper inside) and constructed of much finer and rather different materials. In short, I have twice only seen a Reed-Warbler's nest that could possibly have passed muster for a Marsh-Warbler's.

Some ornithologists have written as though six and even seven eggs are constantly found in the nest of the Marsh-Warbler. I do not know from what districts their statistics were derived, but in Sussex, at all events, five form the maximum, and this is the normal set, only a few birds producing four and fewer still (very few) three. I am referring to original layings, since in "repeats" four is of common occurrence, though three is most abnormal.

The ground-colour of the eggs is, variously, pure white (very scarce), soiled white, greyish-white, pale creamy-white (rare), pale bluish-grey (sometimes almost light lavender), pale greenish-blue; bluish-white (usually pale), and just occasionally pale greenish-white; and on all grounds occur (almost invariably broadcast) countless, dark, pin-point-like "spickles", which impart to some specimens, if glanced at hurriedly, a faint semi-hazy sort of appearance. But the real markings, which are brown of different shades (sometimes actually black, especially as to their centres), greyish-brown and olive and (once) chestnut, with underlying stains of grey, even to violet-grey—the markings of one clutch are inky-grey alone (on a pure white ground) and very few—are relatively scant, though nearly always very bold and clearly defined, if often blotchy and confluent, and generally most pronounced at the larger end of the shell. It should here be remarked that the chestnut and inky-grey marked types are

excessively rare; the former, indeed—which, incidentally, has a dirty white ground—is, I believe, without precedent. Not quite so scarce a type is smudged practically all over with muddy olive, and this is the only variety in which there is not plenty of ground visible and, broadly speaking, the only one that could possibly be taken for a similar type of Reed-Warbler's egg. In this connexion, however, it is advisable to remember that "Reed's" eggs (all types, of course) are almost always appreciably smaller and slimmer and, moreover, lack the curious, pin-point-like "spickles". Naturally, in the above, I refer to unidentified specimens.

The male Marsh-Warbler, sometimes at any rate, assists in incubation, which now and then starts before the clutch is complete, though never until the second egg has been deposited. Incubation, therefore, in cases where five eggs are laid, may last fifteen days. Each egg, however, hatches in twelve.

In the case of an unknown nest, no matter what the weather, it is a rare event, except at dusk, to get to grips with an incubating Marsh-Warbler, though I have often suspected that this light-sitting propensity is actuated more by the swish set up from the forcing of the intruder through the surrounding vegetation than from any inherent tendency. This theory is the more tenable when one remembers that, in the case of a known nest which can be approached gingerly, the bird will often allow you to watch it brooding at very short range for even an appreciable period. On leaving, it generally flits or glides gracefully through the encircling growth (incidentally, fairly often without a rustle); only very occasionally (though never, should the nest be at a respectable altitude in a sapling) does it rise out of and above it, and then usually but for the briefest interval. After this, as long as the observer remains on the scene, it skulks, at first not very near by, but soon at close quarters, though until these are reached very little can be seen of it and often nothing. Even at close quarters it seldom remains visible for any length of time. The non-sitting bird is almost always in attendance, likewise skulking, and the male, when near home, is apt to burst into angry snatches of song; whilst both sexes may utter one or more of the following cries (used on other occasions as well, and, contrary to the precepts of some, before laying commences), though chiefly with Nos. 1 and 2.

1. A loud, repeated (sometimes very fast as, for instance, on the appearance of a Sparrow-Hawk) "*tic*" or "*tchic*" (variously, "*chic*", "*chit*" or even "*chi*"), which—the "*tic*" at any rate—rather recalls, e.g., a like cry of the Whitethroat.

2. A somewhat rolling “*tchirrr*” or “*churrr*” given at intervals of a few seconds, which, though full and hard-sounding, is not so harsh as the “*kurrr*” of the Reed-Warbler or a somewhat similar note used by the Reed-Warbler and Whitethroat. Sometimes this cry develops into a regular rattle, viz., “*tchir-r-r-r-r*”, when it is apt to terminate with a higher-pitched “*er*”, rapped out, it seems, with something of an effort. Sometimes, again, it is craking in effect.

NOTE.—Now and then “*tic*” and “*tirrrr*” are joined together, a combination which may conclude with a short note sounding like “*wit*”.

3. A queer little subdued chatter of “*tic-tirric*” or “*tirric-tic*”.

4. A very hushed “*tchuk*” or “*tuc*”, perhaps a modification of No. 1.

5. A thrice-repeated “*weet*” (something like one of the Whitethroat’s utterances), generally followed, and, if so, instantly, by three “*tics*”.

6. An iterated “*tweek*”, almost agonised in expression.

7. A chattering “*churuc*”, sometimes oft-repeated. This note approximates to a Reed-Warbler utterance.

Juveniles use subdued editions of Nos. 1 and 2, as well as, in extreme fear, a high-toned squeal.

There are two phases of song. The one most usual by far, which in calm weather carries a long way, if not drowned by the songs of other species, mainly consists of a mass of mimicry rattled off, some of it, in tones low, rolling, blurred and gurgling; some of it, again, in a key high-pitched, liquid, trilling, and very clear; the rest, in pants, sighs, wheezes, and even nasal phonetics. Now it is petulant, now almost sad, yet now abandoned, effervescent and very gay. It is a song which at one time somewhat slow, subdued, laboured, and even snatchy, suddenly flashes into quick, smooth, sustained, effortless rhythm—a hurried flow of tune loudly effusive, brilliant and intensely passionate, even to the verge of delirium. The general effect is always most beautiful, though a certain grate in parts of the refrain—due in some cases, of course, to the notes of the species borrowed—spoils what would otherwise be perfect symphony. Yet I, at any rate, could never tire of listening to the “musical-switch” of the Marsh-Warbler. I have heard the following species imitated, all more or less exactly: Jackdaw (“*jac*” note), Magpie (chatter), Starling (song and certain other notes), Greenfinch (song, “alarm”, “*peezh*” and hunger call of young), Goldfinch (song and calls), Linnet (several calls and portions of song), Chaffinch (song and several cries), House-Sparrow (various notes), Yellow Bunting (song, often shorn of the concluding “*eeese*”),

Reed-Bunting (song and call), Wood-Lark (fragments of song), Sky-Lark (parts of song), Tree-Pipit (song), Pied Wagtail (normal call), Nuthatch (sundry calls), Great, Blue, Marsh- and Willow-Tits (various calls), Red-backed Shrike (hawk-like cry), Willow-Warbler (song and usual call), Wood-Warbler (usual call), Whitethroat (song and calls), Garden-Warbler and Blackcap (songs), Song-Thrush (song and "alarm"), Blackbird (parts of song and certain cries, including hunger-plaint of juveniles), Whinchat and Redstart (normal calls), Nightingale ("alarms" and parts of song), Robin ("alarm"), Hedge-Sparrow (song), Wren (song and "rattle"), Swallow (song and call), Green Woodpecker (two cries), Wryneck (song), Common Redshank (call), Common Partridge (juggling) and Pheasant ("peep" of "cheepers").

To the above must be added some high, clear, liquid, canary-like shakes and trills; a crude gasp; a species of wrawl; a sighing "swee"; a sound like the lowing of kine heard from afar; a nasal, repeated "pee", and a very, nasal, iterated "za-wee". Of these, the first and last are, I think, the bird's very own property and they are never absent from the song if of any duration, consequently being highly characteristic. But, as to the rest—and this includes every sort of mimicry—no bird has been heard to give anything approaching all, and no bird necessarily indulges in the imitations it knows in the same order or all together in any one pæan.

The second phase of song merely resembles the ordinary babbling of Reed- and Sedge-Warbler, sometimes being more like one, sometimes more like the other; and, were this phase of common occurrence, the Marsh-, being not unlike the Reed-Warbler in general appearance, would be a difficult bird to locate, unless, of course, one was prepared to devote endless time and energy to the searching for nests in likely-looking haunts!

Melody continues from the bird's arrival until the young are hatched. Twice, and twice only, have I heard song after the young were hatched, and that was very brief and very bad. This means, of course, that, where individuals have been forced to "repeat" twice, singing is heard until far on into July, whilst unmated males—superfine vocalists these in every respect—are sometimes still serenading at the extreme end of this month.

The Marsh-Warbler is a spasmodic songster and independent of the weather. Thus, to take extremes, it sometimes performs almost without cessation for as much as three hours on end even on the unpleasantest of days, whilst, conversely, it may remain mute for an appreciably longer period in beautiful weather. Yet, even in its most taciturn moods, the presence

of a human being by the nest, be that barely commenced, nearly always induces furious diapacons, whilst, if the habitat adjoins a line, a passing train will oft-times set a silent Marsh-Warbler a-singing. In any case, however, it seldom sings in the evening, especially late evening, and by night, it seems, never.

Even when singing this species is apt to be restless, not only in that it often "creeps" and hops about when so engaged, but also inasmuch as it frequently changes stance. Stances are variously lent by weeds (generally their summits), bushes, hedgerows, and, perhaps particularly, trees, in the last-named of which song is often given at a height of from 15 feet to 25 feet from the ground. A singing-station is very seldom more than 30 yards from the nesting-site and generally much less; indeed every Marsh-Warbler has a favourite "platform" very close to the nest itself. On the rarest of occasions a snatch of song is uttered as the musician flies from one stance to another.

It may here be remarked—and I hold proof positive—that just every now and again female Marsh-Warblers sing, though seldom, if ever, after they have been over here more than about ten days. Their delivery, moreover, is always brief, feeble, faltering and whispered, their mimicry always indifferent when not actually faulty.

Practically speaking, there is in this country only one species that really approximates to the Marsh-Warbler in the colour of its plumage. That is the Reed-Warbler. But (I am speaking of adults) the "Marsh" is altogether "colder"-looking, being light earthy- or even olivaceous- rather than rusty-, brown above; below, appreciably whiter, i.e., almost silvery-white hardly sullied with buff; whilst its legs are pale pinkish-brown rather than plain, or even greyish, brown. The "Marsh", moreover, is of the two birds slightly bigger and of somewhat stouter build, though equally elegant all the same, whilst, when a good profile view of a flier is procured, it will be seen that *palustris* is considerably more bottle- or oval-bodied than its much commoner cousin. To the undoing, however, of the above distinctions, it must be remembered that owing to the nature of most of its haunts, which, by the way, are often shared by the two species, clear, long views on the whole are seldom obtainable, and, in actual fact, the Marsh-Warbler's characteristic song, or the finding of its nest, are the only really safe guides to its status in any locality.

The young are rather differently clad and still more like Reed-Warblers, but I have described them in these pages previously (*antea*, Vol. XVII., pp. 185-6).

I do not pretend to know when exactly the Marsh-Warbler leaves this country. Merely can I say that never yet have I been sure of a specimen after the early part of August.