Notes

**Great Crested Grebes breeding on rivers** Recent notes by R. E. Youngman (Brit. Birds 70: 544-545) and H. J. Harvey (Brit. Birds 72: 385-386) and the letter by D. H. Gantzel (Brit. Birds 71: 226-227) have documented the history of Great Crested Grebes *Podiceps cristatus* breeding on rivers. Recently, we analysed the habitats used by this species at the time of the 1975 national census: Great Crested Grebes were reported from 15 rivers. (Since collecting breeding data was incidental to the main purpose of the census and in some areas observations were limited to a single weekend, the figures are a minimal assessment of the true status on rivers.) In Norfolk, 88 individuals were found in Broadland, at least six pairs breeding; in the East Anglian Fenlands, 68 grebes were reported, with nine or more breeding pairs; in other areas, a total of 49 individuals on four rivers included at least 13 breeding pairs. Although the largest numbers were in Norfolk, on the Yare (45) and the Bure (34), constant movement between these rivers and the Broads means that only a few grebes would have had breeding territories on true river habitat; nevertheless, despite the high density of pleasure craft and considerable tidal fluctuations in water level, breeding is occasionally attempted on the main channels on these rivers.

While Mr Youngman’s figures show a rapid increase from 1975 to 1976, Mr Harvey’s note demonstrates that in many areas the habit of breeding on rivers is comparatively recent. In 1975, Great Crested Grebes were found on relatively few rivers during the breeding season; although increasing, numbers are small and in 1975 represented less than 3% of the total English population.

S. W. M. Hughes and P. Bacon
6 West Way, Slinfold, Horsham, West Sussex

**Black-headed Gulls stealing from feeding Oystercatchers** In November 1977, on the outskirts of Cork, I watched, from my car, a flock of about 70 Oystercatchers *Haematopus ostralegus* feeding in a large, partially flooded field at the side of the road. About 20 Black-headed Gulls *Larus ridibundus*...
191-194. Sequence of four photographs showing Black-headed Gull *Larus ridibundus* following feeding Oystercatchers *Haematopus ostralegus*, stealing their catch of worms, and flying off, Cork, November 1977 (Richard T. Mills)
195-197. Sequence of three photographs showing Black-headed Gull *Larus ridibundus* snatching worm away from feeding Oystercatcher *Haematopus ostralegus* and making off with it. Cork, November 1977 (Richard T. Mills)
were following those Oystercatchers feeding around the shallow flooded depression about 15m from me. Each gull would move about, apparently keeping an eye on the four or five waders nearest to it. As soon as one of the latter caught a worm (which seemed to be fairly plentiful), the gull would immediately chase it and force it to give up its prey (plates 191-197). At other times, when the Oystercatcher appeared about to find something, the gull would hover above it. Occasionally, several Oystercatchers would make a run together at a more obstinate gull, but this did not deter it for very long. It was obviously profitable for the gulls, for they did not bother looking for food themselves, being content merely to harry the Oystercatchers.

RICHARD T. MILLS
Redwing, 44 Halldone Avenue, Bishopstown, Cork, Ireland

Division of labour between Dippers building nest On 31st March 1978, at Hardcastle Craggs, Hebden Bridge, North Yorkshire, I found the nest of a pair of Dippers Cinclus cinclus under an overhang about 3 m above a swiftly-flowing stream; it was about 70% completed. For over an hour, in very good light, I watched the two birds building. During this time, ten bundles of grass were collected from the edge of the stream and incorporated into the nest; and five beech Fagus sylvatica leaves were retrieved from the stream, making a total of 15 deliveries to the nest. This fits the nest-building description given by Bruce Campbell and James Ferguson-Lees (1974, *A Field Guide to Birds’ Nests*); on this occasion, however, one Dipper did all the collecting and flew to a flat stone in the centre of the stream, while the other flew down to join its mate where the material was passed from the first’s bill to the second’s. The builder then returned to the nest and the collector continued searching for new material. Later in the day, farther along the same stream, I watched another nest under construction (almost completed): both Dippers shared collecting and building, adding eight bundles of material in 42 minutes.

RON FREETHY
15 Lower Manor Lane, Burnley, Lancashire BB12 0EB

High concentrations of feeding Dunnocks It would be interesting to know the identity of the weeds referred to by R. E. Youngman in his note on Dunnocks Prunella modularis feeding gregariously (*Brit. Birds* 71: 182). Over the last eight years, during which I have observed such gatherings annually, the attraction has invariably been one plant: fat-hen Chenopodium album, especially when it forms extensive patches of complete ground cover. During the winter of 1977/78, in such a site, where what I have come to call ‘Dunnock-weed’ evenly overtopped a crop of turnips about 0.2ha in area, at least 60 Dunnocks came daily to feed on the seed; from early November until the field was ploughed in January, I caught 50 individuals, including 15 which I had already ringed locally from 1974 onwards. The attractiveness of fat-hen to Dunnocks, however, extends over a long period, for such gatherings can be observed well before the seed has formed. Thus, in July and August 1975, I repeatedly flushed concentrations of up to 30 from a dense patch of fat-hen less than 100 m² in extent, and I am convinced
that at this season the black aphids *Aphis* for which this plant is a host were being sought, for I regularly catch Dunnocks in chardoneret traps baited with these insects. I should stress that on no occasion have I seen such gatherings of Dunnocks behaving as a coherent or co-ordinated flock, either when feeding or in flight.

**W. D. CAMPBELL**

*Ticknell Corner, The Slade, Charlbury, Oxford*

On 25th December 1967, near Driffield, North Humberside, I found a closely packed flock of about 100 Dunnocks in a ride in a small conifer plantation surrounded by arable farmland. On this farm, quantities of seed are put out during the winter as feed for gamebirds, and I suspect that the Dunnocks had discovered one of these regular artificial feeding-sites.

**V. A. DRAKE**

*Division of Entomology, CSIRO, PO Box 1700, Canberra, ACT 2601, Australia*

We have also received observations from J. Corfield, who recorded a small party of almost ten Dunnocks feeding closely together on a ploughed field just north of Stevenage, Hertfordshire, on 6th April 1978; and from R. A. Frost, who counted 28 Dunnocks feeding together among straw and dead leaves at Scarcliffe Park, Derbyshire, on 25th December 1975, and added that he has often seen winter parties of up to about ten at feeding stations for Pheasants *Phasianus colchicus*. EDS

**Aberrant song of Dunnock** During the breeding season of 1978 and again during March 1979, I heard and recorded an aberrant song of a paired Dunnock *Prunella modularis* in the Hertfordshire and Middlesex Trust for Nature Conservation’s reserve ‘Fir and Pond Woods’ near Potters Bar, Hertfordshire. I interpreted this unusual song as ‘treedle-treedle-treedle-tree’ (with up to ten ‘treedles’ per phrase), each phrase lasting about between one and three seconds and being uttered at the rate of approximately one every four seconds, with the first few notes of the normal song starting it off. Indeed, it seemed to be an extension of these commencing notes. The same individual also had a normal song, but this was never intermixed—in any one song burst—with the variant.

A third song-type—probably not an unusual variation—was also uttered, being almost normal but with a somewhat prolonged ending.

**PAUL DRIVER**

*45 Tiverton Road, Potters Bar, Hertfordshire EN6 5HX*

Mr Driver’s tape has been examined by Ron Kettle, curator of the British Library of Wildlife Sounds, and Dr D. W. Snow, who is currently undertaking a study of the Dunnock. Mr Kettle could find no comparable reference in the literature nor any similar sound on any recording. He had, however, heard what he considers to have been the same sound himself, in company with John Gordon, at Woodchester Park, Gloucestershire, on 9th April 1978. He transcribed it as: ‘treedle te wee-er wee-er wee-er . . .’. Dr Snow commented that both the song and the subsong recorded by Mr Driver were unusual, particularly the very short, unusually jerky—rather than rambling—song phrases. EDS.

**Redstarts wintering in Avon, South Glamorgan and Dorset** On a number of occasions between early November and 28th December 1969, at Clevedon, Avon, I saw a Redstart *Phoenicurus phoenicurus* in or near our garden on Strawberry Hill, 200-300 m from a deciduous wood. It appeared
at times to be seeking food, perhaps spiders, round the walls of the house. When first sighted it was in juvenile plumage, but subsequently moulted into male winter plumage. It could fly well, but seemed to have a bunch of misplaced secondaries in one wing, noticeable when it perched; perhaps it had recovered from an accident or other infirmity which had prevented or inhibited it from migrating at the correct time. It was seen into January 1970 by a neighbour. This appears to be the first record of a Redstart wintering in Britain.

K. E. L. SIMMONS
Department of Psychology, The University, Leicester LE1 7RH

On 30th October and 1st November 1976, at Lisvane Reservoir, South Glamorgan, a female Redstart Phoenicurus phoenicurus was seen by several observers, including Maurice Chown and DJF. It was particularly pale with noticeable pale bull edges to the secondaries and inner primaries. On 11th December, what was probably the same individual was seen by MC in a garden on a housing estate about 2 km to the south.

From at least 3rd until 20th December 1976, an immature male Redstart was present on the Nothe, Weymouth, Dorset. DJF and ISR noted that it fed on the numerous flies (Diptera) among the seaweed along an area of rocky foreshore and a seawall. Quite often it gave a quiet ‘tick’ call, unlike the wintering Black Redstarts P. ochruros which always remained silent. On the several occasions when the two species came into conflict, the Redstart always succeeded in chasing off the Black Redstart.

While the earlier dates are not unusually late for Redstarts, R. Hudson (1973, Early and Late Dates for Summer Migrants) gave only three December records for the species.

D. J. FISHER and I. S. ROBERTSON
9 Hurford Place, Cyncoed, Cardiff CF2 6QZ

The January report mentioned by Dr Simmons was the first ever for that month. In future, we shall be publishing out-of-season records only in exceptional circumstances, but reports will be passed to Robert Hudson for possible inclusion in any revision of his 1973 listings.

Robin-like feeding by Stonechat Mrs Sheila Bottomley’s note on a Stonechat Saxicola torquata feeding like a Robin Erithacus rubecula (Brit. Birds 71: 84) prompts me to record the following. On 31st January 1976, in my garden in Southampton, I was returfing a patch of lawn when a nearby movement immediately made me think the resident Robin was in the vicinity. I glanced in the direction of the movement and was surprised to see a female Stonechat. She stayed close, sometimes less than 1 m away and occasionally picking unidentifiable items off the stacked turves and using the various garden tools as perches while I finished the turfing. I later started collecting dead leaves and other items for burning, including old stems of New England aster Aster novae-angliae, the seeds of which the Stonechat appeared to take. I examined some seeds with a 20 X lens, but found no minute organisms. While the Stonechat was in my garden, the only readily identifiable items I saw it take were earthworms (Lumbricidae). I can find no mention of Stonechats taking seeds.

TERRY M. MARTIN
144 Athelstan Road, Bitterne, Southampton
Notes

We are grateful to K. G. Spencer for bringing to our attention the following from the *Lancashire Bird Report 1971*: 'A very tame [female Stonechat], at Wigan, 4 & 5 December, followed a gardening crew, perching on tools and truck as would a Robin.' A letter on Robin-like feeding by Stonechat also appears on page 366, and we feel that the behaviour has now been adequately covered; we shall not, therefore, be publishing further notes on the subject. EDS

**Blackbird 'playing' with leaf** On 6th October 1977, at Blunham, Bedfordshire, my father, my wife and I watched an adult male Blackbird *Turdus merula* repeatedly picking up and tossing away a fallen leaf of Norway maple *Acer platanoides*. The actions were similar to those used by any feeding Blackbird in autumn, but were repeated at least 14 times with the same leaf, the bird flying or running after the leaf on each occasion. No attempt was made to peck underneath the moved leaf; the actions resembled a game, and recalled a kitten playing. The leaf measured 11 × 14 cm.

J. T. R. SHARROCK
Fountains, Park Lane, Blunham, Bedford MK44 3NJ

**Blackbird feeding on tideline** The letter from Bernard King (*Brit. Birds* 71: 311) on passerines feeding on tidelines recalled a male Blackbird *Turdus merula* which I observed on the Gann Estuary, Dyfed, on 21st June 1978. It approached a small heap of seaweed and hopped into the centre, then hopped up and down several times until it had disturbed a considerable number of sandhoppers (Amphipoda), which could easily be seen jumping into the air around it. It then collected a beakful, usually by picking them off the ground, but on several occasions catching them in the air. When it had filled its beak, the Blackbird flew off to some bushes about 100 m away. This pattern of behaviour was repeated several times during 30 minutes' observation.

A. K. JONES
79 St George's Road, Stoke, Coventry CV12DJ

**One adult male Blackbird feeding another** At 11.10 GMT on 10th July 1978, I was casually watching two adult male Blackbirds *Turdus merula* as they fed on my lawn at Blunham, Bedfordshire. One (A) was collecting food in his bill, which I assumed he would take to nestling Blackbirds in a nearby shrub. Suddenly, the second male (B) ran swiftly across the lawn towards A, with his head held downwards. To my amazement, A offered a billful of worms and larvae to B, who promptly ate them. This apparently appeased B, whose approach had seemed to me to be aggressive. The event was, to my eyes, clearly proffering and acceptance, rather than food-piracy.

The two Blackbirds continued to feed on the lawn for another 20 minutes; they usually remained within 3 m of each other, A running swiftly to join B, or B to join A, whenever they became more widely separated. From 11.30 to 11.37 hours, B lay sun-bathing on the lawn while A fed around him, within 1 m. The feeding of one by the other was not repeated.

I could distinguish B from A by his more ruffled rump feathers, but otherwise the two birds were identical: not less than two years old, with wholly black plumage and wholly bright orange-yellow bills.

J. T. R. SHARROCK
Fountains, Park Lane, Blunham, Bedford MK44 3NJ
Blackbird killing and eating nestling House Sparrow  Early in the afternoon of 10th July 1978, from the window of our house at Knutsford, Cheshire, my mother saw a young House Sparrow *Passer domesticus* only a few days old drop from the eaves above the window on to the edge of the lawn. In spite of its fall, it was still very much alive. A cock Blackbird *Turdus merula* feeding halfway down the lawn immediately hopped up to the young sparrow and began to attack it vigorously. My mother rushed out to intervene, but the Blackbird picked up the nestling in its bill and flew to the bottom end of the lawn, where it recommenced its assault. My mother again intervened, and this time the Blackbird abandoned its prey and flew off to a group of nearby trees. Although the incident lasted for only about one minute, the sparrow had been killed. No sooner had my mother returned to the house, than the Blackbird came back, quickly dismembered the nestling by pecking vigorously, and devoured it, legs and all.

J. Taylor  
*Milton Bank, Plumley, Knutsford, Cheshire WA16 9RZ*

Blackbirds feeding on reptiles  The note on a Blackbird *Turdus merula* eating the tail of a slow-worm *Anguis fragilis* (*Brit. Birds* 71: 131) prompts me to record the following. In spring 1970, in the ‘nature reserve’ of Kibbutz Netzer Sereni, Israel, my wife and some of her pupils watched a male Blackbird struggling with an eyed skink *Chalcides ocellatus* about 17 cm long. The latter—far too large and strong for the Blackbird—managed to escape several times; but suddenly it was caught by its tail, which it shed, thereby managing to disappear into the vegetation while the tail found its way into the Blackbird’s stomach. In September 1975, I watched another male Blackbird trying furiously to extract something from under the roof tiles of one of the houses in the kibbutz. After several fruitless attempts, it finally caught a Turkish gecko *Hemidactylus turcicus* about 10 cm long; with this small reptile in its bill, it flew to a nearby lawn where it swallowed it. These seem to be the first records of Blackbirds feeding on reptiles in Israel.

Henk K. Mienis  
*Kibbutz Netzer Sereni, 70-395 Israel*

High nest of Fan-tailed Warbler in shrubby composite  On 28th July 1974, 0.4 km inland from Puerto de la Selva, Costa Brava, Spain, I discovered the nest of a pair of Fan-tailed Warblers *Cisticola juncidis* still being built in the topmost leaves of the composite *Inula viscosa*, a lush, aromatic shrub. The nest was about 90 cm from the ground. *Inula* has terminal clusters of lance-shaped, sticky leaves which form a close bushy crown, giving good concealment. The nest was typical of the species: purse-shaped, very compact, of spiders’ webs matted around the surface of one of the leaf clusters, thus gathering the leaves somewhat inwards to form the outer wall of the nest; the depth from the entrance hole at the top to the base of the nest was about 15 cm. The bush was part of a rough scrubby patch of *Inula* clumped together in the uncultivated corner of a sizeable
Notes

vineyard bounded by low loose-stone walls and, in places, hedges. The surrounding area consisted of thick, thorny scrub, vineyards, a few small grass meadows and an extensive area of market gardens divided up by very high wind breaks of giant reed *Arundo donax*, at the base of which were hedges of dense bramble *Rubus*. To the south of the site, along the low-lying coastal belt at Rosas, with lush marshy conditions, drainage channels and croplands, at least three Fan-tailed Warblers were breeding in more typical habitat of long, tough grass, rush *Juncus* and sedge *Carex*.

My thanks are due to Santiago Musquera of Barcelona for assistance in the identification of botanical specimens.

A. S. Norris

130 Farcroft Drive, Market Drayton, Salop TF9 3EY

**Late arrival of Willow Warblers in recent years** Attention has been drawn to the apparent late arrival of some summer migrants in recent years. Mason (1977) analysed first arrival dates of common summer migrants in Leicestershire during 1942-74 and concluded that, on average, most had been arriving a few days later in 1969-74 than in 1942-68. He suggested that this was correlated with the cooler spring weather of recent years and pointed out that this reversed the general trend of earlier arrivals during the last 30 years compared with previous years' records (Hudson 1973). The collection and analysis of first arrival dates is worthy of attention on a wider scale. These alone, however, do not necessarily reflect trends in the timing of the main migratory movements, and bird-observatory data are probably of little help in this respect. Data from two studies of breeding Willow Warblers *Phylloscopus trochilus*, however, enable a more detailed analysis for that species. The first was carried out by May (1947, 1949) during 1944-46 at Englefield Green, Surrey; and my own, on colour-ringed individuals, started in 1976 at Witley Common, Surrey. In both studies, records were kept of the arrival dates of warblers comprising the breeding populations. May's (1949) graph of the arrivals of males in 1946 is reconstructed alongside my own for 1977-79 (fig. 1). The differences are striking: although at the beginning and end of the arrival periods the timings differ by about one week, the dates by which 50% of the populations had arrived differ by nearly a fortnight. Not only would the main arrival appear to be later in recent years, therefore, but also compressed into a shorter period of time. The inconspicuous females tend to arrive some two weeks later than males and are difficult to keep track of; it would seem, however, that differences in their arrival times between May's and my own warblers are similar to those of the males.

In view of the late arrivals in recent years, it is interesting to compare the timings of the breeding seasons using nest record data from the same two studies. First-egg dates calculated from May's (1947) data average around 30th April (a date at which my first females are usually only just beginning to arrive), whereas those from my own studies average around 10th May (using first brood data only). There is no indication that the warblers are tending to remain later on the breeding grounds than formerly in order to compensate for the later arrival, but there is a strong suggestion that the
Fig. 1. Spring arrivals of male Willow Warblers *Phylloscopus trochilus* in Surrey. Dotted line: based on 31 individuals at Englefield Green in 1946 (after May 1949); solid line: based on 63 records of colour-ringed individuals at Witley Common during 1977-79.

frequency of second broods has been considerably reduced since May’s studies. The recent later spring arrival, therefore, would seem to result in a shortening of the breeding season. The subject clearly requires investigation on a wider scale, and data on more northerly populations would be of particular interest.

M. R. LAWN

20 Croft Road, Godalming, Surrey GU7 1BY

REFERENCES


We agree with Mr Lawn that the subject requires more investigation; further detailed observations will be welcomed. EDS

Three Rooks at one nest As part of a study of the social behaviour of the Rook *Corvus frugilegus* at the University of Edinburgh, a rookery of 56 nests at Gilston, 32km south of Edinburgh, was studied during the 1978 breeding season. A single tree 50m from the main group was selected for intensive
study; its four nests were 5-10m from the ground, so reasonably good visibility was assured. All observations were made from a ‘Land Rover’ parked on the road 10m from the tree. On 3rd March, the male from one nest was regularly accompanied by another Rook of unknown sex when he returned to feed his incubating mate and when he left on foraging trips. The female was easily identified by her very prominent brood patch. On 4th, the first eggs hatched and the same behaviour was observed, the additional Rook approaching the female very closely while she was being fed and uttering a subdued call. On one occasion, the additional bird remained by the nest after the male left to forage, and repeatedly approached the sitting female, who attacked it each time, often leaving the nest to drive it away. After five such attacks, the encroaching Rook joined the male in the feeding field. On 7th, the female was building up the walls of the nest, generally flying down to collect material after being fed by the male. The nest was often left unattended for periods of up to two minutes while she gathered twigs; the accompanying Rook showed great interest in the nest, but was always rapidly expelled by the returning female.

On 10th, about 7cm of snow had fallen overnight; I observed the nest from 19.00 GMT until dark at 21.15. The accompanying Rook was extremely active, flying around the nest with twigs in its bill, making repeated attempts to add to the nest; it always landed on the same branch and made towards the nest, but was attacked by the female when about 10cm away. This behaviour was repeated at about one-minute intervals over a 22-minute period. The male made frequent visits to the nest, at first with food and later just sitting on a branch near the nest, but made no apparent reaction to the accompanying Rook. (Because of the dull light, I cannot rule out the possibility that I mistook the identities of the three Rooks, but I believe my observations which follow are accurate.) The female then left the nest and sat on a nearby branch, allowing the additional bird to add its twig to the nest and then to sit on the young; she then allopereened her mate on a branch about 1m from the nest. At 20.22 hours, the male and female left to feed; at 21.10, the third Rook was still in the nest and the feeding flock had joined the rookery to roost; the male and female had not returned to the nest when the light was so low that observation was difficult. The temperature at 21.10 hours was —2°C, and it seems unlikely that the chicks (the oldest of which was six days old) would have survived the night if the third Rook had not been sitting on them.

The sex and breeding status of the accompanying Rook were unknown. One possible explanation is that it was a female which had lost her brood, or had been otherwise unsuccessful in her breeding.

Paul T. Green
University of Edinburgh, Department of Zoology, West Mains Road, Edinburgh EH9 3JT

Ian J. Patterson has given the following comments on this observation. ‘Additional individuals at nests in rookeries are not uncommon in Aberdeenshire, where a small proportion of females remain unmated. Some have attached themselves to pairs and behaved generally as described by Mr Green; others built their own nests, attached to another pair’s nest, laid eggs and incubated, but no young survived. Most were fed by the male of the pair, but were attacked by the female. In the incident observed by Mr Green, since the Rooks were not
marked and observations were made in the last 48 minutes before dark, there seems a possibility of mistaken identity: the additional bird may have gone off with the male (as it had frequently before), leaving in fact the female on the nest. EDS

**Brambling breeding in Scotland** On 23rd June 1979, STB found a female Brambling *Fringilla montifringilla* in a birch-wood in the Grampian Region. It fed for about 15 minutes, and then disappeared in the foliage of a birch *Betula*. On 30th June, STB returned and, although no Bramblings were seen, an unfamiliar song was heard three times over a period of about two minutes: two fairly short, harsh notes followed by a 'dzee' recalling the sound made by a Greenfinch *Carduelis chloris*. The suspicion that the song was from a Brambling was confirmed after listening to Scandinavian recordings.

Two days later, on 2nd July, STB and AGK entered the wood and almost immediately saw a bird, which proved to be a female Brambling, settle on a nest high in a birch tree. We watched the nest from 12.05 to 13.43 GMT, during which period the Brambling left to feed five times, returning four to seven minutes (average 5 1/4 minutes) later. The interval between arriving back on the nest and departing again was 12-18 minutes (average 15 1/3 minutes). The bird left and returned silently; departure was quick; the bird dropping out of the nest and flying about 50m, where it landed on the lower limbs of birch trees and was soon lost from sight. We did not follow it from the nest. The bird's arrival back was straight into the canopy of the tree and, from there, quickly to the nest in a couple of hops from branch to branch; it then dropped into the cup and, after a short shuffle, settled. This behaviour led us to believe that the bird was incubating eggs.

The female was followed back to near the nest on two of the five occasions by a male Chaffinch *F. coelebs*, which otherwise appeared to show no interest in either the female or the nest. What we believed to be the same male Chaffinch was seen several times in other parts of the birch wood. We consider it unlikely that it was mated to the Brambling, since a male Brambling was also present in the same small wood, and was in fact heard calling and singing sporadically through the period of our observations on 2nd July.

The nest was very Chaffinch-like, although perhaps a little wider across the base. It was constructed of grasses, fine roots, lichens and wool, and was placed in a fork of the main trunk near the bottom of the rather thin canopy and about 1.5m from the highest point of the tree. The wood consisted of approximately 2ha of mature birches about 10m tall and fairly evenly spaced 5-10m apart. There were several standing dead trees, but no regeneration or shrub layer. The ground layer was mainly grasses and heather *Calluna*. There was one clearing with several small, wet patches of slowly running water. The wood graded into mixed birch-conifers on three sides. All but one of the contacts with Bramblings were within the 2ha area of birch near the nest, where the only other passerines seen were Redstart *Phoenicurus phoenicurus*, Willow Warbler *Phylloscopus trochilus*, Spotted Flycatcher *Muscicapa striata*, Blue Tit *Parus caeruleus* and Chaffinch.

On 8th July, the nest was watched from a distance for two hours in light rain, during which time no Bramblings were seen. The nest was believed to
have been deserted and was inspected using a mirror. There was some foliage in the cup, and the rim was untidy. A minimum of three eggs could be seen. The nest was lined with several white feathers. Using the mirror-pole, the height of the nest was measured as 7.25 m.

On the final visit, on 13th July, STB found that the nest had been tipped over and was hanging from the fork. A search of the ground revealed one broken and one intact egg, which was removed under licence and later examined by Dr H. M. Hamadani, who discovered that it contained a small, long-dead embryo. The egg-shell has been deposited at the British Museum, Tring.

There is only one previous documented record of Brambling nesting in Britain, although it is reported to have bred in Perth, Ross and Inverness (BOU 1971) among other places. The accepted record was of a nest in Sutherland in 1920 (Hodgkin & Hodgkin 1920): building started on 19th May, seven eggs were laid by 31st May, and the eggs were taken on 3rd June; the nest was 25 feet (7.6 m) up in a fork of a Scots pine Pinus sylvestris, in a wood of that species mixed with a few larches Larix. The male was reported as being hard to find after nest-building began.

In Scandinavia, Bramblings frequently occur as casual nesters to the south of the normal breeding range. This is thought to occur because some fail to leave the wintering area either in years of mass wintering in a particular area (Eriksson 1970; Kalela 1949 quoted by Eriksson) or in years with cold springs when the return migration is not completed (Hilden & Linkola 1962, quoted by Eriksson 1970; Kalela 1938, quoted by Newton 1972). The numbers of Bramblings present in northeast Scotland during late winter/early spring 1979 were larger than in the last ten years (at least), except 1972, when there was one exceptionally large flock reported in May. Provisional meteorological data indicate that the spring of 1979 was also one of the coldest and latest this century. For these reasons, we believe that the breeding of Brambling in the Grampian Region in 1979 may not have been part of the general trend of colonisation of Scotland by Scandinavian species (Murray 1979), but an isolated incident resulting from the large numbers wintering in the area, and the unusually cold spring weather.

Stephen T. Buckland and Alan G. Knox
Departments of Statistics and Zoology, University of Aberdeen, Aberdeen, Scotland

REFERENCES

Birds feeding on snowberries The editorial comment to my note on Blue Tits Parus caeruleus and a Robin Erithacus rubecula feeding on snowberries Symphoricarpos rivularis (Brit. Birds 71: 133) stated: 'We do not recall ever
Notes

seeing a bird eating snowberries and have found no reference to this in the literature.' I would draw your attention to my note on Bullfinches Pyrrhula pyrrhula eating snowberries (Brit. Birds 61: 270). In addition, in my garden at Brentry, Bristol, I have seen Greenfinches Carduelis chloris pulling at the pulp of these berries to expose the seeds, which they then ate; I watched this behaviour almost daily during November and December 1977 and January 1978. Also, during December 1977, I often saw male and female Blackbirds Turdus merula swallowing whole snowberries, usually dark, over-ripe ones which had fallen to the ground; and male and female Bullfinches feeding on snowberry pulp. B. E. Slade (in litt.) has also drawn attention to an earlier note of mine, concerning Collared Doves Streptopelia decaocto eating snowberries (Brit. Birds 60: 218). I suspect that the habit is commoner than is generally realised, certainly in my area. (I might add that we have a snowberry bush outside our kitchen window, which makes observation of feeding birds easy for my wife and myself.)

A. P. RADFORD
2 Wyck Beck Road, Brentry, Bristol BS10 7JE

Since coming to live in Ipswich, Suffolk, in 1972, both my wife and I have seen Blackbirds and Song Thrushes T. philomelos taking snowberries in our garden.

R. B. WARREN
103 Larchcroft Road, Ipswich IP1 6PQ

Further to Dr Radford’s note and the accompanying editorial comment, I should like to add the following. On 30th November 1974, near Chalford, Gloucestershire, my daughter and I watched at short range two wintering female Blackcaps Sylvia atricapilla feeding voraciously on snowberries in a roadside hedgerow. They were still eating the berries when we drove on about ten minutes later.

JOHN F. BURTON
11 Rockside Drive, Henleaze, Bristol BS9 4NW

John V. Dennis, who has made a study in the USA of garden plants used as food by birds, has summarised for us the information available to him on the snowberry. Opinions are divergent: from ‘I have grown snowberry . . . a few yards from a bird feeder for 15 years and have yet to see a bird eat the initially attractive marble-like fruits . . . ’ (McGourby 1977, Wildlife Plants for Beauty and the Birds) to ‘an extremely valuable winter food source for both gamebirds and songbirds such as thrushes, cardinals, towhees, grosbeaks and waxwings’ (Barrington et al. 1971, The Joys of a Garden for your Birds). Mr Dennis concludes that the truth probably lies somewhere between these widely differing viewpoints, and that the relative unpopularity of snowberry may be due to the white colour of its fruits (the red fruits of the closely related coralberry S. orbiculatus are much more often consumed by birds). Eos

The ‘Skokholm Hide’: a new concept in permanent-hide design
Prototypes of a novel design for a bird hide (fig. 1), built on Skokholm, Pembrokeshire, Dyfed, have proved to be very strong, easy to build, cheap, inconspicuous, comfortable and remarkably roomy (it is even possible to use a tripod in the hide).

The ‘Skokholm Hide’ consists of front and back panels, which can be of plywood sheet, old floorboards or almost any other strong material, attached to two triangular end-frames. A hinged flap provides an
observation window and a low bench seat is provided. End panels or flaps can easily be added to either side for extra warmth and cover. The following major components are needed for a two/three man hide (see fig. 2):

A Two beams 220 × 5 × 5 cm
B Two beams 125 × 5 × 5 cm
C Plank 180 × 15 × 2 cm
D Front panel 130 × 150 cm
E Roof panel 40 × 150 cm
F Back panel 125 × 150 cm
G Plywood panel 55 × 150 cm (note 5-cm overlap)
H Rigid plank (e.g. scaffold plank) 155 cm long
I Two 5-cm brass hinges; two casement stays; about 25 nails or screws

The structure is stable in gale-force winds without requiring attachment to the ground and, thus, is easily moved from one site to another.

**Stephen Warman and Carol Hellawell**

*Skokholm Bird Observatory, Marloes, Haverfordwest, Dyfed*