



Notes

Merlin stalking Dunlins on foot On 7th November 1988, on the northern coast of the Eiderstedt peninsula, Schleswig-Holstein, Germany, a Merlin *Falco columbarius* attracted my attention. It left its perch on a wooden post, flew a short distance and landed on the short, sheep-grazed grass of the saltmarsh. After standing erect for a few moments, apparently searching, it then proceeded to walk, like a parrot (Psittacidae), across the marsh, hopping over intervening ditches. It moved approximately 30 m in this fashion, towards a small flock of roosting Dunlins *Calidris alpina* about 60 m distant, before taking to the air. It was thus able to surprise and catch one of the waders. This behaviour is not mentioned for the Merlin in *BWP* (vol. 2), although running is given as a hunting technique for the insectivorous Red-footed Falcon *F. vesperinus* and for other species (Saker Falcon *F. cherrug*, Lesser Kestrel *F. naumanni*) when feeding on insects; the Lanner Falcon *F. biarmicus* is also mentioned as 'exceptionally' hunting on foot.

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Young Moorhen repeatedly carrying food from adult to younger chicks On 6th August 1990, at Orrell Water Park, Wigan, Greater Manchester, I watched an adult Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus* collecting loose floating anglers' bait from the surface of a lake and then pass the food item to an almost full-grown young. The latter then swam about 3 m to the shore of an island and fed the food to one of three younger Moorhen chicks, approximately seven days old, which were waiting there; the older chick then swam back to the adult to receive another food item, which it again took back to feed to the younger chicks. I watched the juvenile make several successive round trips, carrying food from the foraging adult to the younger chicks and then swimming back, before I ceased my observations. It is well known that young Moorhens of earlier broods may help to feed later broods, but the repeated transferring of food items is of particular interest.

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Moorhen feeding from, and in association with, a hedgehog On the evening of 17th June 1990, beside a small farm pond in Holkham Park, Norfolk, I noticed an adult Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus* following a hedgehog *Erinaceus europaeus*. On closer inspection, it became obvious that the bird was picking small insects from between the spines on the mammal's back. It followed the hedgehog for about 30 m, continually placing its bill among the spines. On one occasion, the Moorhen even jumped on to the mammal's

back, where it remained for a split second, perched most precariously. As well as taking insects directly from the hedgehog's back, the Moorhen also fed on those disturbed from the grass by the mammal. I have never before seen any bird exploiting a hedgehog as a means of feeding.

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It seems probable that the 'insects' were in fact ticks (Acarina) or the hedgehog flea *Archaeopsylla erinacei*, with which hedgehogs are frequently infested. EDS

Apparent egg-dumping by Common Gulls In 1987, a total of 69 pairs of Common Gulls *Larus canus* was present on North Ronaldsay, Orkney (*Scot. Birds* 15: 83-89). Nests were located in 43 territories, and in three cases additional eggs were found in nests long after incubation had commenced.

Nest A Single egg found on 7th May, and complete clutch of three eggs from 13th; on 27th May, four eggs were in the scrape, one fresh and broken, and on 2nd June four unbroken eggs, the newest very distinctively marked. On 7th June, two eggs had hatched and the chicks had left the nest; one of the other eggs contained a dead chick, while the distinctive egg remained unbroken (these eggs were still in the nest on 11th June).

Nest B Two eggs on four visits between 16th and 27th May, but on 9th June, when one egg was chipping, there were three similarly marked eggs in the nest.

Nest C Clutch of three eggs found on 30th May, but on 8th June two newly hatched chicks along with three eggs, while on 16th June two cold eggs and a dead chick were present.

In addition, a further nest near nest *A* on 27th May contained three eggs, with a further two cold eggs just outside the scrape. The other three nests were widely dispersed over the island, suggesting that more than one individual was dumping eggs.

Egg-dumping by gulls appears not to have been recorded previously, although there are other instances of Common Gull nests containing eggs laid by more than one female. Two females shared the same mate and nest on Fair Isle, Shetland, for a number of years (N. Riddiford in prep.), while in 1977, on Handa, Highland, M. Trubridge recorded a female presumably rolling eggs from an adjacent nest into its own (*Brit. Birds* 73: 222-223).

The advantages of egg-dumping to the laying female are obvious, although in the three North Ronaldsay nests the eggs were laid far too late for successful incubation. There is, however, a possible advantage to the cuckolded nest. Work by N. Verbeek on Glaucous-winged Gulls *L. glaucescens* in Canada has shown that the last egg laid in a complete clutch (which is the egg least likely to produce a fledged young) is the most likely to be preyed on (*Ibis* 130: 512-518); it is usually smaller and distinctively marked, and therefore the most obvious to an avian predator with limited time at the nest. As an egg laid by a different female will probably differ in appearance from the other eggs in a nest, it is therefore the most likely to be preyed on, at no cost to the incubating birds.

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Predatory behaviour of Kittiwakes On 10th June 1990, on the Ythan estuary, Grampian, most of the local Common Eider *Somateria mollissima* chicks had apparently hatched and were congregated in large creches. On two occasions, I saw small groups of Kittiwakes *Rissa tridactyla* hanging around the

chicks, and then dashing in, snatching one from near the edge and stabbing it to death; they were also feeding on any corpses lying around, including those of adult eiders. Once they had a kill, the Kittiwakes became very aggressive and attempted to keep it for themselves, more in the manner of larger, more aggressive gulls. A little later, on a rising tide, many more Kittiwakes came into the estuary. Some started chasing the Sandwich *Sterna sandvicensis* and Arctic Terns *S. paradisaea*, behaving more like agile skuas *Stercorarius*, and on four occasions I saw a Kittiwake grab the wing or tail of a tern, but only once did pursuit result in the tern dropping its fish.

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Feral Rock Doves attempting to land on sea At about 12.00 GMT on 1st January 1990, at Holland Haven on the north Essex coast, my attention was caught by two fairly large whitish birds fluttering near the surface of the sea. Expecting them to be gulls (Laridae), I raised my binoculars and was surprised to see that they were feral Rock Doves *Columba livia*. They were approximately 100-150 m from the shore, and were fluttering very close to the water, feet dangling, as if trying to land on the surface; after about 15 seconds, they flew out to sea, then circled back over my head and followed the coast northwards. I have read before of feral Rock Doves trying to land on flat expanses of fresh water, and the explanation is often given that they mistake the water for a solid surface. On this occasion, however, the sea was fairly rough, whipped up by a moderate southeasterly wind, with waves of perhaps 70 cm or more. It seems unlikely that the pigeons could have mistaken the sea for a land surface, so was this behaviour a genuine attempt to land on the sea? Another explanation must be that they were attempting to catch a food item.

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Dr J. J. M. Flegg has commented: 'I have seen this in the English Channel and the North Sea on three separate ferry crossings, involving whole flocks of racing pigeons. They do land on the water and take off again successfully and repeatedly, often after intervals well in excess of one minute.' EDS

Aggressive display by Long-eared Owl towards Common Buzzard

At 04.45 GMT on 10th April 1989, at a gorge near La Rambla, north Tenerife, Canary Islands, we watched a Long-eared Owl *Asio otus* very persistently chasing an adult Common Buzzard *Buteo buteo* for about two minutes. It was dark, but nearby street lighting and a powerful torch allowed good views. Both birds flew over an area of approximately 200 m², the owl trying to displace the buzzard, which seemed quite easily to avoid the constant attacks. A cliff in the area held a Common Buzzard's nest with two chicks, and in the same cliff, perhaps less than 100 m from the raptors' nest, a pair of Long-eared Owls bred. The latter's aggressive display probably involved territorial defence. Although it is likely that the owl's intimidatory flight motivated the buzzard to abandon its perch, this could also have been provoked by our presence near the nest.

We should like to thank Keith Emmerson for his help.

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Sand Martin catching fish On 15th June 1990, on the River Lune near Tebay, Cumbria, I was watching a Sand Martin *Riparia riparia* flying low over the water when, to my astonishment, it plunged into the water and caught a small fish. The martin immediately 'towered' up into the air and then dropped the fish, only to catch it again in mid-air; it then dropped and recaptured the fish once more. The Sand Martin was then chased briefly by a Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica*, before flying downriver; unfortunately, I lost sight of it and was unable to see what it did with the fish.

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House Martins taking over Barn Swallows' nest An editorial comment to D. R. Coan's note on Barn Swallows *Hirundo rustica* destroying nests of House Martins *Delichon urbica* invited the submission of similar records (*Brit. Birds* 83: 24). Perversely, I respond with an account of a pair of Barn Swallows not interfering with the nest-building activities of a pair of House Martins in circumstances which seem much more provocative than those described by Mr Coan.

In July 1987, at Gullane, East Lothian, a pair of Barn Swallows built a substantial nest on a telephone junction box about 20 cm below the eaves on the outside wall of my house, rearing one brood. On 17th September, just before they finally disappeared, a swallow was seen to chase off an inquisitive House Martin. In 1988, a pair of Barn Swallows reappeared at this nest on 1st May, but by 14th it was apparent that they were facing competition from a pair of House Martins. The martins quickly gained the upper hand (probably because they visited the nest together and spent much time there, while the swallows visited singly and spent more time perched on the gutter above), and in the following week they built the nest up to the overhanging eaves. By the end of the week, the swallows, which I never saw attempt to interfere with this work, had left the scene, and the martins hatched out one brood, which apparently fledged successfully. In 1989, no Barn Swallows appeared in the vicinity of the nest, but it was again occupied by House Martins, which raised two broods.

Few Barn Swallows' nests are built in situations which invite exploitation by House Martins. The only similar case that I can find in the British literature (*Brit. Birds* 71: 39) also concerns a nest against an outside wall which was taken over by House Martins when building was nearly complete. No mention is made of the Barn Swallows' reactions to being dispossessed. *BWP* (vol. 5: pages 270 & 293) records two, apparently different, cases of House Martins taking over Barn Swallows' nests. In one of these, the swallows' unsuccessful defence lasted three days.

Individual Barn Swallows vary enormously in their aggressiveness. One of those which have nested in our garage over the past 20 years could be confidently identified by the persistence with which it used to mob our dog anywhere within 450 m of the nest. Maybe such extreme individual aggressiveness was responsible for the events recorded by Mr Coan. This, however, would not explain the curious record (*Brit. Birds* 54: 362) of eight Barn Swallows attacking the nest holes at a colony of Sand Martins *Riparia riparia*.

There have also been records of Barn Swallows successfully competing for nest sites with House Sparrows *Passer domesticus* and Spotted Flycatchers *Muscicapra striata* (*Brit. Birds* 25: 131, 171).

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Identification of Black Wheatear in flight Male Black Wheatear *Oenanthe leucura*, when seen at some distance, may be quite difficult to separate from younger, black-crowned White-crowned Black Wheatear *O. leucopyga*, even in flight. The tail pattern of some first-year White-crowned Blacks can approach that of Black, and this can cause problems, especially in unfavourable viewing conditions. A useful character is the fact that, in flight, Black Wheatear shows a slightly paler 'panel' along the bases of the inner primaries and outer secondaries: this panel is inconspicuous and nowhere near so obvious as that shown by some races of Mourning Wheatear *O. lugens*; it rather recalls the effect given by Blackbird *Turdus merula* in flight, not clear, but still noticeably paler than the wing-coverts. Nothing of this feature is revealed on a resting Black Wheatear, as the paler coloration is restricted to the inner webs of the feathers involved, the outer webs being as dark as the wing-coverts. This character applies to both races of Black Wheatear, nominate *leucura* of Iberia as well as *syenitica* of North Africa; it is most useful in North Africa, where Black overlaps in range with White-crowned Black (though its mountain and cliff habitat differs somewhat from the latter's desert habitat), but could be useful on any vagrant. There is some variation in the distinctiveness of this pattern on females, but their brownish plumage makes them reasonably easy to identify in any case.

The pale wing-panel of Black Wheatear was not mentioned by Peter Clements in his paper on wheatear identification (*Brit. Birds* 80: 137-157, 187-238); nor in *BWP* (vol. 5), where the flight illustrations in plates 64 and 65 are inaccurate (as, in fact, is the flight picture of Blackbird).

I wish to thank Nils Otto Preuss for access to skins in the Zoological Museum of Copenhagen.

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Feeding habits of Dartford Warbler On 7th January 1990, at Greatstone-on-Sea, Kent, together with other observers, we watched a Dartford Warbler *Sylvia undata* feeding in close association with three Common Stonechats *Saxicola torquata*, in a manner recalling that observed by J. Tallwin and R. E. Youngman (*Brit. Birds* 71: 182-183). All four birds were feeding in about 0.5 ha of scrub, dominated by sea-buckthorn *Hippophae rhamnoides*, on low sand dunes and adjacent to private gardens. The warbler frequently perched in the open on panel-and-stake fencing, seemingly to maintain contact with the stonechats, its bold actions and its use of quite exposed vegetation in which to forage running entirely counter to our previous experience of this usually skulking species. On at least two occasions, the Dartford Warbler was seen to take sea-buckthorn berries. Apart from *The Handbook*, which comments that this species is 'said to eat blackberries in autumn', all other refer-

ences which we have been able to consult describe its diet as consisting exclusively of insects and other invertebrates. The question arises whether the apparently rare consumption of berries that we observed reflects the rather unusual habitat being exploited, or whether the atypically confiding behaviour of this individual allowed the observation of normal, if occasional, supplementary diet. Certainly, many other *Sylvia* warblers include berries in their diet.

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A letter commenting on the association between Dartford Warblers and Common Stonechats is published on pages 188-189. *BWP* (vol. 6), published since this note was accepted, notes that fruit is an occasional item of food on the Continent. EDS

Eye-colour of birds in dim light When finally the Flamborough Head, Humberside, Desert Warbler *Sylvia nana* came into view on the afternoon of 25th October 1991, the light was very dull within the lower canopy of the sycamore *Acer pseudoplatanus* where it was feeding. In quite a good close view, it struck us that the bird's eyes—which we had expected to be distinctively pale—appeared dark. Later, however, the bird moved up into the open crown of a leafless hawthorn *Crataegus* in rather better light, and it was clear that the bird was now sporting the expected pale eyes.

The coloured part of a bird's eye is of course its iris, and it occurred to us that in the dull conditions of the first encounter the pupils might be so dilated as to obscure most of the irides beneath the eye-lids, so creating the impression of a dark eye. In bright desert light, on the other hand, the pupils will be mere pin-holes, and the eyes staring and pale. If our only encounter with the bird had been in dull conditions, we might have recorded that the bird had dark eyes, implying, wrongly, a dark iris. This could be a potential pitfall when noting the details of birds in the poor light of dull autumn days.

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S. C. Madge has commented that he has had similar experiences with Desert Warbler, and also with Orphean Warbler *Sylvia hortulana*, which can often show a large, dark pupil and only a narrow, inconspicuous, pale outer ring. P. G. Lansdown has also drawn attention to the change in perceived eye colour of individual Ring-billed Gulls *Larus delawarensis* 'from dark to glaringly pale depending upon viewing distance, light conditions and the bird's mood (e.g. "sleepy" or alert).' EDS

Wintering Chiffchaff feeding on peanuts On the morning of 26th February 1989, through the window of my flat in central Aberdeen, Grampian, I saw a warbler perch on a wire feeder suspended from a birdtable in the garden; it flew off almost immediately. The feeder had been filled with fresh peanuts the previous day. I fetched my binoculars and relocated the warbler in a broom bush *Cytisus scoparius* in an adjoining garden, where I identified it as a Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita* of one of the northern/eastern races *abietinus/tristis*; after five minutes, it flew to the ground and foraged for a brief time in a vegetable plot, before flying out of sight. On the morning of 4th March 1989, I saw what appeared to be the same Chiffchaff on the rear wall of my garden and searching through a small spruce *Abies*. It then flew to the feeder, now half empty, and pecked at the nuts for a minute or two,

before dropping to the ground, where it picked up and ate several items, either fallen fragments of peanuts or kitchen scraps and birdseed previously scattered there. The Chiffchaff then flew into a nearby rowan *Sorbus aucuparia*, where it gave the typical alarm call of the race *abietinus*, before finally it flew off and was never seen again. I inspected the feeder with a hand-lens, but could find no insects on it or the nuts; I therefore concluded that the warbler had been feeding on peanuts. At all times when near the birdtable, the Chiffchaff was alone. From mid December to mid February, one Chiffchaff, at least, of the nominate race *collybita* had been in the neighbourhood of the flat; peanuts and birdtable food had been available throughout the period, but this individual was never seen to take advantage of this food source, preferring to search for insects on roses *Rosa* or on the rowan. I have found no reference in the literature to Chiffchaffs feeding on peanuts.

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Canopy display by Hawfinch Dr J. T. R. Sharrock's note on Isabelline Wheatear *Oenanthe isabellina* using 'canopy technique' when feeding (*Brit. Birds* 81: 530-531) prompts us to record a similar posture by the Hawfinch *Coccothraustes coccothraustes*, although in this case the canopy was used as part of the courtship display. Since 1986, we have spent considerable time studying the activities of breeding Hawfinches, and the displays of adults have been particularly well observed. The canopy display of the male occurs at the apparent climax of activity, after which the pair immediately flies away. The male brings his wings forward to form the canopy and then pivots his body back and forth in front of the female (fig. 1); the two are only 10-20 cm apart. The display lasts only a few seconds, but may be repeated up to four times. We have witnessed it on at least half a dozen occasions, involving a minimum of four pairs. On one occasion, a second male displayed to the female of an established pair by building a nest platform and performing close to it: his attempts to solicit the female failed, and the platform was abandoned.

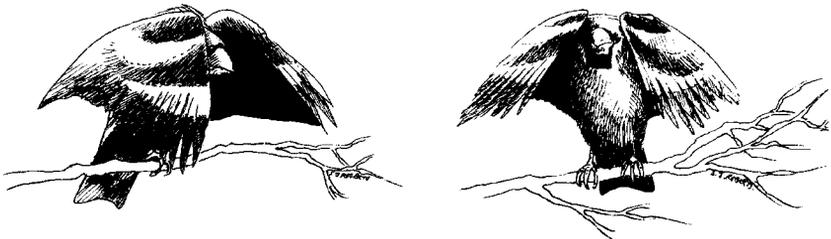


Fig. 1. Canopy display by male Hawfinch *Coccothraustes coccothraustes* (S. J. Roberts)

This display is not mentioned by Guy Mountfort (1957, *The Hawfinch*), and, although it may be not unusual among wheatear species when foraging (*Brit. Birds* 85: 672), we have been unable to find any other reference to this posture being adopted by any other Western Palearctic passerine.

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Similar displays are, of course, performed by several birds-of-paradise (Paradisaeini). EDS