



LETTER

Hybridisation by Syrian Woodpeckers

In his letter on the hybridisation of Ruddy Ducks *Oxyura jamaicensis* and White-headed Ducks *O. leucocephala*, Dr David Harper (*Brit. Birds* 90: 325-327) unfortunately chose to refer to the expansion into Europe of Syrian Woodpeckers *Dendrocopos syriacus* in order to broaden the scope of the *Oxyura* argument. He stated that Syrian Woodpeckers 'initially hybridised with Great Spotted Woodpeckers *D. major*, but stopped doing so when they became sufficiently common', referring to Knox (1994) as the source of this idea.

The notion that Syrian Woodpecker hybridisation with Great Spotted Woodpecker occurred only when, as Knox put it, 'there were insufficient birds of their own species to mate with' is one which is conveniently repeated *ad nauseam* in the literature, though it has actually never been proven. Cramp (1985) stated that Syrian Woodpecker 'occasionally hybridises with *D. major* at boundary of range'. Similarly, Skakuj & Stawarczyk (1994) mentioned that 'Hybrids between Syrian and Great Spotted Woodpecker occur mainly in regions newly colonised by Syrian.' This initially attractive theory does not, however, stand up to close scrutiny. Statements which refer to the hybridisation of these two *Dendrocopos* species due to range pioneering are far too simplistic.

Hybridisation involving these two woodpecker species was first observed in Hungary (Keve 1948-51, 1955) in the period when *syriacus* was rapidly expanding its range from the Balkans into the Carpathian Basin, but there is no evidence to show that hybridisation occurred *only* in this period and *only* on the Syrian 'front-line', as it were. In fact, the evidence is to the contrary. Hybrid *syriacus* × *major* individuals were observed long after Syrian Woodpecker had colonised Hungary and headed on into Austria, Moravia and Slovakia. Today, though certainly not rife, hybridisation between these two woodpecker species continues in Hungary. Furthermore, this hybridisation is not confined to the periphery of the range of *syriacus* and is not strictly related to the absence of potential *syriacus* mates, as the species is established in suitable habitat nationwide. It seems to me that hybridisation between Syrian and Great Spotted Woodpeckers can occur *whenever* and *wherever* they meet, though the extent of, and reasons for, this continued hybridisation remain for the moment unclear.

GERARD GORMAN

Budapest 1399, Pf:701-1047, Hungary

References

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