

Notes

Birds collecting insects from trains and vehicles

Previous notes in *British Birds* have recorded Common Starlings *Sturnus vulgaris* pecking insect remains from parked cars and a stationary locomotive, and Red-legged Partridges *Alectoris rufa* and House Sparrows *Passer domesticus* taking dead insects from vehicles (*Brit. Birds* 77: 121; 91: 330; 93: 289). We have received a number of other observations of this phenomenon, which are summarised here:

On 4th August 1999, a juvenile Herring Gull *Larus argentatus* fell from the roof of a building in Plymouth, Devon, and spent a week in the car park below. One or both of the adults brought food about once a day to the youngster. After three days, another juvenile joined the first in the car park, presumably its sibling from the rooftop nest, and I noticed that they were picking dead

Sara McMahon

72 Underwood Road, Plympton, Devon PL7 1SZ

In addition to those species already reported picking insects from parked vehicles, I have seen Blackbirds *Turdus merula* and two immature Carrion Crows *Corvus corone* feeding in this way in Stranraer and Newton Stewart, Dumfries

R. C. Dickson

Lismore, New Luce, Newton Stewart, Dumfries & Galloway DG8 0AJ

On 31st July 1998, at Laugarbakki, northwest Iceland, I watched an adult 'White Wagtail' *Motacilla alba alba* feeding along a row of about ten cars, removing dead insects from the headlights of the vehicles. Presently, a second adult wagtail flew in and chased the first away. The second bird initially fed in the same manner as the first, but on reaching a four-wheel-drive vehicle it entered a vent below the bumper and I watched it moving about in the space behind

Tony Taylor

26 High Street, Spetisbury, Blandford, Dorset DT11 9DJ

During many years of commuting into and out of Waterloo Station, London, I have frequently seen Common Starlings fly out from the covered platform area to meet incoming trains. The birds have learnt to land on the front of

John Eyre

3 Dunmow Hill, Fleet, Hampshire GU51 3AN

insects from the bumpers and grilles of parked cars. I wondered where the gulls had learnt this behaviour, since the adult gulls were not observed feeding in this way. I have not recorded Common Starlings in this particular car park, but House Sparrows are sometimes seen feeding on insects from stationary cars.

& Galloway. On 10th July 1998, a female Blackbird dominated three House Sparrows, chasing them each time the sparrows attempted to pick insects from the front of a parked vehicle.

the radiator grille, apparently feeding on dead insects from the radiator itself.

While small insects are superabundant in good weather, a stored source of food would be invaluable in cooler conditions. Given the dust and mud of unmetalled roads, most Icelanders wash their cars frequently, which would remove most dead insects from the external bodywork, but those inside the engine bay might be expected to build up to higher densities.

slow-moving trains to eat the insects deposited there. They have presumably found that, with juicy morsels arriving regularly, if not always on time, it is worth being at the table early.

EDITORIAL COMMENT This habit of feeding on dead insects stuck to trains and motor vehicles seems to be fairly widespread and is now well documented. We shall not, therefore, publish any further individual notes on this behaviour unless they relate to particularly unusual circumstances or involve species for which such a foraging method would be totally unexpected.

Juvenile Fulmar eating Fulmar corpse

Stranded juvenile Fulmars *Fulmarus glacialis*, which have not managed to reach the sea, are a common feature of the Shetland landscape in late summer. In 1998, the problem was exacerbated by prevailing easterly winds which forced many recently fledged juveniles ashore, where they could be seen sitting around on beaches.

On 3rd September 1998, at Haroldswick, Unst, several juvenile Fulmars were present, 'beached' on the shingle. One could be seen pecking at something on the beach, and as I moved closer I saw that it was actually sitting next to the corpse of another juvenile Fulmar, which I estimated had been dead for about a week. The live bird stopped pecking at the

corpse on my approach, but after a few minutes it resumed feeding. It pecked at the breast of the dead bird until it got a good hold, and then tugged with its neck, flapping its wings to gain further purchase, until a chunk of flesh was pulled free. As far as I could tell this was then swallowed immediately.

I can find no reference to cannibalism amongst Fulmars, while *BWP* suggests that both scavenging on bird corpses and feeding on land in this manner are also highly unusual. It was, however, obvious that this particular individual was under abnormal stress and this will doubtless have influenced its behaviour.

M. G. Pennington

9 Daisy Park, Baltasound, Unst, Shetland ZE2 9EA

Smyrna Kingfisher accidentally killed while catching large fish

Many cases of fish-eating birds, such as cormorants (Phalacrocoracidae), herons (Ardeidae) and mergansers *Mergus*, accidentally killed by the protective spines of fish, or suffocating or being drowned by underestimating the size of their fish prey, are reported in literature. For kingfishers (Alcedinidae), which prey on fish regularly, we are aware of only one such incident, that of a Common Kingfisher *Alcedo atthis* which was found dead with a bullhead *Cottus gobio* wedged in its throat (*HBW*).

In November 2000, at Keoladeo National Park, Bharatpur, India, we observed a Smyrna Kingfisher *Halcyon smyrnensis* which died while trying to catch a fish. Rainfall had largely failed during the monsoon season, and the marshy areas (bunds) in the park were mostly dried up. During our visit we saw Smyrna Kingfishers almost exclusively along water canals and pools of standing water, where they hunted mainly solitarily. With prey items in grassland and other dry habitats seemingly scarce, the kingfishers appeared to depend extensively on frogs and fish. At about 07.45 hrs on 25th November, we observed a Smyrna Kingfisher perching in

Acacia trees overlooking a pool covered with large patches of floating green algae, with many fish breathing heavily on the surface. Suddenly, the kingfisher dropped down, plunging its bill deep (approximately half the length of the bill) into the dorsal side of a large fish. For 10-15 minutes the bird fought violently to lift the fish, which reacted with just sporadic strokes of its caudal fin. The kingfisher became weaker and weaker, and finally floated lifeless on the surface above the fish. We found both in the same condition when we passed by again, some three hours later.

Unfortunately, we were not able to identify the fish, but it may have been *Clarias batrachus*, an abundant species in the park. Estimating its size against the total length of the bird, we reckoned the fish to be about 40-55 cm long. Kingfishers are highly adapted to locate their prey under water, overcoming light reflection and refraction at the surface to estimate the size of the fish and its depth under water (*HBW*). In this case, the bird's ability to evaluate the size of its prey correctly was probably impeded by turbidity and the algal bloom on the water surface.

Peter Sackl & Herbert Ehrlich

Forschungsstätte Furtnersteich, c/o Steiermärkisches Landesmuseum Joanneum, Raubergasse 10, A - 8010 Graz, Austria

House Martins assembling on tethered helium-filled balloon

A recent attraction at Longleat, Wiltshire, is a large, tethered, bright yellow, helium-filled balloon. Using a steel cable attached to an underground winch, the balloon is capable of carrying up to 25 passengers in a doughnut-shaped gondola slung beneath, to a height of about 150 m above the ground, from which commanding views may be obtained of the surrounding Somerset and Wiltshire countryside.

On the afternoon of 20th September 1998, we were amazed to see a flock of up to c. 300 House Martins *Delichon urbica*, constantly wheeling around and alighting upon the upper half of the balloon, despite the fact that it was swaying in the breeze and in constant use by the visiting public. At ground level, the balloon tended to attract fewest birds. As soon as it began to ascend, however, up to about 100 birds would land on the horizontal covering-mesh supports, to be carried up into the air, as if taking a lift, while others would be constantly

flying in formation in close proximity to the balloon. Once aloft, the balloon seemed to become almost magnetic in its attraction and a flock containing several hundred birds would quickly form. Occasionally, a sizeable proportion of the flock would break away to feed over the nearby woods and lakes, but the flock would re-form almost as quickly.

We initially suspected that because of its colour the balloon was attracting flying insects, but we could find very little evidence to support this idea and it appeared that it was simply being used as a site for post-breeding assembly, in which the extreme vantage afforded by the balloon was presumably an important factor. Later in the afternoon, we noticed that some nearby oak *Quercus* trees were also used for this purpose by part of the House Martin flock. Although the feeding flocks contained a few Barn Swallows *Hirundo rustica*, we did not once see that species being attracted to the balloon.

Andrew Duff & Ann Lawson

64 Kings Castle Road, Wells, Somerset BA5 3LT

EDITORIAL COMMENT A somewhat similar observation was reported previously in *British Birds* (85: 244), and describes House Martins associating with a hot-air balloon. In the instance described here, even though the observers could see little evidence of the martins feeding near the balloon, it seems worth pointing out that yellow is an attractive colour to many flying insects.

Mud carrying by House Martins and Barn Swallows

Following Ken Spencer's letter (*Brit. Birds* 94: 603) concerning the way in which House Martins *Delichon urbica* carry mud, the following observations of Barn Swallows *Hirundo rustica* may be of interest. In summer 2000, I filmed a Barn Swallow's nest from egg-laying to departure. Shortly after the female began sitting she was found dead, but the male found a new partner within 48 hours. The new female ejected the old eggs from the nest, and the male also rebuilt part of the nest, the uppermost 2-3 cm of the 'parapet'. During this rebuilding, I was able to film mud collection and pellet laying. The swallow would make several jabs at the mud, and usually took a sizeable

amount, but always *inside* the bill. Any mud which adhered to the top of the bill appeared to be accidental. The mud was then pressed against the wooden rafter or against the existing part of the nest in several ways. Mostly, it seemed to be done with an open beak, with the head oscillating to and fro. It seemed that the bird was really pushing hard; perhaps the tongue and mouth were used to shape the pellet, while saliva formed the cement? At other times, the bird would be motionless for 5-10 seconds, clearly still pushing but without any head movement. On two occasions, I filmed a bird finishing a building session, then clearly wiping its bill on a white feather.

John Snape

Thwaite Barn, Thwaite Common, Erpingham, Norfolk NR11 7QG

EDITORIAL COMMENT Angela Turner has commented that 'Ken Spencer raised the question of whether House Martins collect mud on top of or inside the bill, and in response David Bryant and I suggested that hirundines usually collect mud *in* the bill but are often seen with mud *on* the bill as

well. The present note is an interesting example of a hirundine using mud collected in the bill for nest-building and suggests that mud is only accidentally carried on the bill. The observation of bill wiping is particularly interesting.

Robin attaching faecal sacs to cable

The observation of a Wren *Troglodytes troglodytes* attaching faecal sacs to a cable (*Brit. Birds* 94: 545) recalled the following. In late May 2001, I watched a Robin *Erithacus rubecula* perch on a main electricity cable and purposefully place something white on the cable. Ini-

tially, I thought it was a maggot, but my binoculars revealed that it was a faecal sac. Looking more closely at the wire, I counted 12 white spots along a stretch of about 30 m. During the next few days, more sacs appeared on the cable.

Stella Woodman

Maes-y-Gwarta, Gladestry, Kington, Herefordshire HR5 3NS

EDITORIAL COMMENT This interesting behaviour is perhaps more widespread than would appear from the literature. Consequently, we shall not publish further notes on this subject unless they contain information of a particular or additional interest.

Wheatear killing a crab

On 20th October 2001, at Keyhaven, Hampshire, I came across two Northern Wheatears *Oenanthe oenanthe* feeding along the tideline. The debris forced up by recent exceptionally high tides consisted of seaweeds (*Laminaria*, *Spartina* etc.) and the usual assortment of flotsam. Both birds fed by picking at and turning over piles of seaweed in search of prey, such as the flies (Diptera) which were emerging in the warm weather.

One of the wheatears, which still retained elements of juvenile plumage, disturbed a small crab (*Carcinus* sp.), about 20 mm in length, from the seaweed; the crab scurried across open ground towards the saltmarsh. The bird jumped back, but then advanced to peck at the crab.

M. P. Moody

Bramble Walk, Lymington, Hampshire SO41 9LW

With each peck it hopped backwards and then returned to the attack immediately. The crab had stopped on open ground, and in defence raised both open claws at the attacker. The wheatear continued its attack, on one occasion catching the crab by its claw and 'bashing' it against the ground, removing a pincer. A few more pecks subdued the crab, and the wheatear pecked at the soft underparts of the now-dead crustacean; it may well have eaten part of it but I could not be sure.

BWP does not include crab as a food item of Northern Wheatear, but in view of the persistent attack, I concluded that it was a deliberate effort to secure a food item, rather than just a random surprise attack.

Male Blackbird bathing in creosote fumes

On 5th February 1998, I was creosoting a shed in my garden at West Bagborough, Taunton, Somerset. While I was working, a male Blackbird *Turdus merula* flew over to perch at the edge of the shed roof, close to my creosote brush and about 30 cm above my head. The Blackbird remained for about two minutes, during which time I noticed that the bird's body

feathers were slightly raised and that, for much of the time, there was also a partial elevation of the wings; in addition, a faint subsong was uttered for a few seconds. Having flown off, it subsequently returned a little later and stayed for another minute or so before disappearing again.

Weather conditions at the time were cloudy,

mild and still. It is not unusual for birds of certain species to smoke-bathe; presumably, in this incident, the Blackbird was bathing in cre-

osote fumes and, obviously, was inhaling them too.

Dr A. P. Radford

Crossways Cottage, West Bagborough, Taunton, Somerset TA4 3EG

Persistent full song and territoriality in wintering Blackcaps

On 7th February 2000, in my garden in Leatherhead, Surrey, two male Blackcaps *Sylvia atricapilla* were heard singing. Both songs were full, with a typical scratchy start and 'pure', flutey ending, quite different from the familiar subsong heard increasingly in late winter. These two males continued to sing against each other on most mornings until 14th March, when one male disappeared; the other remained until 28th March. Each was individually recognisable by the pattern of the black cap above the bill.

Song was heard mostly between 08.00 and 09.00 hrs, except when the weather was markedly inclement. Each male established an exclusive territory, which encompassed shrubs along one side of my garden (which is 20 m wide) and parts of adjacent gardens, with song-posts in each. The boundary between the two territories fell halfway along a fence at the bottom of my garden, and this fence supported two peanut feeders, about 15 m apart. Each feeder was defended at times by the Blackcap in whose territory it lay, with interspecific aggression shown to other small birds. Only one other Blackcap was recorded in the garden that year, a female seen briefly on 15th January.

Blackcaps have wintered in Britain in increasing numbers in the last 40 years, the individuals involved having a central European origin and a northwesterly autumn migration

(Berthold 1995). Observations of foraging behaviour include many examples of both intra- and interspecific aggression, defence of individual trees or bushes (e.g. Young 1998) and numbers feeding together with mutual aggressive behaviour (e.g. Hardy 1978). Winter song has previously been documented too (e.g. Brown 1976; Young 1998). Ruttledge (1996) describes female Blackcaps as being dominant when both sexes are present, and quotes Frank King's observation of male aggression only in the absence of females. In 1996 in my garden, up to five Blackcaps (two females) were present simultaneously in February, but one male was dominant throughout February and into March and defended the feeder from Blackcaps and other species. When the dominant male left on 12th March, a female became dominant in a similar way, and remained so until last seen on 15th April. In other winters, only males have been dominant.

References

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Dr Alan Prowse

46 Badingham Drive, Leatherhead, Surrey KT22 9HA

Kleptoparasitism by Common Starling on a Whimbrel

Kleptoparasitism in birds is well known, although relatively few species specialise in this type of feeding. Such behaviour is not a normal feeding strategy of Common Starlings *Sturnus vulgaris*, but kleptoparasitism on Northern Lapwings *Vanellus vanellus* has been documented (*Ökol. Vogel* 10: 113-114). On 30th July 1999, for a period of about 15 minutes during the early evening, I watched a Whimbrel *Numerius*

phaeopus feeding in a cut hayfield at Low Newton-by-the-Sea, Northumberland. Although there were Eurasian Curlews *N. arquata* nearby, the Whimbrel was feeding separately, and an adult Common Starling was following it closely (at a distance of 30-60 cm). Each time the Whimbrel started to probe deeply to extract a food item, the starling either flew or ran at the Whimbrel. This strategy was suc-

cessful in harassing the Whimbrel to the extent that it dropped food items which the starling picked up and flew a few feet away to eat. Eventually, the Whimbrel moved away while the starling remained behind.

This was presumably an opportunistic

Dr Chris Redfern

Westfield House, Acomb, Hexham, Northumberland NE46 4RJ

strategy by this particular individual, as groups of Common Starlings were feeding normally (by probing) elsewhere in the field. It was, however, clearly effective against the Whimbrel, enabling the starling to obtain prey that may otherwise have been out of reach.

Pirate Common Chaffinches

Although a keen observer of birds in my garden, I was surprised by the following incident during May 2001. A small group of Common Starlings *Sturnus vulgaris* were foraging on the lawn, feasting on leatherjackets, when a female Common Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs* darted in to snatch one of these tasty morsels from the starlings. Such intrepid behaviour provoked no response from the starlings, which continued with their foraging. I

Mary Joy Jones

The Byres, Barn Close, Lingwood, Norwich NR13 4TS

observed this behaviour on two separate occasions within a two-week period; in both instances, about four Common Starlings and one Common Chaffinch were involved, and the chaffinch made more than one such sortie on each occasion. Whether the same individual chaffinch was involved I cannot say. The observations were made at my previous home in Brancaster, north Norfolk; the weather at the time was spring-like and sunny.