

Notes

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Little Grebe swallowing small mammal

In early March 2003, I made the following observation at the S'Albufera Parc Natural, in Mallorca. I was photographing a Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis* and followed the bird through the camera lens as it disappeared into some reed. There followed some disturbance in the reeds, as though some sort of struggle was

taking place. Eventually, the grebe reappeared and, to my amazement, I could see the hind legs and tail of a small mammal being swallowed head first.

I can find no mention of mammals included in the diet of this or any other species of grebe, and my observation appears to me to be unique.

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Cream-coloured Courser showing feeding attachment to desert roads

During a visit to south-central Tunisia in April 2004, I was interested to note an intriguing, persistent association between Cream-coloured Coursers *Cursorius cursor* and the tarmacked roads passing through their desert and steppe habitats. All of the 13 birds seen on 25th-26th April were found on the road or close to the roadside. By contrast, on numerous occasions, I stopped and scanned appropriate habitats away from the road, but never found them. The most compelling evidence for some underlying ecological attachment to roads came on 26th April, in an area of alkaline steppe around the oasis of Chebika, 55 km northwest of Tozeur. Here, we found an adult and two young c. 100 m from the road, then two adults close to a stretch of road on which there were two dead courser chicks, one probably hit that morning. Another pair of adults fed close to the roadside, one of which eventually began feeding on the tarmac until repeatedly flushed by a succession of vehicles, while a third corpse spotted later may well have been that of a Cream-coloured Courser.

In rural Pakistan, this species is often

extremely tame and feeds in the vicinity of villages, where beetles are attracted to the dung of livestock (Roberts 1991). I infer that my observations reflect a recently acquired variation on this opportunistic behaviour and that the birds are finding grit and/or searching for road-killed insects and possibly other items like lizards. Beetles (Scarabaeidae) and species of Orthoptera are important prey items and I found that our radiator grill and engine housing were full of dead insects. Given that the desert roads are relatively traffic-free and other avian road-casualties infrequent, the incidence of several dead Cream-coloured Coursers was noteworthy in itself and may represent an important cause of juvenile-courser mortality.

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Exceptional numbers of Oriental Plovers in southern Siberia in 2003

The first record of Oriental Plover *Charadrius veredus* for the Western Palearctic, in Finland in May 2003, stimulated much discussion in the birdwatching press (e.g. Rannila 2003, Papps 2004), and speculation as to what might have

caused an individual to be found so far west of the breeding grounds. My observations in southeast Transbaikalia, Russia, suggest that Oriental Plovers were moving much farther north and northwest of their normal breeding

range than usual in summer 2003. The Oriental Plover is accidental in Russia, having been reported only in the regions neighbouring Mongolia (Tuva, Buryatia, and Chita; Dement'ev & Gladkov 1951, Kozlova 1961). Before 2003, only one breeding record had been reported in Russia, in the Tuva Republic in 1968 (Golovushkin 1971).

During 3rd-8th June 2003, I visited the Chita region with a group of Dutch birders; this is an area chiefly of hilly steppe near large, brackish lakes (Zun- and Barun-Torey) on the border with Mongolia. Typically, Oriental Plovers are extremely rare there (Goroshko & Kiriliuk 2003) but, during our visit, a total of eight were observed. Furthermore, a pair found on 3rd June showed evidence of breeding behaviour – the male was flying around anxiously, while the female attempted to lead us away from the area – though, unfortunately, we could not locate a nest. Four more territorial males were registered in the following days in the steppe around the lakes, and two males thought to be migrating were seen on the shore of Lake Barun-Torey, with Red-necked Stints *Calidris ruficollis* and Broad-billed Sandpipers *Limicola falcinellus* on 4th June. In Tuva (Ubsunur basin), a nest with eggs was located and two more breeding attempts were reported that year (Ozerskaya 2004).

Spring and early summer in this part of Russia were extremely (and atypically) dry, with many steppe and forest fires. It is possible that conditions on the usual breeding grounds in eastern Mongolia and northern China were similarly harsh, or even worse, which forced birds to explore new breeding sites and precipitated the exceptional numbers on the Russian steppes.

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82. Male Oriental Plover *Charadrius veredus*, near Dalandzadgad, Mongolia, June 2004.

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Footnote: The spelling 'Tuva' is retained in this note, but the name of the republic is now written 'Tyva'.

Ruffs feeding on contents of a Giraffe's stomach

On 19th November 2003, at Etosha, Namibia, I was watching animal activity at a waterhole when I noticed a small party of 12 Ruffs *Philomachus pugnax* feeding close to the carcass of a long-dead Giraffe *Giraffa camelopardalis*, one that I estimated to have been dead for at least ten days. The Ruffs were feeding close to the bones and dry hide of the Giraffe carcass, as if

taking advantage of some invertebrates (beetles or fly larvae?) living among the remains. During some 30-40 minutes' observation, the Ruffs particularly favoured a large brown patch of dead vegetation that lay in close proximity to the Giraffe's belly, and were clearly taking prey items from among this vegetation pile, some 150 cm high in places, rather than catching flies

on the surface. They did not pick at the Giraffe's hide, flesh or bones.

About one hour later, I saw vultures (Accipitridae) feeding on a recently dead Wildebeest *Connochaetes taurinus*. Three Warthogs *Phacochoerus africanus* sifted through an adjacent patch of piled dead vegetation and fed among it for at least 20 minutes. This patch was similar in colour and structure to that present at the Giraffe kill and I realised that it was the spilled contents from the dead animal's gut. Chris Hines, one of my companions and a Namibian biologist, confirmed that it was not unusual for other animals to feed on or among spilled gut contents arising from the death of a large animal.

Although *BWP* states that seeds form part of the Ruff's diet, the Giraffe's gut contents were unlikely to contain an abundant supply of seeds owing to the fact that acacia leaves form the staple of this mammal's diet, and the Ruffs were

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more likely to have been taking insects from the pile of gut contents. Ruffs are opportunistic feeders known to follow ploughs in search of invertebrates, and many birds take flies from animal droppings (*BWP*). The behaviour reported here, associated with large game animals, may have gone unnoticed by European birdwatchers and is not mentioned in *BWP*. I have seen other shorebirds such as Turnstone *Arenaria interpres* and Sanderling *Calidris alba* feeding on dead animals, fish and large crustaceans on the tideline, and also francolins *Francolinus* in Namibia pecking at large pieces of meat put out to bait Leopards *Panthera pardus*, so I would not have been surprised to see Ruffs picking at the flesh of a Giraffe carcass. These birds showed a deliberate interest and preference for feeding among the gut contents, however, as the Giraffe's flesh had long since been taken by other scavengers such as vultures and jackals *Canis*.

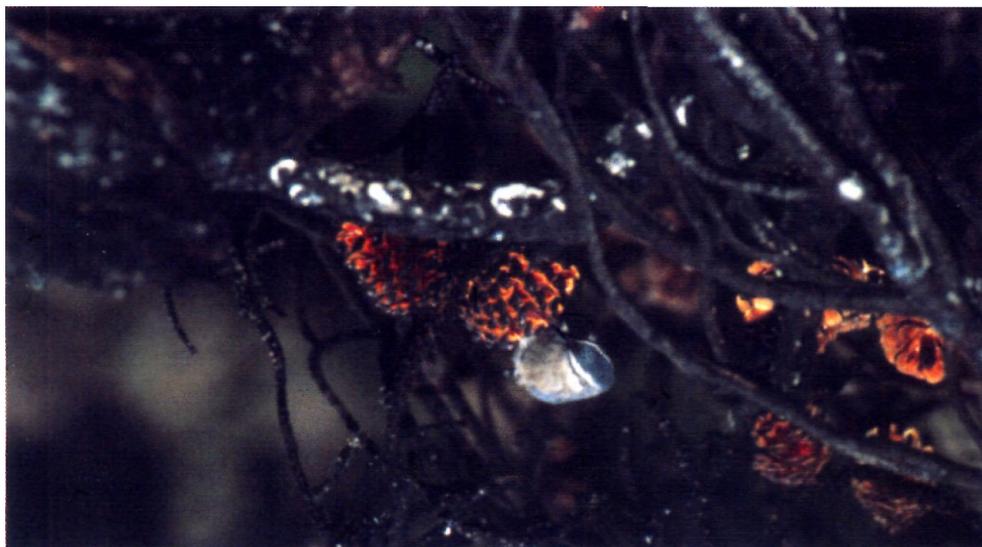
Taking advantage of a crisis: the behaviour of Corsican Nuthatches after a wildfire

The diet of Corsican Nuthatches *Sitta whiteheadi* consists primarily of small invertebrates from spring to autumn, and the seeds of Corsican Pines *Pinus nigra laricio* var. *corsicana* from November to March, during the cone-opening period (Cramp & Perrins 1993; pers. obs.). In winter, the cones typically open on dry, hot days, allowing nuthatches to hoard the seeds which they will retrieve later, when cold, damp weather ensures that the cones remain closed. Here, we describe the behaviour of Corsican Nuthatches feeding on and hoarding the seeds of Corsican Pines in summer, after wildfire had induced the early opening of cones.

On 24th and 25th August 2003, following an exceptional heatwave, four trees were struck by lightning in the territorial forests of Melaja and Tartagine (Haute-Corse), triggering a fire that foresters and firemen were unable to control. The fire lasted for two weeks, burning 1,836 ha of woodland (approximately 54% of the forest cover). Owing to the heterogeneity of relief, substrate, and vegetation, the fire resulted in a large mosaic of charred, scorched, and undamaged areas. These forests were predominantly Corsican Pine, intermingled with Evergreen

Oak *Quercus ilex* and Silver Birch *Betula pendula* in Supramediterranean and Montane vegetation zones respectively (Gamisans 1999).

We visited the Melaja forest on 7th September, in particular those sites identified as Corsican Nuthatch territories before the fire (Beck 1992). In two separate areas, both severely affected by the fire, at an altitude of 750 m and 870 m respectively, we watched several Corsican Nuthatches in burnt trees, foraging on cones and hoarding seeds under the bark of nearby trees. Along with Coal Tits *Parus ater*, the Corsican Nuthatches were foraging on open cones, scorched and brown-coloured, and consequently easy to distinguish from closed, unripe, greenish-brown ones. In one spot, with fallen branches still burning, a female Corsican Nuthatch, surrounded by small flames and a cloud of smoke, was seen picking seeds from the cones and hoarding them on burnt trunks (plates 83 & 84). Observations at this site the following autumn and winter showed that the nuthatches remained on their territories. The post-fire hoarding thus appeared to be a survival strategy in a disturbed environment where seeds remained the only available food (pers.



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83. Opened by the heat of a ground fire, the cones of the Corsican Pine *Pinus nigra laricio* var. *corsicana* turn brown, while the extremities of their scales are scorched. This female Corsican Nuthatch *Sitta whiteheadi* extracted the seed, then proceeded to hoard it under the bark of a burnt tree some 40-50 m away. It repeated the same behaviour several times in quick succession.

obs.). Those areas in which the fire was at its greatest intensity, causing trees, foliage and cones to char, were, however, completely deserted by the Corsican Nuthatches.

Fire is a recurrent part of the landscape in Corsica, destroying several thousand hectares of maquis and forests each year, but its effects are being exacerbated locally by salvage logging, leading to an overall decrease in the Corsican Nuthatch's habitat (Thibault *et al.* 2002, in press).

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84. General view of the site where the female Corsican Nuthatch *Sitta whiteheadi* (in plate 83) foraged and hoarded, Melaja forest, Corsica, September 2003. The trunk is broken, with branches still burning on the ground.