

CAPE BIRD CLUB

NEWS SHEET

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Editor: Mrs M.K. Rowan.

Tierbos, Hout Bay.

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The Annual Congress of the South African Association for the Advancement of Science, held this year in Cape Town, has just come to an end. This was the Association's Jubilee Meeting, and, from every point of view, an unqualified success. Even the weather cooperated! It was disappointing, however, to see so few representatives from the Cape Bird Club, as all members would undoubtedly have found many meetings, excursions and social functions both stimulating and enjoyable. With so many branches of science represented, there was something for everybody, every day. Perhaps the most interesting item from the birdwatcher's point of view was a paper by Miss Courtenay-Latimer, giving an account of a large egg which has been in her family's possession for nearly three generations. Although absolute proof is unfortunately lacking, it seems highly probable that this egg was laid by the long-extinct, flightless, giant pigeon of Mauritius, known as the Dodo. If it is indeed a Dodo's egg, it may well be the only one in existence, although Professor Kirby told the meeting that there are allegedly two Dodo's eggs in a Russian museum.

One of the distinguished overseas visitors to the Congress was Sir Lawrence Bragg, Nobel Prize-winner in Physics, and Director of the Cavendish Laboratories. Sir Lawrence is also very interested in ornithology and told delegates of a "counter" that one of his students has designed for recording the wing-beats of birds. The counter is a beautiful example of the way in which the specialized knowledge and techniques of one branch of science may be applied with great advantage to another. The whole apparatus weighs less than a gram and is attached to one of the bird's wing-quills. It consists of a small tube, about half-an-inch long, constricted in the middle like an hour-glass. At one end is placed a particle of radio-active material; at the other there is a small photographic plate; and in the middle, at the constriction, is a small ball-bearing. With each wing-beat, the ball-bearing falls away, allowing a few alpha-particles from the radio-active material to pass through the aperture, and these are recorded on the photographic plate. At the end of the flight, examination of the photographic plate reveals how often the bird has flapped its wings. This apparatus is being used on homing pigeons and has supplied some most interesting and unexpected results.

NOTES AND RECORDS:

Two more interesting records have come to hand, regarding the local distribution of the Namaqua Dove. Mr R.K. Schmidt writes to say that he saw a single bird on the Philippi-Belville Road, near Vredohof Farm, on 18 November 1951. Again, on 8 January 1952, he saw four together on the Claremont-Strandfontein Road, about half a mile from the beach. This seems to be a favourite haunt of these birds, when visiting the Peninsula (see Mr Stanford's notes in the last News Sheet, No. 6).

Miss Clare Robinson's observations on this species come from further afield. She writes that Namaqua Doves "have penetrated right down to L'Agulhas and the surrounding district. Although we have been holidaying there for the last seventeen years, we saw these birds for the first time in January 1952, when they were fairly common. Again in early April, we saw one, and two late in May."

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Other notes from Miss Robinson concern Flemingoes at L'Agulhas, where they have been observed on two salt pans and one small vlei. In January 1950 Lord de Saumarez told Miss Robinson that the Flemingoes had left the pans (on his farm at Springfield) about a month previously. He said that he had known as many as 3000 there at a time, but it appears that the pans become too salt for them in the dryer months, although on one (unspecified) occasion, they remained all the year through. Miss Robinson's own notes record ~~x~~ about 40 in May 1951. In



January 1952 Flamingoes were seen on several occasions on both pans and on the vlei, but never more than 300 at a time. In April 1952 there were about 300 at Springfield, and at the end of May between 500 and 600 were seen at the same place.

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Miss Robinson also has something to say about Honeyguides. She writes that for some years past, Greater Honeyguides have been in the habit of visiting their garden at Plumstead, a three-acre plot, where bee-keeping is carried out on a fairly large scale. There Miss Robinson has observed males, females and juveniles. "I wonder what birds' nests they parasitize (writes Miss Robinson) and whether members of the Cape Bird Club have ever come across nestlings. On one occasion, I saw a juvenile - with yellow throat and breast - and two adults together. The young Honeyguide was fairly large, although not full-grown. The adult birds remained near to it while it fed on the ground, picking up small pieces of wax that had been washed off utensils used for honey. This made me wonder whether the adults, though parasitic, ever take any notice of their young."

Dr Gill states that this species is found from the Cape Peninsula northward and eastwards around the coastal belt. However, I have the impression that it must be a rare visitor within the Peninsula itself, as I cannot recall that my family's many years of bee-keeping have ever attracted this species to our garden. The incidence of three birds together in Miss Robinson's garden, must also be unusual. Skid describes this bird as of "solitary disposition" and states that he has never seen more than one at a time. It would be very interesting to have records from others who may observations regarding these points.

Regarding parasitism, Gill states that the White-throated Swallow, the Pied Starling and (surprisingly) drongos are all victims, while Roberts gives a list comprising Barbets, Woodpeckers and Bee-eaters. Some precise records from the recent literature show that the Greater Honeyguide lays its eggs in the nests of Yellow-throated Sparrows (Skull, Auk 58:60), Rufous-chested Swallows and probably also the Kokoi or Semiterbill (Soria, Ibis 92:83). Benson (Ibis 92:472) published evidence that it also parasitizes the Little Bee-eater, and this has recently been confirmed by a correspondent in Discovery, Transvaal. On 11 November 1951 Mr Graham Patten found a newly-hatched Greater Honeyguide, still with the hooks on its beak, in the nest of a Little Bee-eater. It is interesting to note that the chick still shared the nest with the Bee-eater's unatched clutch of four.

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Another parasitic species in the news this month is the Diederik, Ladria or Bronze Cuckoo. Mr Schmidt writes that he saw several young birds at Philippa in February and March, 1950, and again during the same months in 1951. In 1952 however, none were observed, although Cape Sparrows (which this cuckoo frequently parasitizes) were as numerous as ever, and adults were present throughout the summer. Mr Schmidt adds that he heard and saw the first adult of last summer on 19 October 1951.

A third record from Mr Schmidt concerns the Paradise Flycatcher, which, to judge from the records, is another comparatively rare visitor to the Peninsula. On 25 March 1951, Mr Schmidt observed a single male at Philippoi. He saw no others until 14 November 1951, when a single bird appeared and was seen almost every day until 5 December. It called loudly, especially in the early morning, and Mr Schmidt therefore supposed it to be a male, although it did not have the typical long tail feathers of the breeding male.

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On 29 June, I saw an unusual sight which seems worth recording here. It was a calm day, and in the shallow wavelets flowing on Hout Bay beach, we noticed a Little Egret wading up to its thighs in the salt water. The bird was unusually tame, and allowed us to approach within a few yards. For nearly half an hour



we walked parallel with it up and down the shore. It was obviously feeding on some sort of sea-creature, possibly small crustaceans, but despite our close proximity, we were unable to identify the food. Dr Broekhuysen tells me that he has also seen Little Egrets feeding in sea-water, on two occasions. It appears to be the only one of c. Egrets or Herons which does so. Is there anyone else with similar records?

The Rev. (Capt.) E. Dudley Brown has contributed a most interesting account of Gulls and Terns breeding at Robben Island. He writes as follows:

"On the north side of Robben Island, facing the open ocean, is a level piece of ground about a third of a square mile in size, which provides the birdwatcher with one of the most interesting sights around the Cape coast. In June this is the breeding ground of the Grey (Hartlaub's) Gulls and the Swift Terns. The gulls, of which there must be many thousands, greatly outnumber the terns. On the approach of a human being, most of them rise into the air and form an almost dense 'ceiling', whirling and crying, and occasionally 'dive-bombing' the intruder. The commotion grows more strident as he picks his way cautiously between clumps of low vegetation in which such fledglings as are able to run have hidden themselves; and from which they can be picked, sitting unprotesting on the hand and trotting off when released without much sign of agitation.

"Nests - mere saucer-shaped indentations on the ground - are found every few feet, some containing coffee-coloured eggs with dark brown spots, one or two to a clutch. Here and there the young can be seen in process of breaking out of the egg, and here and there are dead chicks. (Are these killed by mole-snakes, which abound here, and may be seen at this season, sluggish and replete with eggs, curled up amongst the rocks?)

"Towards the edge of the gull's breeding area, but not separated, is an 'island' of terns. These bunch together more closely than the gulls, so that they seem to be a dense mass, almost touching each other. They do not rise and join the general commotion overhead until the stranger is almost upon them; then they go up in a black-and-white mass, leaving their young scattered on the sand, one to every two or three feet of ground. They are the same colour as the sand on which they lie, and unlike the gull chicks, they tend to stay put, almost flat with the ground, and it is not easy to avoid treading on them. The terns eggs are about the same size as those of the gulls, but of a lighter ground colour, and it is less usual to find more than one to a nest.

"When the watcher retires and surveys the scene through binoculars, the terns speedily return to their young, apparently finding their own chicks without trouble or hesitation, but most of the gulls remain in the air and keep up their noisy gyrations until he has gone far from the area. It would be interesting to know whether Swift Terns always breed alongside Grey Gulls, and whether they do so in order to benefit from the protection provided by their more numerous and vociferous neighbours.

"Neither Black-backed Gulls nor Gannets breed on Robben Island, although the former are common enough round its coast, and the latter are always seen in flight between the island and the mainland. The breakwater at Murray's Bay, the island harbour, has been taken over as a breeding ground by White-breasted Cormorants, which were there last year in such numbers as to form a dense mass covering the masonry. They are there again this year, but not so abundant."

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On 4 June Mr J.G.R. MacLeod wrote to say that he had found four Sugarbirds' nests and four Orange-breasted Sunbirds' nests the previous weekend (presumably at Sir Lowry's Pass, which is, I know, a favourite hunting ground for our Somerset West members). The nests were at all stages, some being built, and others with eggs or with young. One Sunbird's nest was actually in a haken tree, six feet above ground, a most unusual site for this species. At Hout Bay, on 14 July, I found another Orange-breasted Sunbird's nest, containing two eggs, in an unusually exposed position. It was three feet above ground, in the fork of an outer branch of a Kreupelhout (Leucospermum) bush. All but a few of our sugarbirds, however, have already disappeared.



In the B.O.C. Bulletin of May 1952, there is a very interesting note by Col. Meinertzhagen. He reports that he caught 18 European Starlings from a roost at Mottisfont in Hampshire, during January 1899. These birds he gave to Cecil Rhodes who sailed for the Cape on 14th of that month. They are believed to be the original stock from which the Cape's present large population of European Starlings is derived.

For this information, the News Sheet is indebted to Mr Liversidge, who adds that he has been trying to keep records of when these birds flock, where they roost, and other aspects of their seasonal behaviour. He urges that others should do the same as little is known of the habits and behaviour of the starlings in this country. I understand that a very fine, detailed study of the European Starling in England has ~~shortly~~ recently been completed and that the results will shortly be published. However, the birds' behaviour is not identical in all parts of the world where it has become established, and it would be interesting to have material for comparison. What records can members of the Cape Bird Club offer?

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PERSONAL:

Dr and Mrs Broekhuysen and the family are shortly leaving on a visit to England and the Continent, and we will sadly miss their invaluable services in matters ornithological for some months. Mrs Broekhuysen and the boys hope to spend much of their time with their family in Holland, while Dr Broekhuysen is planning a tour of some of the bird-ringing stations of Europe. We wish them a very happy holiday and good birding!

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It is with deep regret that we record the death of Captain E.J. Scholtz. With his passing the Cape Bird Club has lost one of its most beloved members. We extend our sincere sympathy to Captain Scholtz's family and his many friends.

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