

No. 16

August 1953

Editor: Mrs M.K. Rowan.

Tierbos, Hout Bay.

People have been poking fun at the birdwatcher's methods of recording bird song for more than a century, as I learn from Hesketh Pearson's biography of the Rev. Sydney Smith ("The Smith of Smiths" in Penguin Books). In 1826 Smith reviewed a book by one Mr Waterton, entitled "Wanderings in South America". The whole essay makes delightful reading, but the following passage had special appeal:

"The description of birds (in Mr Waterton's book) is very animated and interesting; One species of the goatsucker cries "Who are you? who are you?" Another exclaims "Workaway, work away". A third "Willy, come go, Willy, come go". A fourth "Whip-poor-Will, Whip-poor-Will". It is very flattering to us that they should all speak Ebglish! - though we cannot much commend the elegance of their selections."

.....

NOTES AND RECORDS.

Dr Winterbottom writes that he and Mr Middlemiss saw a Ruff at Rondevlei on 18 July. "This, combined with the Curlew, Marsh Sandpipers and Greenshanks at Rietvlei on 18 June, seems to suggest an unusual number of wintering Palearctic waders".

.....

Miss Joan Robinson tells me that she and her sister have recently seen at least three pairs of Familiar Chats along Boyes Drive, which, she suggests, is a more promising place for birds than is generally realised. Miss Clare Robinson adds a note to say that she saw and heard the Chaffinch in Plumstead throughout June and up to 5 July, since when she has been away from home.

.....

Mr MacLeod writes from Scotland that birdwatching and sightseeing do not go together. However, at Helmsdale on the east coast of England, on a gravel beach, he found two nests of the Ringed Plover, each containing 4 eggs. On the whole he thought wader nests were easier to locate than in South Africa, although an Oystercatcher gave him some trouble, and required nearly an hour of patient watching before he discovered its nest with 2 eggs. At the summit of Glen Einach in the Cairngorms he watched two Greenshanks whose behaviour suggested chicks in the neighbourhood, but his wish to see these birds actually nesting on the Scottish moors has not been fulfilled.

.....

Mr Liversidge attended the recent show of cage-birds, reported in the press, and found it interesting. He wished to learn something of "the professional cage-man's methods with our indigenous species", and also to discover how many different kinds are still available to the aviculturist, since the trapping of wild birds, except under permit, has been forbidden by law since 1932. He records his strong impression that a number of permits, more particularly for "up-country birds", must have been issued in recent years. Presumably the selection of species was greater than might have been expected if the aviculturists had been forced to rely solely on cage-bred birds for the past 21 years.

The waxbills, of which there were many, seemed to take to cage life better than any of the other wild birds, and were chirpy and in good condition. There were few doves, shrikes and bulbuls on show, and none were in very good condition, apart from one outstanding exception: a young Bokmakierie, hand-reared from a nestling. "It was plump, in beautiful condition, and seemed well content to sit on its perch and receive the admiration of hundreds of ugly people, such was the superior look in its eye".

The general condition of the seedeaters and buntings was not up to the standard of the waxbills, and, while most appeared content, there were some conspicuous exceptions. One Cape Siskin, for instance, was probably in the wild state very recently.

Mr Liversidge found it difficult to discover what criteria were used in judging the wild birds, and much seems to depend on the judges' personal opinions and reactions, except perhaps with regard to the waxbills. Here the breeders aim at the largest and reddest belly patches and the largest and reddest lines through the eye. The legs must be a good colour, and the bird must perch perkily, with its tail half-fanned.

"It is obvious that breeding does occur in captivity, and it is a pity that the two interested societies do not cooperate more actively. Useful work and interesting results might be expected".

.....

On a visit to Knysna at the end of July, Mr and Mrs Liversidge were surprised to see near George a mixed party of about 150 birds, comprising 80 % European Starlings, 10 % Pied Starlings and 10 % Cape Weavers. This association between Pied Starlings and Cape Weavers is interesting, and has been noted before, but this is the first time I have heard of European Starlings joining such an assembly, and certainly they have not previously been recorded at George in such great numbers.

Some time ago Mr Liversidge appealed for information regarding the European Starling, but only Miss Robinson was kind enough to contribute any. He and Dr Winterbottom now jointly renew this request. They are trying to get an accurate picture of the present status of the bird and to this end have prepared questionnaires which they wish to distribute as widely as possible. In particular, they would like to have names and addresses of people resident in the country, who might be willing and able to help, and would welcome any suggestions from members.

.....

Mr Paul Kihn, from a flat in the heart of Cape Town, contributes a tale of two Starlings - Redwinged. One winter morning four or five years ago, Mr Kihn heard their unmistakable flutelike note outside his door. He found a pair on his verandah, feeding on the insects clustered round the electric light. The birds were timid and flew away, but, hoping they would return, he scattered a few currants for them. Return they did, and they have continued to come back regularly, ever since.

"If I omit to put the currants out overnight, they perch on the railings and call. They are now so tame that they will come within two or three feet of me while they are being fed, always watchful, but seemingly at ease". When they fly off, the male sometimes collects a few extra currants and carries them away in his beak. On several occasions Mr Kihn has seen him feed the female with his takings. This, of course, is part of a courtship ritual characteristic of this species.

"Last year, after a period of absence - the birds periodically stop calling for a time - I was summoned to the door to find father, mother and a couple of youngsters perched on the railings. The youngsters were evidently being schooled in the art of scrounging. Whether today there is more than one pair calling, I do not know, but it is now not unusual for them to visit my flat two or three times a day". At this rate Mr Kihn's currant bill must be mounting, but he seems to be a willing victim of the starlings' importunities

.....

Mr John Martin records some interesting and unseasonal appearances of the African Great Swift at Somerset West. At 1.30 p.m. on 6 July he watched a party of 20 - 30 passing in a south-easterly direction, feeding as they went. Again, on the afternoon of 11 July he saw another 6, also feeding and travelling in the same direction.

When he first wrote, Mr Martin was watching 8 nests. Two belonged to Orange-breasted Sunbirds, with two eggs apiece; a third belonged to a Sugarbird and contained two young; the other five were all Bokmakierie nests. One of these had three young about 8 days old on 19 July. Another contained three eggs, and the remaining three were all under construction.

Another letter, dated 31 July, reported that the remaining Bokmakierie nests all had eggs, and, in one of them the clutch was not three, but four. "An interesting point here is that the large clutch was found near Klipheuwel, where last year a nest was found with four eggs. Is it possible that the Bokmakierie strain at Klipheuwel lays four eggs? If we can find more nests in this area it should give us more information on this point." This reminds me of the Crowned Plovers found on Gordons Bay flats. Some years ago some of us found five nests here, and each contained three eggs. Since then I have found a number of Kiewietjie nests in different parts of the Western Province, but in each case only two eggs formed the clutch. Last year I was again lucky enough to find Crowned Plovers nesting at Gordon's Bay, and again the birds had three eggs. Significant? Or just a coincidence?"

Mr Martin's second letter also records several additions to his list of nests in the current season. A pair of Cape Robins had two eggs, and White-fronted Sandplovers also had a clutch of two. Most interesting, however, was a pair of Orangebreasted Sunbirds with two chicks only a few days old, whose nest has a remarkable history. It was built at Sir Lowry's pass, and the first egg laid in it on 21 May. Two young left the nest between 18 and 25 June, and now it contains another two chicks. "Are there any records (asks Mr Martin) of these sunbirds using the same nest more than once?" I know of none, and all the nests I have watched at Tierbos have disintegrated so rapidly after departure of the young that they could not possibly have been used a second time, without extensive rebuilding. Perhaps other members can offer some information on this point.

.....

Interesting confirmation of early breeding in Cape Weavers comes from Mr Symons of Donkergat Whaling Station. He tells me that he has a large colony right outside his window, from which he derives much pleasure and amusement. The males started their building and displaying at the beginning of June, some weeks in advance of the arrival of the females. One lone hen, however, joined the colony at an early stage. She received no attention at all from the males, who neither courted her, nor drove her off when she approached their nests. They simply ignored her. Neglected, and presumably lonely, she built herself a nest, right on the edge of the colony. Unfortunately, her identity was lost when the remaining hens arrived, and Mr Symons does not know what became of her. Early in July a gale wreaked havoc in the colony, blowing dozens of nests to the ground. On examination, one in every four of these was found to contain eggs.

.....

An interesting letter from Mrs Knipe at "Badgemore", Klipheuwel, gave an account of breeding at the farm on 27 July. The first brood of Fiscal Shrikes was out of the nest and flying, with the parents still feeding them. This was rather early, according to Mrs Knipe. Another Fiscal nest had 4 eggs which were due to hatch in two or three days. The adults at this nest did a curious thing when building. First they made their nest in a low thorn-bush, but when it was complete decided to build instead in a gum tree near by. They carried practically all the material from the first nest to the second. Most extraordinary is the fact that this same pair did exactly the same thing last year, using the same thorn bush in the first instance, and the same gum tree in the second.

Mrs Knipe had two Lesser Double-collared Sunbirds' nests under observation. One of these took 25 days to build, and two eggs were laid on 13 and 14 July. Both hatched on 28 July, giving an incubation period of 14 days, plus or minus one day. In the other, only one egg was laid and hatched, but it very nearly came to grief, as a cow ate most of the Wild Dagga bush in which it was suspended. The nest was left hanging by two threads, and the

movements of the young bird and the female threatened to break it off completely. Mrs Knipe, however, armed with darning needle and nylon fishing line, did a sound repair job, and sewed the nest securely to its branch. The parents raised many loud objections while the work was under way, and when complete flew down to inspect. They must have approved, as they continued to feed the chick as if nothing had happened.

A new arrival on the farm was a Bied Barbet, identified by Mr John Martin, who also saw a Greybacked Warbler carrying nest material. Last year the first nest of this species was found complete on 6 August, so these birds are not earlier than usual.

A week later Mrs Knipe wrote again to say that nests of the Karoo Prinia, Ground Robin, Grey-backed Warbler, Yellow Seedeater and Crowned Plover had all been found, but only the last with eggs. Most exciting, however, was her announcement of the discovery of a Cape Penduline Tit (Kapokvogel) sitting on five eggs. "I would like to know (she writes) whether this bird and its wonderful nest has been found in these parts before". Can any reader help?

.....

NEST RECORD CARDS:

With the breeding season well under way, Mr Liversidge asks whether any member requires further supplies of Nest Record Cards, and issues an eloquent appeal for full data on every nest found. Every occupied nest should be recorded whether it is seen 20 times or only once. NO bird should be omitted, no matter how common. We are as anxious to have data on the European Starling and Cape Sparrow as on any rarer species. Indeed it is the abundant birds which are often most neglected. Please address requests for cards to Mr Liversidge at the Zoology Department, U.C.T.

.....

BIRD PARASITES:

Bird ringers have been assisting Dr Theiler in her studies by collecting ticks from the birds caught for ringing. We have recently had a request from Dr O.G.H. Fiedler, also on the staff at Onderstepoort, for assistance in obtaining flies parasitic on birds. These can be taken at the same time as ticks, and put into vials without any preservative. Dr Fiedler will supply containers to any member willing to help. The small dark pupae of these flies are also required and may be found either on these birds or in their nests. A piece of paper, recording species, date of capture, locality and collector should be included in each container, and a separate container used, of course, for each separate bird.

.....

BUDGET COMMENTARY:

From Dr K.H. Barnard: "I expect the Chaffinch in Oranjezicht in early August. Will it sing 'A little piece of bread and no cheeese' or 'NO little piece of bread etc.'?"

.....