

NOTES.

UNUSUAL FEEDING BEHAVIOUR OF TITS.

I HAVE recently been particularly interested in the behaviour of Marsh- and Coal-Tits, which together with larger numbers of Blue and Great Tits, have visited the garden here at Llanyminych during about the first three weeks of October, 1944. The garden, and many other places near here, are infested with the little black slug. The Marsh-Tits (*Parus palustris dresseri*) have been most diligent in picking these out of the soil of the flower beds in view of my window. The Coal-Tit (*P. ater britannicus*) has also done the same thing, but not to the same extent. The curious thing is that the birds seem to eat few, if any, at the time. Sometimes they fly away over the boundary fence of the garden with the slugs dangling from the bill. In a very short time a bird will be back for another slug. At first this gave me the impression that there was a late nest of young to be fed. However, as I watched, I soon found that this was not so, for the tits did not always go over the fence. Very often they would enter the hedge and, after moving about in it, go to an ivy-clad stump and push the slug in a crevice in the ivy or the stump. The Blue Tits (*P. caeruleus obscurus*) badgered them considerably while they were in the fence and seemed to search for the caches after the Marsh-Tits had gone. At any rate, searching as carefully as I could, I was unable to find any slugs, although I saw dozens disposed of by the birds. I also noticed Marsh-Tits carrying these slugs to hide several times when I was walking near the village. Sometimes they placed them in the thick stems of dead plants. Slugs are not mentioned among the food items of the Marsh- and Coal-Tits in *The Handbook*.

J. H. OWEN.

RED-BREASTED FLYCATCHERS SEEN IN WILTSHIRE AND HAMPSHIRE.

ON May 13th, 1944, near Calne, in company with Christine Willis, Rachel Judd, and Anne Tanqueray, I saw a small bird on the edge of a beech-wood behaving like a flycatcher. It flew into a tree whose branches overhung the lane. At first the light was against us and I took it for a Spotted Flycatcher, but when we had gone a few yards on and stopped to look at it again, we noticed that it had a red breast and this was clearly seen by all of us. We watched it flying out some twelve feet or so above us from a bare projecting branch four or five times in succession and returning to the same perch. Finally it flew to another tree and we did not see it again. When it was on the branch we twice heard it give a short rattling note, and we agreed on this description of the call on our way back and before consulting *The Handbook*. We had not got field-glasses and unfortunately did not notice the tail pattern, but we are sure that the bird was a Red-breasted Flycatcher (*Muscicapa p. parva*). There is not the least possibility that it was a Robin; its whole

behaviour and appearance were unmistakably those of a flycatcher. I visited the place again later, but did not see any sign of it.

SUSAN K. TAYLOR.

On the evening of May 1st, 1944, a male Red-breasted Flycatcher (*Muscicapa p. parva*) was identified in his garden in Southsea, Portsmouth, Hampshire, by Dr. P. Hamilton Boyden. The bird was hunting insects in the air with the distinctive flycatcher flight. Its red breast first caught the observer's attention and caused momentary confusion with a Robin, which closer observation dispelled. The bird's slender appearance induced Dr. Boyden to examine it with a glass, and although he unfortunately cannot definitely recall having seen the characteristic tail pattern he verified the identification at once with a text-book. The garden is surrounded by trees, which, although affording good shelter for birds, made observation somewhat difficult. Dr. Boyden also noticed the unusual call-notes of the bird, sounding distinctively tinkling or bell-like and repeated four or five times. These continued for about half an hour in the vicinity after it had left the garden. A bird which may have been a female of the species was seen in the locality a few days later, but unfortunately its identity could not be confirmed.

D. J. GUNSTON.

[It is unfortunate that in neither of the above cases was the distinctive tail pattern seen, but we are satisfied after correspondence with the recorders that the records can be accepted. Indeed in the case of Miss Taylor's record the reason for the omission is clear from her account; the bird was always well above the observers, and the tail pattern is much less striking from below, the white portion appearing merely as a continuation of the white of the belly. The fact that in both instances call-notes of the species were heard and correctly described confirms the identifications. We have some reason for thinking that either the season of 1944 was an exceptionally good one for Red-breasted Flycatchers or that the species is actually becoming a more regular visitor here, as, in addition to the above, we have received two or three other records recently which we think are in all probability correct, though unfortunately not sufficiently certain to publish.—Eds.]

LITTLE OWLS FEEDING YOUNG ON NEWTS.

IN June, 1944, when watching the nest of a pair of Little Owls (*Athene noctua vidalii*) containing two young about ten days old in a hole in the bank of a large flooded clay pit at Kempston Hardwick, near Bedford, I found dead newts in the nest hole with them and one with other material in a pellet. The newts were of varying freshness and two were full of colour when collected. I found about seven or eight in all and I formed the impression that they had been caught and brought to the nest over a period of days. *The Handbook* does not mention newts as prey of the Little Owl. As to how the birds obtained them one can only speculate.

H. C. TRIMNELL.

[The newts are the Common or Smooth Newt (*Triturus vulgaris*). The record presents some odd features. In the first place, although birds-of-prey will sometimes bring to the nest more than the young can eat, it seems curious that a number of these amphibians should have been found in the nest untouched—unless, in spite of the parents bringing them, they proved distasteful to the nestlings. Some colour is lent to this possible explanation by the other curious feature of the case, that the newt in the pellet is almost intact, suggesting that although swallowed it was thrown up prematurely. As to the manner in which this unusual prey was obtained it should be noted that newts come out on land after breeding and may well have been secured soon after leaving the water or on moist nights subsequently: it seems improbable that they can have been taken from the water.—B.W.T.]

DARK-BREASTED BARN-OWLS IN DEVON AND YORKSHIRE.

WHILE cycling in a lane near Ottery St. Mary, Devon, at 9.15 a.m. (B.S.T.) on October 8th, 1944, I noticed a Barn-Owl coming towards me over the adjoining field, and was at once struck by its unusually dark colour. A moment or two afterwards it topped the hedge and flew directly overhead some 15 feet up, and I was astonished to see that there was no white on its under-parts, all, including the under wing-surfaces, being a light shade of brown, and not so very light at that. Nor did the facial discs show up white, but appeared to be also of a brownish shade. The bird dropped over the opposite hedge, and was seen hawking over the fields for a time before passing out of sight.

My view of the bird as it passed over me, though brief, was a very good one, as the light was ideal, sun behind very light cloud. Unfortunately, I was too obsessed with noting the area of brown under-parts to notice if the breast was spotted, and by the time the bird was far enough away for me to see its upper-parts it was too far for me to be sure of their colour, as I was without glasses.

I may say that I know the Barn-Owl well, as it is still common hereabouts and often to be seen in daylight, both in the early morning and just before dusk, but I have never previously seen one brown-breasted like this. Its appearance agreed closely with that of the dark-breasted form (*Tyto alba guttata*), which according to *The Handbook* has not previously been recorded in Devon.

E. H. WARE.

ON October 14th, 1944, at Goathland, Yorkshire, I was hidden under a bush at 5 p.m., waiting to shoot Wood-Pigeons, when a Barn-Owl (*Tyto alba*) came flopping over the hedge about 5 yards from me. It did not see me and for two minutes or so it played around within 50 yards of me, looking for mice on the grassy bank on which I was. During this time I noticed that it was greyer above than is usual in Barn-Owls in England, with hardly any buff or yellow on the upper-parts. After a few minutes it

came back and stayed hunting on the bank for five minutes, hovering and pouncing, at times within 4 or 5 yards of me, and once sitting upright on a tuft of grass facing me for a minute, 10 yards off : its breast was apricot-coloured. I did not particularly notice the facial disks, nor do I remember any obvious spotting on the breast, the characters already described being what struck me particularly. I think this bird may have been *T. a. guttata*. This is the first time I have seen a Barn-Owl in my immediate area, though one nests about a mile and a half away. W. S. MEDLICOTT.

[Unless they are supposed to have been aberrations of the white-breasted form of an unrecorded kind, there seems no reasonable doubt that these were examples of the dark continental race. It is a pity that Mr. Ware was not able to make sure of the colour of the upper-parts, but the fact that the whole bird appeared dark as it approached him supports the above conclusion.—EDS.]

SQUACCO HERON AND OTHER RARE MIGRANTS IN NOTTINGHAMSHIRE.

MIGRATION in the Trent Valley, around the Nottingham Sewage Farm, has been watched daily and in great detail during the period July to September, 1944. It was found that considerable passage of all types of birds was in progress.

The most noteworthy visitor was a Squacco Heron (*Ardeola ralloides*). An immature bird of this species was seen by R. J. and T. W. Raines to come over and circle one of the sewage farms, several times at a low altitude, on August 27th. The description noted was as follows :—Small heron about the length of a Shoveler, but body very small. Large, pointed beak, neck streaked with brown, breast streaked as neck, back and scapulars brown, probably also streaked with darker brown, wing almost completely white but some brown on the primaries, tail white, feet stretched behind tail.

Unfortunately this bird did not alight, being put off by the observers ; nevertheless excellent views, in very good light, were obtained and it was in full view for about 10 minutes.

Some other migrants are sufficiently rare to be worthy of record and are listed below.

WATER-PIPIT (*Anthus s. spinoletta*).—One seen by a gravel-pit near the sewage farm, on September 6th. It may have been in moult since, although the breast was almost unstreaked, the back was a dark, tawny brown colour, as in winter plumage. The bird was dark, larger than a Meadow-Pipit, had a white eye-stripe, and white outer tail-feathers, and those streaks which were on the breast were in a semi-circular position around the pale throat. The legs were dark brown (R. J. & T. W. Raines).

BLACK REDSTART (*Phœnicurus ochrurus gibraltariensis*).—An adult male in winter plumage seen on September 3rd (R. J. & T. W. Raines, J. Staton).

MONTAGU'S HARRIER (*Circus pygargus*).—A juvenile was noted over the sewage farm, on July 13th. This bird was identified by

the whitish area on the upper tail-coverts and the reddish brown, un-streaked breast and under-parts. It hunted over the farm in typical harrier style, but was almost constantly mobbed by Carrion Crows and large gulls.

TEMMINCK'S STINT (*Calidris temminckii*). This species has been rather frequent during the observed period. On July 26th three were identified; on this occasion a Little Stint was present for comparison. Two were again sighted on the 27th. One was seen on August 3rd, another on August 22nd, and two on August 30th and September 3rd.

In all cases the typical call and very small size were noted (R. J. & T. W. Raines, B. K. Montgomery).

PURPLE SANDPIPER (*Calidris maritima*).—One was identified among a flock of Turnstones on August 22nd (R. J. Raines).

LITTLE GULL (*Larus minutus*).—A substantial passage of this species seems to have occurred. An immature bird was seen on August 23rd. Three, two immatures and an adult in winter plumage, were seen on August 30th. Two immature on August 31st and five, three immatures and two adults, on September 1st. Two adults, September 15th (R. J. & T. W. Raines, J. Staton, M. P. Winsor).

SPOTTED CRAKE (*Porzana porzana*).—A great S.W. gale was blowing on August 28th, and hundreds of migrants were held up by it. During the morning on this date three birds of the above species were flushed at the observer's feet. On the following day, August 29th, another was flushed. In all cases the birds were flushed very close and dropped into cover again almost immediately. They were distinguished by small size, spotted back, white edge to first primary, barred flanks and buff-yellow under the tail (R. J. Raines).

R. J. RAINES.

UNUSUAL NESTS OF SWALLOW.—Mr. Hubert E. Pounds informs us of a Swallow's (*Hirundo r. rustica*) nest, examined by him on August 7th, 1944, near Chelsham, Surrey, affixed to a wooden partition in a stable without any ledge or other support below it. There were four nearly fully-fledged young on August 25th. The nest in which the birds had reared their first brood was normally placed on a horizontal beam.

Major A. W. Boyd writes: If many nests are examined sites differing from the normal will be found not infrequently. Nests built like a House-Martin's against a wall without support and just below the eaves or a gable have been recorded (*antea*, Vol. xxxiii, pp. 109-10) and I have seen a number of these at Hartford, Cheshire.

A remarkable nest (June 27th, 1932) was built in an upper room at Antrobus, Cheshire, on a stick shaped like a walking-stick with a rough handle projecting for about 2 feet from a wall. The nest was built on the end of the stick and although it vibrated whenever the sitting bird flew off, a brood of five was reared. In the same building I found a nest with a brood of six built in a lump of straw projecting from the bottom of a pigeon-box, and in

a farm in the same area Swallows nested for three years in a shippon on a plate hung by wires from the roof—originally to hold liquid disinfectant. Other unusual sites could be mentioned.

SHORT-EARED OWLS PERCHING IN TREES IN WINTER.—With reference to the note under this heading (*antea*, p. 100), Mr. B. K. Montgomery reports another case of Short-eared Owls (*Asio f. flammeus*) perching repeatedly in trees in winter. Four birds which remained at Fulbourn Fen, Cambridgeshire, during the latter half of January, 1944, were flushed on each of several visits from some ivy-covered trees, which appeared from the droppings to be used as a regular roost.

RUDDY SHELD-DUCKS AT LUNDY AND IN ANGUS.—Mr. F. W. Gade has written to us from Lundy that a Ruddy Sheld-Duck (*Casarca ferruginea*) visited the island on September 16th, 1944. Unfortunately all birds of this species are nowadays under a strong suspicion of being strays, but Mr. Gade states that this one was rather shy. Another was seen by Corporal P. A. Humble in Montrose Basin on August 8th, 1944.

GADWALL IN YORKSHIRE.—Mr. J. C. S. Ellis sends us details of a pair of Gadwalls (*Anas strepera*) seen by him on October 14th, 1944, on a lake near Wakefield, Yorks.

LESSER BLACK-BACKED GULL DROPPING SHELL-FISH.—Mr. J. A. G. Barnes informs us that on August 31st, 1944, he saw a Lesser Black-backed Gull (*Larus fuscus graellsii*) on the Kent estuary, Westmorland, pick up a small object, presumably a shell-fish, on a mud-bank, fly up to about 20 feet and drop it after the manner of a Common or Herring-Gull. It then alighted, picked up the object and repeated the process in exactly the same way. This behaviour is not recorded for the Lesser Black-back in *The Handbook*.