

FAIR ISLE BIRD OBSERVATORY.
NOTES ON SELECTED SPECIES, AUTUMN, 1949.

Compiled by

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The following notes have been selected from the Fair Isle Bird Observatory "Notes on Species" record-book as much for their importance in amplifying the information contained in *The Handbook of British Birds* as for their general interest to ornithologists. The report should be regarded as supplementary to a similar one covering the Spring migration of 1949 which has been submitted to *The Scottish Naturalist*, and which contains observations on a Greenish Warbler (*Phylloscopus trochiloides viridanus*), Nightingale (*Luscinia megarhyncha*), Black-browed Albatross (*Diomedea melanophrys*), and Kentish Plover (*Leucopoliis alexandrinus*), among other species.

LAPLAND BUNTING (*Calcarius lapponicus*). A male stayed on Ward Hill from September 2nd-5th and was trapped on the latter date. The bill was a deep vinous colour, not yellow as stated in *The Handbook* (i, 148). The tip was dark horn, this colour covering a greater area on the upper than the lower mandible. There was a little yellowish along the cutting edges only. The legs and toes were blackish-brown, iris dark brown.

About 40 birds arrived with as many Snow-Buntings (*Plectrophenax nivalis*) on September 10th, and Lapland Buntings remained at this strength until the 22nd, there being few only after this until the 29th, with odd birds up to October 12th. All birds watched at close quarters during this period confirmed the above observation on the colour of the bill, and it seems likely there must be a seasonal change.

RED-BREADED FLYCATCHER (*Muscicapa parva*). Two first-winter birds trapped on September 21st had the legs black, soles olive-brown, and bill dark brown with flesh-pink at the base of the lower mandible. The gape was yellow. A bird recorded on September 13th had a characteristic habit of cocking the tail above the back, after the manner of a Wren (*Troglodytes troglodytes*).

[This is a typical habit of the species and is mentioned in *The Handbook*.—EDS.].

CHIFFCHAFF (*Phylloscopus collybita* subsp.). A single Chiffchaff thought to be *Ph. c. tristis* was observed on October 6th and 7th. On the 8th four similar birds were reported, and on the 12th a further small influx took place, eight birds being examined at close quarters on that day, and five on the next. One bird remained on the island until the 17th. There was a moderate N.E. wind all day on October 5th, E.S.E. winds from then to the 11th, blowing at gale force on the afternoon and night of the 10th, and moderating the following day. Visibility was reasonably good until the 11th, when it was poor on account of continuous rain.

The upper-parts of these birds were brown, lacking the olive tinge of the typical race, and in some the under-parts were greyish-white quite definitely without any yellow except on the under wing-coverts at the angle of the wing, thus agreeing closely with the description of *Ph. c. tristis*. Of those watched on the 12th, six were of this kind, but two on this day (and three on the 9th and 13th) had slight and rather streaky yellow markings on the breast, thus approximating to *Ph. c. abietinus*. All had a dull buffish wash on the sides of the breast and flanks, aptly described by W.H.B. as "mackintosh-colour," and the legs were black. There was a whitish orbital ring.

As all these Chiffchaffs were present on the island at the same time, it is perhaps a reasonable inference that they may have originated in the same area of northern Europe or Asia, possibly an area of intergradation between these two races. Their occurrence provides a striking example of how, on migration, one can get a small group of birds, apparently from the same source, exhibiting such a mixture of characters in the field. Whilst certain general affinities can be recognized it would obviously be unwise to refer to such birds, either severally or individually, by an established name.

These Chiffchaffs were usually quite easy to observe: they kept to the turnip and cabbage patches, but did not skulk in the cover as is so often the case with migrant warblers, and especially with the more olive-backed and yellower Chiffchaffs of earlier in the autumn. Sometimes they would rise and fly away with rather high, wayward flight to a neighbouring patch of crops; but a more usual (and in fact quite characteristic) habit was to remain in their chosen field flitting restlessly from place to place, perching between whiles in open view on the tops of the plants. Excellent close views were thus easy to obtain. Sometimes they took insects from the leaves, or snapped at passing flies.

YELLOW-BROWED WARBLER (*Phylloscopus inornatus*). An early bird was seen by H. J. Pease on August 28th; subsequently, from one to three were present from September 19th-28th, and another was recorded between October 12th and 16th. The only call-note, noted by several observers, was a high-pitched "weest." In addition to the yellowish-white wing-bars, which appear to vary individually in size (especially the upper bar), the wide sweep of the superciliary stripe is an excellent field-mark. The birds are fond of leaping up after passing flies, the action being accompanied by an audible snapping of the bill.

PALLAS'S GRASHOPPER-WARBLER (*Locustella certhiola*). A bird identified as a first-winter bird of this species, which has only one previous record in Britain, was present in a turnip and cabbage patch on October 8th-9th. It was studied at close quarters on both days by the following observers: Dr. W. H. Bierman, R. F. Rutledge, C. I. Murdoch, L. P. Samuels, G. Waterston, T. Yeoman, P. Robertson and K. Williamson. The weather observations

appropriate to this period are given under Chiffchaff.

The bird was an inveterate skulker, rarely showing itself for more than a few seconds at a time, and then nearly always on the wing. Its habit, when close-pressed, was to fly a little way and then dive into cover. If not harrassed, it would move forward through the crop ahead of the observers, and appeared to progress by long hops, though this point is not certain as views were so fleeting. When the end of the crop was reached the bird would sometimes delay for a few moments, resting quietly under cover of the leaves, as though unwilling to venture into the open. It would then rise and swerve round to pass to the rear of the observers, soon diving into the turnips again. The technique adopted was for the party to advance slowly through the crop, line abreast, and for those on the flanks to try to work round to the edge of the cover when the end of the rows was reached. The best views of the bird both on the ground and on the wing as it turned to fly to the rear, were had at such times. The bird had a habit when it flew of sometimes lifting the tail upwards at an angle to the back. Once or twice it forsook the cover and came down in pasture which surrounded the crop; and on the morning of the 9th (after it had escaped through the mesh of a herring-net set to catch it) several watchers were able to study it in the field, in much better light than was available among the crops.

The immediate impression given by the bird when on the wing in good light was of a dull, warm olive-brown bird superficially resembling a Sedge-Warbler (*Acrocephalus schænobænus*). The brief views obtained as the bird skulked quickly across the rows suggested a Grasshopper-Warbler (*Locustella naevia*). Very early in the proceedings, however, it was realized that the rump and upper tail-coverts were altogether too reddish for the latter bird, and one or two observers claimed to see whitish tips to some of the tail-feathers. The importance of the find was therefore appreciated quite early, and every attempt was made to procure a detailed plumage description. C.I.M. and K.W. took down notes in the field (often supplied by other observers) and these were discussed at intervals, and carefully checked during subsequent watching. The final form of the description given here was drawn up by C.I.M. and K.W. from these notes in the company of the others at the evening conference on the 9th.

The general colour of the upper-parts was a dark olive-brown with long blackish striations on the crown and blackish streaks on the mantle. The nape appeared to be unstreaked or nearly so, and (perhaps because of this) paler than the head and back, a dull yellowish-brown. The rump was dull rufous-brown and a striking feature in a good light. The whole of the under-surface appeared to be dull yellowish except for the under tail-coverts, which were tawny-buff. There was an indistinct pale eyestripe and slight spotting on the upper breast and flanks. The bill appeared long and black;

the legs and toes were pinkish in dull light, pale flesh in sunlight. The flight-feathers were dark brown, also the rather long, rounded tail: this contrasted markedly with the rump and mantle and darkened perceptibly towards the tip. When the bird was on the wing, and especially when it turned to pass to the rear of the party, some of the tail-feathers appeared to be tipped with greyish-white. W.H.B., who had incomparably the best view of this character on the afternoon of the 8th, when the bird flew up low a few feet from him, reported "lighter rim to tail-feathers, except the middle ones."

In view of the fact that this light rim to the tail is the italicized field-character in *The Handbook* (ii, 34-5)—though its importance is apparently assumed from examination of skins—some comment on its value seems necessary. It is in fact a very poor field mark if the present experience is any criterion, and it was only on rare occasions that it was seen at all. K.W., for instance, remarked on it the first time he saw the bird rise on the afternoon of the 8th, but was never absolutely certain of it afterwards until the final excellent view in the open field on the morning of the 9th. R.F.R. and others did not see the pale tips with certainty on the 8th, but had satisfactory views of them on the 9th.

Summarizing, the bird's general resemblance to a Grasshopper-Warbler in plumage and behaviour was marked, but the bird differed strikingly in the rufous-brown rump and upper tail-coverts; more heavily striated effect of crown and mantle; dark rounded tail becoming blackish posteriorly and contrasting with the back when in flight; and tawny-buff of under tail-coverts. The almost uniform dull yellowish underparts indicate that the bird was a young one of the year. Subsequently, G.W., T.Y. and K.W. examined skins of this species kindly lent by N. B. Kinnear of the British Museum (Natural History): the characters observed and recorded in the field agreed well with those to be seen in the skins, even to the inconspicuousness of the greyish-white tips of the tail-feathers, which in some examples at any rate do not appear to be replaced at the first autumn moult.

REED-WARBLER (*Acrocephalus scirpaceus*). One trapped on September 1st had the legs flesh-colour, and the metatarsal joint and toes tinged greenish, with the soles yellow. The iris was greyish-brown. Two other Reed-Warblers were observed between September 24th-27th.

SIBERIAN LESSER WHITETHROAT (*Sylvia curruca blythi*). Two trapped on September 13th had the legs bluish-horn, the bill dark horn over most of the upper mandible, lower mandible bluish-horn darker at the tip. One trapped on September 24th remained until 29th, feeding mainly on the shore.

NORTHERN GREAT SPOTTED WOODPECKER (*Dendrocopos m. major*). The first birds of the autumn "invasion" arrived on Fair Isle on September 12th; further birds came in on 21st (in each case

following a day and night of N.E. wind), and another influx took place on October 6th, when ten were recorded on the isle. These dates coincide with the main arrival dates on the Isle of May. Two birds were found in a dying condition on September 16th and 24th, and the skins were preserved: both were in body-moult, as was also the case with others observed in the field. All those seen were juveniles, and by the end of October moult had progressed so far in some cases that a very close view, in a good light, was required to make out the few remaining crimson tipped feathers of the crown. At least three were still on Fair Isle at the beginning of December. There was a single bird throughout late December, last recorded by P. Robertson on January 4th, 1950.

The early arrivals searched for food along the wooden fencing-posts and telegraph poles, and on corn-stooks standing in the fields. A number were seen on the cliffs, probing the rock crevices and digging in the soft earth. D. Stout watched one bird working over the roof and eaves of a cottage in mid-October and thought it was probably taking pupæ of the Large White butterfly (*Pieris brassicae*), which were common there. The birds' call-note was a strong, high "chwip"; C. W. Holt recorded a "chattering cry" of one bird which was threatened by a Fulmar (*Fulmarus glacialis*) when feeding on the cliffs.

It was interesting to see how quickly the lack of a suitable habitat on Fair Isle compelled the woodpeckers to adopt granivorous habits. In late September birds were often at the corn-stooks in the fields, and from the beginning of October spent most of their time in the stackyards feeding on the ricks. They were very confiding and permitted close approach. C. W. Holt recorded of one bird watched at a stook on September 23rd: "It was seen to remove an oat-seed from the cluster and place it on what was subsequently found to be the fairly solid knot formed by the usual tying of several straws around the stook. The seed was then 'hammered' in the usual way and the husks seen to drop, whereupon the kernel was promptly swallowed with a slight throw-back of the head. This procedure was repeated several times: the bird would move a few feet to secure a seed, but always brought it back to the same anvil for 'hammering.' The routine was identical with that used by Great Spotted Woodpeckers in my garden with almond nuts, where the nut is fetched from distant places and placed in a crevice in the bark which acts as a vice." R. F. Ruttledge and others watched the same behaviour on September 28th and subsequently.