

THE FIELD HABITS AND NESTING OF THE HOBBY.

BY

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THE Hobby (*Falco s. subbuteo*) is a rare and extremely local bird in England, chiefly confined to the midland, southern and south-western counties. Its headquarters are probably certain districts in Dorset, Wiltshire and Hampshire. In these counties, particularly the last two, it is well represented in its strongholds. In some other English counties it breeds sparingly, yet regularly. But many former haunts have been deserted, while in others the bird is decreasing. Nevertheless, in one district I discovered in June, 1931, two pairs breeding within five hundred yards, while in another haunt I have known of three nesting pairs within a radius of a mile and a half. These are, however, unfortunately the exceptions.

Owing to its restricted area and scarcity few ornithologists have had the opportunity of becoming really familiar with the Hobby's habits in England, and as I have made a special study of this bird for some years in a number of different areas, it is hoped that these notes may help in giving a clear view of the bird's habits.

Hobbies arrive on their nesting-grounds towards the end of April or early in May. April 29th is the earliest date I have actually seen them on their ground. I do not know whether they travel singly or in pairs, but I have seen a pair together on May 2nd. During May they are courting and much in one another's company. Together they go hunting, and in the evening play and soar towards the clouds, calling querulously to one another. Towards the end of September and through October most Hobbies migrate, but some pairs are later.

FLIGHT.

The flight of the Hobby is unique. When hunting it will fly along at a fair height, gliding and winnowing alternately. If it sees a prospective quarry it hurls itself after it, following the turns and twists of its prey with rare skill and great agility. Few naturalists have stressed the Hobby's fondness for soaring. Sometimes I have known a pair to ring up right out of the range of my binoculars. There has also been discussion whether the Hobby hovers. Although it does not do so regularly like the Kestrel, it often hovers momentarily over gorse on a common or over a reedbed when searching for dragonflies. I have also occasionally seen the bird hover head to wind when high up and on the look-out for prey.

In some lights and at certain angles the Hobby certainly looks like a finely moulded Peregrine. Viewed from below the Hobby suggests a gigantic Swift, but its flight is superb. The female is always slightly the larger and more powerful, but this is often only noticeable when the pair are seen in the air together. To appreciate its amazing powers of flight, one should see, as I once did, a fight between two male Hobbies. They doubled and danced about the sky, turning, tumbling and twisting. The Hobby is also magnificent in its mastery of a gale.

FOOD.

Despite what has been written to the contrary, I consider that the Hobby preys much more commonly on small birds than is generally supposed. My experience, gathered in different districts, can be summarized thus :—

- (1) The Hobby varies its diet a great deal.
- (2) Dragonflies, moths and beetles, etc., are taken, but they feed equally on small birds. I have definite proof of this. Around various eyries I have found the remains of Willow-Wrens, Chiffchaffs, Great and Blue Tits, Tree-Pipits, Meadow-Pipits, Linnets, Yellow Buntings, Wood-Larks, Sky-Larks, Swifts, Swallows, Martins (both kinds) and once a Greenfinch. I have myself seen Hobbies capture Larks, Pipits, Swifts (twice), House-Martins and once a Swallow (July, 1931).
- (3) In some districts the young are fed mainly on Larks. In others, Pipits are the principal diet. Indeed, out of thirty feeding-places examined, only three failed to show traces of Larks or Pipits. This conclusion is also confirmed by the observations of Captain Pearman.
- (4) Sometimes a pair of Hobbies will harry migrating flocks of Swallows and Martins.

But, in fairness, I must give the other side. The Rev. F. C. R. Jourdain tells me that stomach examination of fifteen English Hobbies showed extensive insect feeding. He also points out that insect remains will not be found at feeding-places. This is true, but the result of my inspection of feeding-places is supported by field observation and also by examination of many pellets. The correct solution is that Hobbies like a varied diet. Eighty per cent. of the Hobbies of my acquaintance take a large number of small birds as well as their insect prey.

This July (1931), for the first time, I saw a Hobby capture a Swallow. Dipping and rising, the Swallow attempted to outpace its rival. But the Hobby overhauled it rapidly, and rising above it, darted down, missed, but flew up. Then, passing below, the Hobby turned over on its back and cut

the Swallow down. Without a pause it flew away towards its nesting-haunt.

Prettier, but more deadly than the twisting flight after a dragonfly—and that is a performance of extraordinary grace and skill—is the chase of a mounting Sky-Lark. A grey streak shoots down at those little dancing brown wings, misses, checks, throws up again. Then, at last, perhaps a few brown feathers turn over and over in the breeze, and the Hobby fades into the distance with a little bundle in its talons. But the Hobby often abandons an arduous pursuit and flies away to seek an easier quarry. It also preys on insects high up in the air. Mr. C. V. Stoney and I watched one through our binoculars doing so in June, 1931. The Rev. F. C. R. Jourdain tells me that certain species of beetle fly very high. He considers that Hobbies often feed in this manner, when flying high. Late in the evening I have also known a Hobby to sit on a favourite stump on a common and hawk "May-bugs", returning to its perch at intervals of a few seconds. It is a fallacy to suppose that the Hobby only hunts in the evening and the period just after dawn, but admittedly it is then most active. Once incubation has commenced the male will hunt regularly from the dawn of day till the fall of night, and each pair has definite hunting beats and appears to keep rigidly to them.

NOTES.

In no book that I have read have the calls of the Hobby been accurately described. Some writers say that they resemble those of the Kestrel, which they certainly do not, others quote the words of Mr. J. Walpole-Bond, who described the note as "a double-syllabled cry, 'qui-rik' . . . weak and thin, yet whistling, brisk and somewhat peevish." While this is an accurate description of one of the Hobby's cries, the bird has others:—

(1) A thin, high-pitched, peevish scream—"tew-tew"—not at all unlike that of a Sparrow-Hawk, but thinner and less sustained. In it there is also, perhaps, the suspicion of the "qui, qui" of the Wryneck. It is not long-drawn or whining like the Peregrine's scream, but is uttered only in short bursts, when its nest is being examined or at other times when the bird is angry, as, for instance, when it is driving away a Crow or other larger bird from the neighbourhood of its eyrie. Sometimes they also scream towards sundown.

(2) The normal call-note, a ringing cry, "qu^{ir}-ik" or "cir-ic," so ably described by Mr. Bond. This note is used when the birds are hunting or calling to one another during their courtship.

(3) A metallic and creaking note, "*keek*" or "*cic*," not unlike an old tree creaking in the wind. This is uttered sharply and I have never heard it slurred. It is presumably an anger or excitement note. I have only heard it when I have been climbing to a nest or the Hobby has been sitting on a branch near it.

(4) A curious "chittering" is sometimes used by the bird when it is floating over a nest containing young.

BREEDING-HAUNTS AND NESTING-SITES.

The Hobby's haunts show great diversity. I have found them among squat, heather-covered hills, with clumps and belts of Scots pines. In another district the Hobby haunts the outskirts of true forest-land, where mile upon mile of beeches mingle with old oaks and an occasional clump of pines. A third stronghold is a region of green hills and stony pastures. There the Hobby nests in the clumps of beech and pine that spring up from the hillsides and in the folds of the valleys.

My experience has shown that, other things being equal, the Hobby prefers a clump, line or plantation of thinly planted trees. Failing a suitable clump, Hobbies readily go to big woods, provided the trees are not too close together. Mr. Jourdain tells me of several haunts where Hobbies usually select a hedgerow tree. But he agrees with me in saying that the other type of sites are preferred when they are available.

In the counties where most of Mr. G. A. Garceau's and my work has been done conditions have been natural and not artificial. In the absence of collectors and game-keepers, one has been able to see which of the sites the Hobby would choose when they are side by side. Of twenty-five eyries examined between 1928-31, seventeen have been in clumps or lines, seven in big woods, and one in an isolated tree on the top of a hill.

The chosen clumps differ greatly. Some pairs breed in tall, straight pine clumps, others in scrubby downland plantations, others haunt little groves of oak trees. When a big wood harbours them, the chosen nest may be on the outskirts of a big beech or oak forest, or it may be in a vast pine wood with birches growing thick beneath them. It is not by any means always in an outside tree; in a well-thinned pine wood the eyrie may be anywhere. Occasionally a nest in a tree, which borders a broad ride or track, is chosen. In my experience, however, a commanding position with a good "take off" has always been chosen.

The Hobby builds no nest for itself, but takes over a disused nest of a Carrion-Crow or other tree-nesting species. Occasionally a decrepit nest of a Magpie does duty, while

some pairs of my acquaintance habitually resort to rookeries. I have also on rare occasions known them use a Sparrow-Hawk's nest in a little wooded hollow. Once only, I found a Hobby inhabiting a very old squirrel's drey. But he who expects to find many eyries in the "abandoned abode of a Heron, Ring Dove, or Sparrow-Hawk, or even the 'drey' of a squirrel" will certainly be disappointed! The nest of the Carrion-Crow is the favourite. In some districts the Hobby prefers a new Crow's nest, in others it is not so particular. Of fourteen nests discovered in 1931 nine were in old Crows', four in the year's Crows' nests. Despite emphatic statements to the contrary by Mr. N. Gilroy and others, if a new Crow's nest is taken, the Hobbies often remove the wool-hair lining and lay their eggs on a scrape in the dried grass and twigs beneath. When the nest is old and flimsy, sometimes a few fir cones repose among the eggs and the bird does not trouble to remove them.

The Hobby is not particular whether the nest selected is at the top or crown of tree or at the end of an outflung limb. Sometimes a giant tree with a limbless trunk is selected. I have breathless memories of a couple of Hobby-trees that actually measured over sixty feet from the ground to the first branch! At other times a mean little fir in a downland or hill plantation is chosen.

By the end of May or early June most Hobbies have settled upon a site; often, indeed, for quite a week before an egg has been laid the female will brood the empty nest. Also just before the eggs are laid Hobbies are often noisy and scream and dive over their future home. But, at this time, the observer must exercise great care, as many Hobbies readily desert a site if much disturbed before the eggs are laid. This is confirmed by the observations of Mr. Garceau, Capt. Pearman and others.

I have read that "the same haunt, and often the same nest, are used yearly!" This may be true in some localities, but in the haunts with which I am familiar it is decidedly rare to find a Hobby using a nest twice in succession. I have found that usually each pair has several sites which they use alternately. These alternatives may be within a few yards or up to a mile and more apart. Though occasionally it happens that a pair will concentrate all their sites in different parts of a big wood, other pairs will have alternatives in distant clumps.

BEHAVIOUR AT THE NEST.

Depending to a certain extent on the position of the nest, the behaviour of sitting Hobbies varies much. Some are

close sitters, others the reverse. I have had to tap a tree three times before the sitter would leave her eggs, at other times I have known one to leave as soon as an intruder showed over the sky-line. When a Hobby is disturbed from the nest it frequently swoops down and then curves upwards, but I have seen them flutter off in a clumsy way. Another will twist and dodge like a Sparrow-Hawk.

Once flushed, most Hobbies are noisy. But some are silent. Also, the Hobby is such a temperamental bird that its behaviour varies from day to day. I have known one that was very noisy one day never utter a note the next time I inspected the eyrie. But, if any rule can be made, I should say that most, when disturbed, make short, uneasy flights up and down, now calling high above the trees, now diving down among them, and both birds are apt to scream periodically. Usually the hen returns to her nest in less than half an hour, so a little patient watching will often reveal an unknown nest. While this is the rule, there are frequent exceptions to it. I have known a hen Hobby slink silently away and never show up again. Sometimes a pair will hang over the sky-line and evince little interest in the fate of their belongings.

The male Hobby may be away hunting and consequently never be seen at all, or he may be standing sentinel on a tree quite close to the eyrie. When disturbed, he will often call his mate off her eggs, at other times he flies lazily away to another perch. More rarely he will be soaring high above the nesting wood.

Some Hobbies are very bold. In 1930, when I was climbing to a nest, the female actually stooped so close to my head that I had to duck to avoid her attack. She then actually settled on a branch some ten yards away and watched me, every now and then using her excitement note, "keek"! Captain C. W. R. Knight was struck several times by a Hobby when he was photographing her nest in July, 1920.

During the early stages of incubation the food "pass" of the Hobbies may be occasionally witnessed. I will quote my diary for June, 1930. Shortly before 4 p.m. the cock flew north. About an hour later I heard him call a dissyllabic "cwir-ic", a high-pitched, whistling, yet far-carrying sound. The hen Hobby immediately swooped from the nest and raced away in the direction of the sound. When I first saw him the cock was flying high. Circling a few times, the hen Hobby rapidly rose and overtook him. They flew together for a short distance with the cock slightly above

his mate. Then, through my glasses, I saw him drop something. She turned over and caught it deftly in her talons. Both birds then streaked back to the nesting wood.

Many observers have described the Montagu Harriers' "pass", but few seem to have seen Hobbies or Peregrines do it. They do so more rarely, but it is a performance of rare skill. The speed at which the birds converge is extraordinary. To see Peregrines "pass" high above the sea or Hobbies over a heath is an unforgettable sight. More usually, however, the male Hobby will call his mate off the nest and she will join him on a favoured branch hard by.

The Hobby jealously guards its nesting-site. Carrion-Crows and Rooks are driven off with fury. I have also known a Kestrel to be attacked, and then the different styles of flight of the two birds were seen to advantage. Occasionally a cat or dog arouses the anger of the Hobby. I well remember Mr. Walpole-Bond and I discovering an eyrie in a very difficult place by watching a Hobby stooping repeatedly at a prowling cat. But despite all their care I have known Carrion-Crows and even Rooks to suck the eggs. But this has only happened when the Hobby has been an exceptionally light sitter.

LAYING AND INCUBATING.

The Hobby commences to sit very late in the year. While I have known of an occasional hen brooding before June 10th, that is the exception rather than the rule. The best date for a fresh, full clutch lies between June 14th to 20th. Some pairs are habitually later, and in one district I have rarely found a full clutch of eggs before June 24th. Many Hobbies lay their first egg almost to a day annually.

The eggs are laid every second day, but I have sometimes found the third egg to be laid *three* days after the second. Brooding commences with the second egg and each egg takes four days to "turn". My own observation shows that the incubation-period is twenty-eight days.

While some Hobbies permit their eggs to be taken one by one as they are laid, others move to another site after one or two have been snatched in this way. Sometimes a Hobby will brood substituted Kestrel's eggs, sometimes she will sense the fraud and desert them. Once a Hobby pierced an egg with its claw, but did not desert.

Should mishap overtake the eggs before they are far gone (occasionally even then) the Hobby may lay again. Speaking from my original data I doubt whether more than 50 per cent. do so. Although in some districts most Hobbies do lay again, there are others where very few do so. The

interval between the first and second attempts varies considerably. I have heard of a Hobby re-laying in eleven days, but an interval of two to three weeks is the general rule. Very exceptionally indeed, should the second clutch also meet with disaster, a third clutch is laid.

The Hobby always lays a small clutch. Three eggs are the rule, but in some places two are not uncommon. In Britain "fours" are very rare indeed. The only genuine four that has come within my scope was discovered by Captain Pearman and Mr. E. P. Chance in 1926. In a second attempt it is rare to find three eggs, two is usual, not infrequently only one. I have heard it said that all eggs laid in second clutches are small and lacking in colour, but this is not the case.

The eggs are objects of great beauty and, contrary to conventional opinion, they vary considerably. By some it is wrongly held that the main characteristic of the Hobbies' eggs is the yellowish-brown wash. In *The Practical Handbook of British Birds* Mr. Jourdain says that yellowness appears as incubation advances, and that is quite true. There is a yellow type of Hobbies' eggs, others become yellow after incubation, but the most characteristic thing to note about most eggs is the peppery nature of the markings. One type has a pure salmon-red ground peppered with very light brown, another has a blood-red ground, in others the markings approach those of Wood-Warblers in type. One lovely variety I saw in 1931 had a rose-pink ground with a chocolate cap. Some eggs are capped with deep chocolate-brown, others are blotched at the smaller end. Often a few spots of deep sienna-brown are scattered haphazard over the surface. In rare varieties blotches replace spots, in others the ground-colour is almost white. While the yellow and brown-peppered type of eggs are frequently found, it is rare to find three similar types in a set. Often one is much pinker than the others. On the whole, the eggs of the Hobby are larger than Kestrels. Although some types do approximate the Kestrel, I have yet to see a clutch about which there could be any reasonable doubt.

On the hen Hobby falls the principal onus of hatching the eggs, but I have actually seen the partners exchange duties and subsequently flushed the male from the nest.

As time advances a little grey down and a few feathers cling to the sides of the nest and to the branches adjacent to it. Sometimes a pellet or two will be found among the eggs, while at the foot of the tree and others nearby there may be much "whitewash" and the remains of many victims. Other feeding places are often a considerable distance from the nest.

THE YOUNG.

The young when first hatched are beautiful little balls of down with dark eyes. The time spent in the nest varies. One family which I was watching began to fly about the branches after twenty-three days, but it was over four weeks before they were strong on the wing. Even when the young have flown the nest is still used for feeding purposes. Occasionally I have seen the old birds "pass" food to the youngsters high up in the air.

Birds of the year are brown on the back and yellowish-white underneath. They also lack the brilliant orange-red thigh-plumes. It is said that some breed in their first year, others certainly do not. I remember being once sorely puzzled by a non-breeding pair which screamed and dived just like a normal pair of breeders.

STATUS.

Most of the estimates about the Hobby's status are vague and uncertain. During the last twenty years it has deserted several haunts, in others it is decreasing rapidly. The desertion of old strongholds affords a sad but interesting problem. The reason for their passing seems to be threefold:

- (1) The Hobby likes a secluded haunt among the open spaces and it resents the encroachments of motorists, trippers and builders.
- (2) Lack of suitable food. A dearth of Larks and Pipits in certain localities may partially account for the Hobby's disappearance from them. The extermination of Carrion-Crows in suitable areas must also be remembered.
- (3) In many districts it is still ruthlessly shot at the nest by gamekeepers. I am confident that were that persecution removed it would reappear again in many an old haunt. In one district, only, egg-collecting has been pursued to excess.

It is an interesting fact that the Hobby is largely confined to a few counties to which the Merlin is a comparative stranger. This is significant, since the two species do not appreciably overlap; possibly they are unable to flourish in the same area. This may be the solution to the riddle of the Merlins' absence in the southern and midland districts of England.