

## BREEDING OF THE BLACK REDSTART IN BRITAIN A CENTURY-OLD RECORD

BY

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IN 1916, seven years before T. A. Coward found the Black Redstart (*Phoenicurus ochrurus gibraltariensis*) breeding on the Sussex coast and so established what was then thought to be the first British record, F. C. R. Jourdain wrote an article in *The Zoologist* on the status of the Black Redstart in England as a breeding species. In that article he reviewed every alleged instance of breeding that had been reported up to that date and showed that in every such case an error in identification had been made—"with the possible exception of Hancock's . . . which however requires confirmation before it can possibly be accepted." Hancock's record here referred to was published in 1874 in his *Catalogue of the Birds of Northumberland and Durham* and reads as follows:—"In 1845, a pair [of Black Redstarts] nested in the garden of the late Rev. James Raine, the historian of Durham, in that City; and I am indebted to Mr. Wm. Proctor for their nest, which is now in my collection. An egg belonging to it was kindly presented to me by the Rev. James Raine, son of the above named gentleman."

William Proctor, who gave the nest to Hancock, was the curator-taxidermist of Durham University Museum. He had already published the record himself, for in a "List of Birds found in the County," published as an Appendix to the Rev. G. Ornsby's *Sketches of Durham*, in 1846, he had written thus of the Black Redstart—"Very rare; a nest with five eggs was taken near Crook Hall in the summer of 1845." It will be noted that this was written just one year after the event and twenty-eight years before the publication of Hancock's "Catalogue."

Additional details of the occurrence are to be found in a chapter by Canon H. B. Tristram, F.R.S., of Durham, the eminent ornithologist and traveller, on the "Birds of the County of Durham" in *The Victoria County History of Durham*, published in 1905. Here he wrote—"In the year 1845 a pair [of Black Redstarts] built their nest on a cherry tree trained on a wall in the garden of the Rev. Dr. Raine, at Crook Hall, in the suburbs of Durham City. I regret to say that the birds were shot. The male is in the Durham Museum; the nest and an egg were given to the late John Hancock."

Further evidence is forthcoming from a letter to the late George Bolam from Canon William Greenwell of Durham, then in his 96th year, who had known both Canon Raine and Canon Tristram. It is dated "Durham, Jan. 11th, 1917" and reads—"I well remember the late Canon Raine, son of Dr. Raine, the historian of North Durham, when a boy at the Grammar School, finding the nest of the Black Redstart at Crook Hall, close to Durham, where his father lived. I have forgotten where the bird, its nest and egg went to.

I find however that the bird is in the Museum of the University here, which is now in a very hopeless condition."

Efforts to trace the bird or birds have proved fruitless. The Durham University Museum collections were dispersed and such of the birds as had not already fallen to pieces from neglect were scattered. The nest and one egg, however, are still in the Hancock Collection in the Hancock Museum at Newcastle-on-Tyne. The nest, which is typically that of the Black Redstart, though its situation, if correctly recorded, was certainly unusual, bears this label—"Black Redstart's nest taken in the neighbourhood of Durham about 12 years ago. Presented by W. Proctor, 14th June, 1855." The egg, which is also typical of the species, bears this inscription in Hancock's writing—"Black Redstart taken near Durham some years ago. Prestd. Rev. - Raine, 1855." It is evident that when Hancock wrote these labels in 1855, he did not know the exact date or place where the nest had been taken; but by 1874, when he published the "Catalogue," he had obtained fuller information.

The nest and egg have recently (February, 1945) been sent to the British Museum (Natural History) to be critically examined. The Hon. Guy Charteris, who saw them, considers that they are undoubtedly those of the Black Redstart. His comment on the nest is that it could not be that of any other bird. Thus an old record is definitely confirmed.

#### REFERENCES.

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