Observations on the Black-winged Kite in Portugal with preliminary notes on its status

By M. D. England

(Plates 65-72)

STATUS

For some time considerable doubt has existed in the minds of many, if not most, ornithologists about the Black-winged Kite (*Elanus caeruleus*) as a European breeding species. Indeed, even a superficial survey of the literature shows that this doubt has always been present, and the majority of books on European birds are either very cautious continued...
THE BLACK-WINGED KITE IN PORTUGAL

and non-committal or content to say that it ‘occurs occasionally’ in south-west Europe without stating that it breeds there. Whether contemporary or historical, few authors have been sufficiently satisfied to be dogmatic on the subject. For example, Voous (1960) wrote: ‘In Europe it probably is one of the rare emigrants from Africa. It is, however, not at all certain that it breeds regularly in Europe; it has been suggested that it may in Portugal.’ On the other hand, the authors of the Field Guide were confident enough to state—as I now believe, correctly—‘Resident Portugal’.

It was this very uncertainty which led me, some years ago, to put this bird high on my list of species which ‘require attention’; in particular, I wanted to obtain photographic evidence of its breeding in Europe. It is not, of course, suggested that the photographing of one nest is proof that the species does breed regularly in Portugal, but whether this be true or not it seems worth recording what was learnt during the attempt, always bearing in mind the need to be cautious about drawing conclusions from such limited experience.

Although my interest in the problem, and therefore much reading, began a considerable time ago, it was not until 1959 that I started serious correspondence with ornithologists resident in or very familiar with south-west Europe. The project came near to being abandoned when not a single reply was received from the first six persons I wrote to in Portugal. Even when help was forthcoming, it quickly became evident that I was most unlikely to obtain up-to-date information. In fact, the most recent record of breeding which I was able to find (apart from a reported attempt in southern Spain about 1959) was as long ago as 1944, when the late Henry Coverley found two pairs nesting in a certain plantation (and one at least of them was probably unsuccessful). A ‘male’ was seen at the same spot in 1948, though it is not known how the observer was able to tell the sex.

This region and four other fairly large areas in the southern half of Portugal were suggested by various people as possible places to search. The latest, and therefore most hopeful, information was given to me by Miss C. M. Acland, who saw the species in June 1956; her locality seemed unsuitable for breeding, however, and I could not establish satisfactory liaison with people on the spot. Despite four years of enquiries, I did not contact anyone of British nationality (whether resident in Portugal or not) who had actually seen the nest of the Black-winged Kite in Europe; if there are such people, perhaps this paper will serve to draw the information which appears to be so sadly lacking. Even leading Portuguese ornithologists seemed unable to suggest places where we could expect with any certainty to find the species, and I do not think for a moment that this was due to reluctance to divulge the whereabouts of a rare bird; indeed, we had every help.
In the end, a small party of us spent five weeks in Portugal in the spring of 1963 with the primary object of learning what we could about this apparently elusive bird. Our eventual success, during May, in locating a breeding pair about ten miles from the site of the 1944 nests was due to great good fortune rather than to any particularly clever efforts on our part. Offers over a wide area of a reward which must have seemed a large sum to the shepherds and foresters produced neither further nests nor even claims of birds seen. The majority of these people knew the species by sight or by repute, but most had not seen one ‘for several years’. The head keeper of the estate where attempted breeding was recorded in 1944, who was able to identify a picture of the bird and who described its habit of hovering, had not seen any in that area ‘in recent years’, although his wife claimed to have had a glimpse of one a few months before. Talks with shepherds and similar people elicited the fact that they considered young Black-winged Kites good to eat—and presumably easy to get at—and one claimed to have found and eaten a family of youngsters in 1962, though all admitted that the birds were very rarely seen.

Our general impression was that the species is not only scarce but decreasing in numbers. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that its hold as a breeding bird in Europe is precarious and, while it is by no means certain that this has not always been so, the position appears to have deteriorated in the last twenty years. It seems unlikely that the country-folk in the areas which we visited would have been familiar with the bird if it had not previously been more in evidence. However, it must be admitted that the pair we had under observation were extraordinarily inconspicuous in the nesting area. This would be especially so during incubation and is perhaps partially due to their somewhat crepuscular habits. We felt that, contrary to what many observers have noted in other parts of the world (for example, in Africa), this is a species which could be very easily overlooked on its breeding grounds except possibly when feeding young. When disturbed on the nest, the birds usually flew off in a most unobtrusive manner low among the trees and sat waiting at the top of a bush or tree. If the behaviour of our pair is any criterion, it is not impossible that we overlooked and even passed within a few feet of other nests. Unlike many other species of birds of prey, which fly overhead calling in the presence of an intruder, the Black-winged Kites were completely silent when we approached and, as often as not, we did not even see them though we knew where their usual perches were. Until we became used to this, we went in daily fear that they had deserted their nest, though once an observer had been left in the hide one of the pair was usually sitting on the eggs within a very few minutes.

Although it might seem reasonable to suppose that this small south
THE BLACK-WINGED KITE IN PORTUGAL

European population has been kept in existence by the proximity of fair numbers of the species in North Africa, there seems little good evidence of regular migration. Indeed, there are sufficient winter records from Portugal for the bird to be described as resident in that country, even if some of the observations are from places so far removed from likely breeding areas as to show that it is to a certain extent nomadic. However, the possibility of a continual 'interchange' across the Straits of Gibraltar cannot in the present state of our knowledge be completely ruled out.

BREEDING SEASON

Many people had told us that the species nested early and some of our advisers considered our proposed arrival date in Portugal, 24th April, ridiculously late if we wished to photograph a pair with small young. However, the nest at which plates 65-72 were taken contained four eggs when we first saw it on 11th May and we were informed that they were not then more than a week old. Though it proved impossible to discover just when the first was laid, it was evidently about 1st May.

We assumed at first that it must be a replacement clutch, but subsequent research has inclined me to the view that this was not so and that the end of April is the usual laying date in Portugal. I cannot trace any records of eggs before April and Coverley (unpublished) reported watching a bird nest-building in that month, while Tait (1924) recorded 'large young' in June. It is interesting to note that Favier, quoted by Archer and Godman (1937), stated that the species 'breeds in April on the sea-board of Morocco'.

HABITAT, NEST AND EGGS

The breeding habitat was a small, roughly rectangular 'orchard' of low, bushy cork oaks (Quercus suber), surrounded on two sides by large areas of flat, open (almost treeless) ground with coarse grass and low, thorny scrub; on the third side was a wood of larger and more densely planted trees, and on the fourth cultivated land. The nest was about ten feet from the ground in a small, rather isolated tree (plate 69a). It was built chiefly of sticks, rather loosely and roughly put together but neatly lined with roots and fine grasses, and was on the south side of the bush, quite open and visible (plate 69b). Sprays of greenery were added by the birds during incubation. The eggs when first seen appeared to be very similar to those of the Kestrel (Falco tinnunculus) though with a faint but beautiful purplish 'bloom'. They had not hatched when we had to leave three weeks later and, though worn, some of this bloom was still visible.

A nest height of ten feet from the ground seems to be at or a little
below the usual in many parts of the world. However, some writers suggest that it may be considerably more—for example, Grosvenor and Wetmore (1929) gave 25-50 feet for America, and Archer and Godman (1937) 20-25 feet for Africa—while several mention that old nests of other species may be made use of. In this connection, it is interesting that on the estate where we enquired initially we were shown only two possible nests, both very high up (at least 60 feet). They looked to us, if a little on the small side, like nests of the Carrion Crow (Corvus corone); one was unoccupied and the other contained one young Carrion Crow and two young Great Spotted Cuckoos (Clamator glandarius). The keeper, however, seemed convinced that if we did find the nest of the Black-winged Kite in that area it would be in a tall tree.

That the species is adaptable so far as nest-sites are concerned is shown by the fact that on the island of Masira in the Arabian Sea, in default of suitable trees, the birds breed in caves (Green 1948).

A number of people have commented upon the partiality of the Black-winged Kite for cultivated land and even villages. John Warham informs me that in certain parts of Australia it is a common sight hovering over built-up areas. We were all the more interested, therefore, to note that our nest was in sight of the only farm buildings to be found within many miles. It is also interesting, in the context of the bird's regularity or otherwise as a Portuguese breeding species, that the place was called Kite Farm!

**INCUBATION BEHAVIOUR**

A hide was begun at a distance of 150 feet and was then enlarged and moved nearer very gradually and with the greatest possible care. Although such extreme precautions were obviously desirable, I have seldom known birds take less notice of a hide and on my first session in it—at a distance of nine feet from the nest—my notes read: ‘8.40 a.m., in hide. 8.43 a.m., bird straight on to eggs; no chance of photo.’

I must admit that I was rather sceptical when the first member of the party to occupy the hide, John Norie, thought that he had both sexes incubating alternately at comparatively short intervals throughout the day. I was proved quite wrong, however, since I was quickly to see a change-over at the nest myself, and I was left in no doubt whatever during the next few days that the birds took approximately equal shares on the eggs. On one occasion the sitting bird, the male, refused to respond to the increasingly urgent calls of his oncoming mate, until she landed on the nest and virtually burrowed her way under him as he reluctantly departed.

The pair were very attached to one another and while the female was sitting the male spent a great deal of his time on a bush near-by.
Their behaviour as a pair was in many ways strikingly similar to that of some shrikes, and this likeness was enhanced by their habit of cocking their tails up and down. Much ‘conversation’ went on between the sitting bird and the other, and the male frequently fed the female either on or off the nest. He once arrived at the nest with food twice within five minutes, on each occasion remaining just long enough for a photograph to be taken. When he was near, and especially when he visited the nest in this way, the female would adopt an ‘invitation’ posture, flattening herself in the rather shallow nest so much as almost to disappear from sight (plate 65), at the same time raising her tail slightly (see also under voice).

It was impossible to identify the food which was brought because it was very small, was carried in the bill and feeding took place quickly. I suspect it consisted of insects such as cockchafers. The birds’ interest in insects was evident from the way in which the one incubating would lean over the edge of the nest, with characteristic waving of its head, to watch small creatures like beetles and bees. A careful search beneath the nest failed to reveal any pellets, though the female once spent a long time trying to bring one up. Unfortunately she was called off by her mate before she succeeded.

A Raven (Corvus corax) croaking overhead was the cause of a most remarkable change of facial expression in the sitting bird, with great opening of the iris, the whole effect being very owl-like.

VOICE

I have summarised my own notes made in the hide and find that I could distinguish at least five calls. Making allowance for the greatly differing ways in which observers will translate bird noises into words, these are on the whole reconcilable with what has previously been recorded.

Perhaps the most frequent call, used apparently by both sexes, might be written as gree-ab, sharp but not loud, with the second syllable rather abrupt; I made a note that it was not at all unlike a miniature version of the call of the Osprey (Pandion haliaetus), and I am interested to find that Grosvenor and Wetmore (1929) described it as ‘somewhat like the Osprey’. Another was a hoarse wheeze, somehow reminiscent of a cat and perhaps best described as a nasal purr; the female made this noise whenever the male came near while she was incubating, and it was often associated with the invitatory crouch. This call would be answered by a rapid chuck, chuck, chuck, heard only from the male; it was chiefly a calling-off note, but he also used a quiet version at the nest as he fed his mate. A high-pitched whistle was believed to be used mainly as an alarm note (e.g. when we were working on the hide) and my notes read: ‘The warning whistle, heard at close quarters,
turns out to be a high-pitched version of *gree-ab*, last syllable only just audible.‘ The last call I distinguished was a single piping note repeated several times at intervals of about a second—‘not unlike the call of a very young wader’. A loud version of this was used by a bird approaching the nest after being disturbed, and a very quiet variation was heard several times from the sitting bird as it raised itself and kept looking down at the eggs, almost as though answering a chick in the shell. This soft piping was also uttered by the sitting bird just before its mate arrived to relieve it, and the change-over was often accompanied by some quiet ‘conversation’ consisting of variants of the piping from the male and of the nasal purr from the female.

Two additional calls were heard in South Africa by Dr. Geoffrey Beven (*in litt.*), one a ‘short, shrill scream’ when stooping at a Buzzard (*Buteo buteo*) and the other a ‘hoot’. We did not see any event likely to elicit the former, while the latter may be the same as the high-pitched whistle described above.

**GENERAL NOTES**

One of the most striking things about these birds in the field was the great variation in the colour of the plumage according to light and position. All members of the party noted at different times that they appeared to have everything from completely black wings to wings with no black at all. Even from the hide at a distance of seven feet this was very noticeable. The sexes were similar in colour, but from the hide we became used to distinguishing them fairly easily, because the male was generally cleaner-looking and had darker markings around his eyes which gave him a different facial expression. The female had fleckings of grey on her head and the upper surfaces of her primaries appeared rather less pure grey. The birds could also usually be separated, apart from these small differences, by the fact that each had its individual route to the nest and usually, of course, its characteristic calls.

The habits of hovering kestrel-fashion and of quartering the ground like a harrier have often been described and will not be repeated here in detail, except to note that our birds were never seen to hover or hunt for food within sight of the nest. However, it is worth recording that once, after being disturbed at the nest, one of this pair gave a wonderful display of soaring—circling round and round up to a considerable height on, as I wrote at the time, ‘outstretched and unflapping wings with rounded ends’—while we packed up our cameras. The wings were raised above the horizontal and measurement of the rough sketch made at the time shows the angle between them to have been about 130°. Dr. Geoffrey Beven (*in litt.*) has two records of similar behaviour from South Africa.
THE BLACK-WINGED KITE IN PORTUGAL

Although there is doubtless good reason for it, one finds it a little difficult to understand how this species came to be called a kite, a name which seems to sit uneasily on a bird which is so delicate in habit and colour. In the field at various times we likened it to a harrier, a kestrel, a tern and even an owl, but never a kite.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
Detailed or individual acknowledgement of assistance may appear superfluous in a brief paper such as this, but the dearth of published information on the Black-winged Kite, especially in Europe, made me almost entirely dependent on personal help which it would be churlish to ignore.

My thanks are due, first, to Dr. H. M. S. Blair for introducing me to the ornithologists in Portugal whose help led eventually to success. To Mr. and Mrs. Colin Tait, of Estoril, for allowing us the freedom of their hunting lodge and the large estate where breeding was recorded in 1944. To Mr. and Mrs. Victor Reynolds, of Estremoz, for their hospitality and offers of assistance on the spot. To Professor J. R. de Santos, Jnr., of the University of Oporto, and Dr. A. P. Passos de Gouveia, Portuguese Consul General in London, for their help and encouragement. To Dr. Geoffrey Beven for the use of his notes and for his kindness in searching the African literature. To Stanley Cramp, who was with the party in Portugal, for criticising and improving this paper in draft. To all those, too many to name, who in this country responded to appeals for information or in Portugal acted as guides and interpreters. Above all, to Mr. and Mrs. Eric Flower, of Oporto, for allowing me access to the invaluable unpublished notes of the late Henry Coverley and for their indefatigable help, without which nothing would have been achieved.

SUMMARY
The status of the Black-winged Kite (*Elanus caeruleus*) in Europe is briefly discussed and the finding of a nest in Portugal in 1963 described. Notes are included on the behaviour of the pair at the nest and on the various calls which they were heard to make.

REFERENCES
Coverley, H. (unpublished): Notes in the possession of Mr. and Mrs. E. Flower.
BRITISH BIRDS

PLATE 65. Male Black-winged Kite (*Elanus caeruleus*) standing over the female as she crouches low in the nest in an invitation posture (page 449), Portugal, May 1965. The species has for years been a mystery in Europe and this was apparently the first nest recorded in Portugal since 1944 (pages 444-452) (photo: M. D. England)
Plates 66 and 67. Two more shots of the Black-winged Kite (Elanus caeruleus) at the nest, giving a good idea of the whitish head and tail, the pale blue-grey back, the white under-parts and the distribution of black on the 'shoulders'. Above, the bird has just dropped from the top of the tree (cf. plate 71) (photos: M. D. England)
PLATE 68. Black-winged Kite (*Elanus caeruleus*) incubating; the two birds took turns on the eggs (page 448). Note that the grey primaries are black underneath; the eyes are red and, as one expects in a crepuscular species, rather large. This nest was made of sticks, grasses and roots (see plate 69b) (photos: M. D. England)
PLATE 69. Above, breeding habitat of Black-winged Kite (*Elanus caeruleus*) in flat open country with bushy cork oaks; the nest was on the side of the tree in the foreground, quite open and only about ten feet up (page 447). Below, the four eggs were similar to Kestrels' but with a faint purplish 'bloom' (photos: M. D. England)
PLATE 70. Above, another picture of the Black-winged Kite (*Elanus caeruleus*) incubating (*photo: M. D. England*). Below, coming to the nest from behind, through the foliage of the tree; here the contrast of the black area on the wing with the whitish head and white under-parts shows up particularly well (*photo: A. N. H. Peach*)
Plate 71. Black-winged Kite (*Elanus caeruleus*) perched on top of the cork oak right over the open nest (no branches removed for photography) (photo: A. N. H. Peach)
Plate 72. A final look at one of the Black-winged Kites (*Elanus caeruleus*) on the edge of the nest, Portugal, May 1963. As the tree was not more than thirteen feet high and the nest only three feet from the top, this shot and plate 71 drive home the small size of the bird—little larger than a Kestrel (photo: A. N. H. Peach)