Notes

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Abnormal Reed Warbler chicks

On 30th July 2004, at Rostherne Mere NNR, Cheshire, MC located a Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus scirpaceus* nest containing two nestlings which, from their size and degree of feathering, were estimated to be nine days old. Both birds were of identical size and were clearly Reed Warblers, but whereas one chick had a typical appearance, its sibling looked most unusual. The strange chick sat awkwardly in the nest with bill pointing upwards. It was partially sighted, with bright orange skin, legs and feet, and had a dull orange bill. Its entire upperparts were uniform pale grey, while the underparts were white, unlike those of the normal chick, which were cream.

MC returned two hours later to find the normal chick safely within the refuge of the nest but the strange bird had fallen and drowned in the water below. Reed Warbler chicks should be capable of reacting to a fall by climbing the nearest reed stem, but this bird had failed to do so, presumably owing to its sight impairment, despite the calm weather conditions. The abnormal pigmentation and impairment to the bird's eyesight could have been the result of reduced production of melanin. This condition is known as schizochroism: the lack of one melanin type, leaving the remaining underlying pigmentation unaffected. It is likely that this would affect the retina and skin as described, as well as the plumage of the bird. Abnormal pigmentation is usually associated with genetic factors, but ingested toxins may also have been implicated. The gene for schizochroism is sex-linked, and in the wild manifests itself only in females, which may explain why one chick was affected and not its sibling.

Since 1996, MC has been aware of weakness in some legs of nestling Reed Warblers. The affected legs have been soft and uncalcified; sometimes the legs have been bent. In all observed cases, the bird was ringed on the opposite leg and upon catching two of these birds as fledged juveniles, when 24 and 64 days old, the ankle joint on the afflicted leg was found to be wide and seemingly arthritic. One bird with a bent leg was caught as an adult one year and four years later. Its leg had healed and straightened but a scar remained as though the leg had been broken. No defects were found during a study of nestlings at this site from 1973 to 1995, and we are unable to explain the cause of defect in the warblers' legs.

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Reed Warbler with abnormal body-feathers

A first-year Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus scirpaceus* with abnormal body-feathers was caught on 9th October 2004 near Diyarbakir, south-eastern Turkey (37°54'N 40°15'E). At the lower part of the back, one single feather was growing which was similar to the size, shape and colour of the rectrices, while an adjacent feather looked like an undertail-covert (plate 265). Both feathers were somewhat more delicate in structure and with slightly less pigment than a typical rectrix and undertail-covert. They both grew from a small, reddish-coloured protuberance which looked somewhat like an oil-gland but smaller (plate 002). Around this formation, the skin had developed normally. The bird was in good condition, and none of the biometric data taken were unusual. The same bird was trapped again on 12th October, by which time its weight had increased from 10.2 g to 11.1 g.

Clench (1970) concluded that pterylosis (the arrangement of contour feathers into orderly groupings – feather tracts – on the skin) is a constant anatomical feature. Additional remiges and rectrices have occasionally been reported in

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265 & 266. First-year Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus scirpaceus* with abnormal body-feathers, near Diyarbakir, southeastern Turkey, October 2004.

both passerine and non-passerine species (e.g. Goc 1996, Roper & Grantham 2005), but this case involves a more significant anomaly within the contour feathers. It is difficult to explain, but may have been caused by a perturbation during embryonic development or by some local mutation, and it appears to be exceptional.

Acknowledgments

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References

Clench, M. H. 1970. Variability in body pterylosis, with special references to the genus *Passer*. *Auk* 87: 650–691.

Goc, M. 1996. A Dunlin and Barred Warbler with additional primaries. *Not. Orn.* 37, 3–4: 327–329. (In Polish with English summary)

Roper, P., & Grantham, M. 2005. Garden Warblers: autumn moulting in the UK and birds with extra rectrices. *Brit. Birds* 98: 266–267.

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Garden Warblers moulting in autumn

Recently, Roper & Grantham (*Brit. Birds* 98: 266–267) described two adult Garden Warblers in primary moult in the UK. In 1969, T. W. Gladwin reported seven Garden Warblers in primary moult in the UK, and two further birds in Spain (*Bird Study* 16: 131–132). In Belgium, a Garden Warbler in primary moult was recorded on 28th August 1964 in Flemish Brabant, and six other Garden Warblers were listed as moulting primary feathers in a note by M. Dehaen and myself in 1971 (*Gerfaut* 61: 105–106). Subsequently, another seven moulting birds were found and the details published (*Ornis Flandriae* 1: 15–17; 1988, 7: 4) and supplementary records were sent to me by other ringers.

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Food-induced erythrism in House Sparrows

In late August 2004, an all-red seedeater, associating with House Sparrows *Passer domesticus*, began making regular visits to a garden bird feeder in Kinlochbervie, Sutherland. A second bird, shyer and slightly smaller, and with red restricted to the upperparts, visited the garden less frequently. The householders, Mr and Mrs J. Larter, were unable to identify the all-red bird, and phoned me for advice.

On 7th September, I had prolonged views of the all-red bird, which was fairly uniform vinous red, with a few brownish feathers on the crown and mantle, pinker margins to some of the wing feathers, brownish rectrices edged reddish, and brown primaries. Although the bird was slightly larger than the accompanying House Sparrows, the shape of the bill and tail were identical. The pale supercilium was rose-

pink, but the facial pattern was similar to that of female House Sparrow; the legs were pink and the bill colour normal (plate 267). Although it was clearly not a hurricane-blown Summer Tanager *Piranga rubra* or an exotic rosefinch *Carpodacus*, it was not easy to see how a House Sparrow might have developed such vivid plumage. The second individual was seen later that afternoon and, despite the deep, rose-red colour of the upperwings and mantle, was clearly a juvenile male House Sparrow. Although the two birds were at opposite ends of the species' size range, this finally confirmed my suspicion that both were aberrant House Sparrows. Three red, sparrow-like birds were reported from nearby Oldshoremore at about the same time.

Knowing that true erythrism is a rare condition, I began to seek possible explanations. Mr Larter, a fisherman, mentioned that salmon feed was stored at Kinlochbervie harbour to supply the local fish farm. Enquiries of the company concerned revealed that the food mix contained ground prawn shell to make the salmon flesh pink. The food mix is kept under nets at the fish farm, and is occasionally scavenged by Blackbirds *Turdus merula*, Common Starlings *Sturnus vulgaris*, gulls (Laridae) and crows (Corvidae). Similar storage arrangements exist elsewhere and it is perhaps curious that, so far as I am aware, no other 'red sparrows' have been reported from salmon-farming areas. Perhaps the Kinlochbervie birds may somehow have accumulated an especially high concentration of ground prawn shell. Local recorders should perhaps be aware of the possibility of similar occurrences in fish-farming areas, as such birds present a real potential for misidentification.

Denis Summers-Smith (pers. comm.) commented that diet-induced changes in captive seedeaters are quite easily achieved during moult, when new feathers readily absorb pigment. He is aware of no instances of captive House Sparrows being treated in this way, or of any instance of true (genetic) erythrism in this species, although Nichols (1935) described a male with exaggerated chestnut markings and reddish legs. Since House Sparrows undergo a complete moult not long after fledging, and have rufous tones in the plumage naturally, they would perhaps be more prone to 'reddening' than the other species observed taking salmon food.

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267. Erythristic House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*, Kinlochbervie, Sutherland, September 2004.

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Reference

Nichols, J.T. 1935. Seasonal and individual variation in House Sparrows. *Bird Banding* 6: 11–15.

Blue Chaffinch eating meat

Further to Philip Radford's note (*Brit. Birds* 96: 91), concerning a Common Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs* feeding on a dead Blackbird *Turdus merula*, I saw a female Blue Chaffinch *F. teydea* pecking at strands of dried meat on a bone thrown out for dogs in the Las Lajas recreation area, Tenerife, on 16th January 2004. Several bird species in this area are habituated to humans and their detritus, and with the common use of barbeques it is perhaps inevitable that meat particles in one form or another will be encountered by scavenging birds.

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