THE ROYAL AIR FORCE ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY

JOURNAL

THE ROYAL AIR FORCE ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY

MEMBERSHIP: For details apply Hon. Secretary, 110 Edinburgh Drive, Ickenham, Uxbridge, Middlesex.

R.A.F.O.S. JOURNAL NO. 4

November
1967

CONTENTS

PRICE: five shillings.

BIRDS AROUND THE STATIONS D. Wright

No. 1 Marham

Marham lies on the northern fringe of the Brecklands and to the east of the Fens. Not too distant are the Wash and the north Norfolk coast. Because of the variety of habitat around Marham it is an ideal spot to see a large number of species. I have divided the area into three parts: the airfield, the Brecklands, and the Fens. The coast and the Wash are too large to deal with here.

The Airfield

Marham is one of the few airfields in Britain where you will find the Stone Curlew (Burhinus oedicnemus) a regular summer visitor. It breeds in the stony fields near by and uses the airfield as a feeding-ground. Large flocks can be seen on the airfield after the breeding-season.

Wheatears (Oenanthe oenanthe) can also be found in fair numbers after breeding in various fields between the Married Quarters. The Corn Bunting (Emberiza calandra) breeds beside the airfield, this bird being not too common in Norfolk. The Air Traffic Control Tower boasts a large number of House Martins (Delichon urbica) nesting under the eaves.

During the winter months large flocks of Golden Plovers (Charadrius apricarius) can be seen, together with Lapwings (Vanellus vanellus), Common Gulls (Larus canus), and Black-headed Gulls (Larus ridibundus).

Running through the domestic part of the station is a line of beeches called Ladyswood. In winter flocks of over 400 Bramblings (Fringilla montifringilla) feed amongst the beech-mast. Hawfinch (Coccothraustes coccothraustes) are there, together with Green Woodpeckers (Picus viridis), and Great Spotted Woodpeckers (Dendrocopus major). A delight in summer is to stand outside the Officers' Mess and to listen to the Nightingales (Luscinia megarhynchos).

Less common species I have noted at Marham are Black Terns (Chlidonias niger), Black Redstarts (Phoenicurus ochruros) and a melanistic Golden Plover.

The Brecklands

This huge area of sandy soil is of great interest to the ornithologist. Containing heaths, commons, fens, and lakes, it offers a wealth of bird life to satisfy the birdwatcher. Stone Curlews come immediately to mind, and can be discovered in many fields all over the area.

Also breeding in these fields are Ringed Plovers (Charadrius hiaticula) some thirty to forty miles from a suitable coastal habitat. In the pine-trees, which hedge many of the fields, Crossbills (Loxia curvirostra) breed, and by sitting quietly near a puddle of water one can get good views of these find birds drinking.

Not so long ago I found a pair of Montagu's Harriers (Circus pygargus) breeding on a common in the Brecks, and one can certainly find Hen Harriers (Circus cyaneus) on some of the heaths in winter. The heaths also provide habitat for Red-backed Shrike (Lanius collurio), Redpolls (Carduelis flammea), Grasshopper Warbler (Locustella naevia), and Curlew (Numenius arquata), to mention but a few.

The lakes in Breckland contain large numbers of waterfowl. A winter-day visit to any of them will produce a variety of duck. I believe I have seen more duck in the Brecks than anywhere else in Britain. Interesting species in winter include Goosander (Mergus merganser), Smew (Mergus albellus) and Scaup (Aythya marila). Most lakes have their heronry, and the Norfolk Naturalist's Trust are always interested in nest counts of this species. Redshank (Tringa totanus) and Snipe (Capella gallinago) breed on some of the wet meadowland.

The Fens

Before reaching the Fens proper, just west of Marham, there used to be a large Starling roost, which may still be there. The flight-lines of these birds crisscrossed the airfield. The roost was on the right of the road to Fincham, and a mile further on lies Shouldham Warren, a Forestry Commission area which contains Nightjars (Caprimulgus europaeus). Here Shelduck (Tadorna tadorna) breed in the rabbits' burrows, and there are to be found smaller birds, such as Tree Pipits (Anthus trivialis) and Goldcrests (Regulus regulus).

Near Marham are gravel-pits, both old and new. On some of these there are breeding Tufted Ducks (Aythya fuligula). During 1961 I counted 7 broods, a total of 50 birds on one pit alone. Most pits have their pair of Great Crested Grebes (Podiceps cristatus), and on the various waters around Narborough Canada Geese (Branta canadensis) can be found in large numbers.

Little Ringed Plovers (Charadrius dubius) were discovered breeding for the first time in Norfolk on one of these pits in 1960. In 1961 there were 5 pairs of these birds on the pits, and at least 3 pairs bred. During migration periods many species of waders stop at the pits, and a visit to them was always exciting, as one did not know just what was going to turn up next.

Further to the west, at Welney, are the Washes. This is a large area of lowlying land that is flooded during the winter. This area contains

huge numbers of wintering wildfowl. Whooper Swans (Cygnus cygnus), Bewick's Swans (Cygnus bewickii), Pintail (Anas acuta), and many other water-loving birds are there, whilst in the stubble-fields Pink-footed Geese (Anser brachyrhynchus) may be seen.

There are many other birds of the area I could write about, but I have mentioned only those I consider of greatest interest. Marham is a wonderful place for the ornithologist, perhaps one of the best stations in the U.K. for RAFOS members to be posted to --- any offers?

A VISIT TO SESPE WILD-LIFE AREA

F. Kime

I set off that week-end with Roger Tory Peterson's words printed on my memory, that the common birdwatcher has little chance of seeing the Condors (Gymnogyps californianus), access to Sespe being closed to us (wild America).

After a night in that wonderful American institution, a motel, I arrived at Filmore, the starting point for my expedition. Breakfasting over ham and eggs I soon found luck was to be with me on this day, for my only companions were the local cops. A London "bobbie" could not have been more helpful, as they mapped for me my route to the home of the condor.

Armed with my good fortune and the feeling which only a clear blue sky on a beautiful Sunday morning can bring, I headed for the mountains. Passing through Citrus groves the road soon gave way to a dirt-track, and the orderliness of the groves, the House Finches (Carpodacus mexicanus), Purple Finches (Carpodacus purpureus), Goldfinches (Spinus tristis), and the Western Bluebirds (Sialia mexicana), were left behind.

Ravines and tree-covered slopes replaced each other with increasing rapidity, every turn becoming more precipitous. Continually I was passing rushing mountain streams, which provided pockets of dense greenery through which I caught glimpses of the California Quail (Lophortyx californicus) scurrying from me, while Scrub Jays (Aphelocomo coerulescens), or their raucous cries, were my constant companions.

During this entry into the foothills of the San Jose mountains I was ever reminded of the encroachment of civilisation, for oil-drillings had left their scar.

They were soon left behind as I climbed, twisted, and turned, until there rose up before me the white cliffs of White-acre Peak, my destination. The hills and steep ravines gave way to flats leading into numerous b lind canyons. Here was country the likes of which I had never seen before. I was overawed by the toughness, and yet peace, of this rugged country. This was wilderness and, for me, the true America.

I entered Squaw Flats with those towering cliffs forming a half-circle, embracing the stunted oaks and chaparral*, and the all but dried up stream. By now the sun was getting higher and the morning hotter. The peace was suddenly shattered for, filling the air with their screeching cry, hawks appeared from out of the canyons. Three pairs of Red-tails (Buteo jamaicensis) made their presence known, or was it my presence they were complaining about? Just as suddenly they became silent, for, finding the thermals, they began their systematic search for food.

I settled my back against an oak, thankful for its shade, soaking in this presence of nature and its peace. As I watched, a California Thrasher (Toxostoma redivivum) settled in nearby dense chaparral and a Plain Titmouse (Parus inornatus) was inspecting every leaf in a nearby willow, with a Ruby-crowned Kinglet (Regulus calendula) arriving to share the chores. Finches were ever present in the low scrub a mixture of Oregan Juncos (Junco oreganus) and Lesser Goldfinch (greenbacked) (Spinus psaltria), to be joined by the two Brown Towhee (Pipilo fuscus). All the time Scrub Jays made their purposeful way across the scene, and occasionally a Red-shafted Flicker (Colaptes cafer) would fly into the oaks. Then the peace was shattered by a bundle of noise which turned out to be a Ladder-backed Woodpecker (Dendrocopos scalaris). Fortunately for the peace of the morning, the cause of its wrath, a Jay, soon disappeared down the stream-bed.

So the morning passed, getting ever hotter; but where were those Condors? As if in answer, there appeared in front of the cliffs two large birds soaring effortlessly in the clear but hot air. Observed from a distance of about a mile, the white leading edges of their great wing-spread was most noticeable. In their soaring flight the wings had a definite dihedral, whereas the reference-books give them a straight wing-form. As they soared back and forth, their only seeming movement was that of their grotesque heads. Then, as silently as they had come, they soared up over the cliffs and over the mountain.

After lunch under the oak I was scared for a moment by the appearance of a Wild-cat. Fortunately for me, after a long hostile stare he went on his way.

My good fortune continued, for from out of the canyons there appeared yet another pair of Condors. This time they soared even nearer into view, giving me a closer and longer observation. For fifteen minutes I followed them with my eyes as they soared effortlessly round and round in front of the

white cliffs. At this distance their enormous wing-spread was seen to advantage as they followed each other ever circling.

With their eventual soaring out of sight I suddenly realised that this was no place to spend the night. Reluctantly I left Sespe, to be greeted by the dusk activity of the citrus groves. The air seemed filled with warblers, making identification difficult. By far the majority were Audubon Warblers (Dendroica audubonl), one Nashville Warbler (Vermivora ruficapilla) being definitely identified.

Intermingled with the warblers were numerous House Finches, Purple Finches, and Goldfinches, all seeming to have turned flycatcher. To all this activity a lone Mocking Bird (Mimus polyglottos) gave but a solitary stare.

So I had seen the California Condor, and to this Englishman America had shown another page of its extremes in beauty. A primitive beauty I hope will remain the domain of the Condor, where others may find the peace and contentment that I found on this memorable day in Sespe.

* * * * *

*Chaparral: a community comprising shrubby plants widely distributed in Southern California that are specially adapted to dry summers and moist winters; in the main thickets of dwarf evergreen oaks.

-- EDITOR.

OILED BIRDS AT NEWQUAY

N. Hormbrey

At the time of writing (May 1967) the number of oiled seabirds in Cornwall has diminished to a normal proportion, but vivid memories remain from the last few weeks. The full story of the collection and cleaning of these birds is beyond the scope of this article, and more comprehensive accounts of the disaster can be read in the publications of the B.T.O., Seabird Group, etc.*

Several bird-cleansing stations sprung into being around the Cornish coast after the Torrey Canyon had struck the Seven Stones Reef, and it was at the Newquay centre that personnel from R.A.F. St.Mawgan assisted in the rescue of the seabirds. Each centre was responsible for its own surrounding coastline, and at Newquay fifteen miles of beach from Holywell Bay to Padstow were covered. The work done there was long and arduous, and it showed people at their best, but it is a small consolation for the widespread oiling of sea-birds, and poisoning of birds in general, which, however unintentional it may be, does show a poorer side of mankind.

To catch the birds it was necessary to scramble over treacherous rocks and through oily surf. Once caught the birds had to be cleaned, a job that went on both night and day. After being cleaned the birds spent a short period in local recuperation centres set up on an emergency basis before being passed to the R.S.P.C.A. Later they went to an R.S.P.B. centre in the south-west.

Precise figures of the survival-rate are lacking, but it is probable that most succumbed from a variety of causes, including oil or detergent poisoning, and shock. However, some birds do remain alive, and such birds would all have died if left unaided. The critical point in their return to the wild state is still to come. To catch, treat, and clean a bird is difficult enough, but the task of trying to rehabilitate the birds is daunting. Before being returned to the sea they must be healthy, "watertight", and able to fly and hunt for themselves. This is a time-consuming process requiring utter dedication, and it is suspected that it is often cut short simply by tossing the birds back into the sea.

About 620 live but oiled birds were taken to the Newquay centre for cleaning. They included one Great Northern Diver (Gavia immer), three Puffins (Fratercula arctica), and several Shags (Phalacrocorax aristotelis) and Cormorants (Phalacrocorax carbo). The remainder, in the rough proportion of three to two, were Guillemots (Uria aalge) and Razorbills (Alca torda). The 4th and 5th April were the worst days; over 150 birds per day being taken to the centre.

In view of these figures from Newquay and the very large number of dead birds washed up, the overall estimate---mentioned by some authorities ---of more than 20,000 oiled birds does not appear to be an exaggeration.

Whether such birds as survive can navigate their migration-routes at the appropriate times is a question which is unlikely to be easily answered. It appears that a large number of the affected birds were migrants, as reports are coming in that the population of breeding auks in Cornwall does not seem to have suffered disastrously.

Many useful lessons have been learnt as a result of the disaster. It is considered that well tested courses of treatment of oiled birds are now known, from the rescue stage, through the processes of medical treatment and cleaning, to the recuperation phase. It is also realised that the process of rehabilitation must be tackled at once if the birds involved are ever to return to the wild. For this to be successful the seas must of course be unpolluted.

So much for the picture as it was seen, and the lessons learnt. Very vivid impressions remain with the people who took part. One memory is of admiration for the well named Razorbill, which ounce for ounce, is as well able to stand up for itself as any other bird. A second impression was of the powerful fascination, tinged with a sense of shame, that the Guillemots and Razorbills exerted over people, including hardened and objective ornithologists.

* The Devon Trust for Nature Conservation have published a special supplement to their Journal on Conservation and the Torrey Canyon. This includes papers on many aspects of the pollution and makes interesting reading for anyone wishing to follow up the long term effects of the Torrey Canyon affair. Available from Slapton Ley Field Centre, Slapton, Kingsbridge, Devon at 7/6 per copy.
— EDITOR.

A TOUR AT R.A.F. SAXA VORD : PART 2 E. A. Machell

Breeding Birds

To see the island at its best one should pay a visit between late May and early August; and, if one wishes to do much ringing, July is the month to go. During these months there are 20 hours or more of daylight, and I know of hard men who, after spending the night dancing and drinking in the mess, have descended the cliffs at 4 a.m. to ring Shags (Phalacrocorax aristotelis) and then spent most of the day ringing Great Skuas (Stercorarius skua) on the moors before settling down in the late evening to clap-net the scavenging gulls at Balta Sound.

But the island's beauty at this time of year is not only in the breeding waders and sea-birds but also in its own natural charm. Nowhere in Britain have I seen such a profusion of wild flowers. Among the more noticeable are Thrift on the sea-cliffs, Shetland Red Campion along the roadsides, Marsh Marigold and Buckbean in the bogs, Clover and Buttercups in the fields, and Vernal Squill and Heath Spotted Orchid on the hills.

One often meets herds of Shetland Ponies on the hills; and, as the lambing-season is late in Shetland, one can stop awhile and enjoy watching the antics of the small woolly creatures. After its almost total extinction in 1963 the Rabbit has now made a strong comeback, and they can be seen everywhere; perhaps Unst will have its own pair of Snowy Owls (Nyctea scandiaca) before long. Seals abound on the western coastline, but there are few land mammals; I have had wonderful views of Otter, however.

Even at this time of year the weather is seldom kind, but then it is probably due to this that there are no holiday-camps on the island. But a good day is a magnificent day, and when the sun shines and the skies are blue, the sea can take on the colour of the Mediterranean. On such days the serenity of the islands during the late evening as the sun sets in a blaze of gold, and the moors turn purple, cannot be imagined; it has to be experienced.

Only a few species of passerines breed on the island, but waders are numerous, and there is a royal abundance of sea-birds. The commonest passerine is the Starling (Sturnus vulgaris zetlandicus) which nests wherever it can find a hole in the dykes or in old deserted crofts, and I have even found them nesting in rabbit-holes. House-Sparrows (Passer domesticus), which are increasing in numbers after a few lean years, are to be found around various houses and crofts, as are Blackbirds (Turdus merula), which, in the absence of trees and bushes, build their nests in outbuildings, etc.

The Ravens (Corvus corax), Hooded Crows (Corvus corone cornix), Wrens (Troglodytes t. zetlandicus) and Rock Pipits (Anthus spinoletta) are coastal nesters in the main, but a few pairs of Hoodies and Wrens do best inland.

On the moors can be found Skylarks (Alauda arvensis), Meadow-Pipits (Anthus pratensis), Wheatears (Oenanthe oenanthe), and Twite (Acanthis flavirostris), where their calls mingle with the more plaintive ones of the waders. The odd pair of Swallows (Hirundo rustica) and Pied/White Wagtails (Motacilla alba) occasionally breed. Rock Doves (Columba livia) breed in caves around the coast, and it is expected that Collared Doves (Streptopelia decaocto) will colonise the island in the near future. The most exciting breeding-records of passerines, however, are those of Redwing (Turdus iliacus).

Only a few species of duck breed on the island. Of these the Eider (Somateria mollissima) are the most numerous; their nests are found on the moors usually by accident. Small numbers of Redbreasted Mergansers (Mergus serrator) are resident, both Mallard (Anas platyrhynchos) and Teal (Anas crecca) breed annually, and in recent years one or two pairs of Shelduck (Tadorna tadorna) have nested near the Loch of Brecksie. The ducklings suffer a high mortality rate, both Bonxies (Stercorarius skua) and Great Blackbacked Gulls (Larus marinus) preying on them. A few pairs of Moorhens (Gallinula chloropus) nest each year---most of them in the marsh at Norwick---but the Corncrake (Crex crex) is very much on the decline: it seems that it will disappear as a breeding species from the island, as has the Corn-Bunting (Emberiza calandra) in recent years.

Ten species of wader breed annually, and Blacktailed Godwit (Limosa limosa) and Rednecked Phalarope (Phalaropus lobatus) have also bred. The most conspicuous wader is the Oystercatcher (Haematopus ostalogus), which is to be found throughout the southern end and along the eastern half of the island, sharing its habitat with Lapwings (Vanellus vanellus). Ringed Plover (Charadrius hiaticula) can be found both on sandy shores and high hills, whilst the Golden Plover (Pluvialis apricaria) nests on the wet moors, where its plaintive lonely call fits the scene. Snipe (Gallinago faroensis) are frequently flushed, both on the peat-moors and in the bogs, and the bubbling cry of Curlews (Numenius arquata) is to be heard throughout the central valley of the island. Whimbrel (Numenius phaeopus) breed on several of the higher hills in the north east, but the majority of them are on the Hill of Colvadale and on the Sobul. Common Sandpiper (Tringa hypoleucos) are very local, breeding only at the Loch of Watlee, and then just one or two pairs. A few Redshank (Tringa totanus) breed in various marshy areas, whilst numerous pairs of Dunlin (Calidris alpina) can be seen on most of the moors.

The marsh at Norwick is the summer home for the hundred or so pairs of Black-headed Gulls (Larus midibundus), and several small colonies

of Common Gulls (Larus canus) are scattered around the eastern half of the island and in the south-west. Great Black-backed Gulls nest on outlying stacks and islands, and a few pairs are usually to be found amongst a colony of Lesser Black-backed Gulls (Larus fuscus) on the heather slopes near Helliers Water. Herring Gulls (Larus argentatus) nest on many of the steep grassy sea-cliffs; and on the precipitous cliffs of Leara Stack and Hermaness are colonies of noisy Kittiwakes (Rissa tridactyla). The only breeding tern is the Artic Tern (Sterna paradisea) in various colonies on both the moors and the shingle-spits.

The favourite breeding-grounds of the Red-throated Diver (Gavia stellata) are on the small hill lochans in the west of the island, and the Storm Petrel (Hydrobates pelagicus) breeds on several off-shore islands, and possibly on Hermaness. Some member of R.A.F.O.S. posted to Saxa Vord in the future could follow this up.

Shags can be found anywhere where there is a boulder-scree at the foot of the cliffs. Fulmars (Fulmarus glacialis) are all round the coast, and a good number now breed inland, where one of their favourite sites is either in or on ruined crofts. Black Guillemots (Cepphus grylle), with their strange whistle, are most common at Lamba Ness and on Balta Island.

Although skuas and auks can be seen elsewhere, notably on Saxa Vord, it is on Hermaness Reserve that the big colonies of sea-birds are to be found. In my view the finest approach to the sea-bird colonies on Hermaness Reserve is to follow Hove Burn from Burrafirth, passing through the breeding-grounds of both Arctic Skua (Stercorarius parasiticus) and Bonxie, and seeing nesting Redthroated Divers before reaching the western cliffs of Hermaness Reserve just north of the Tonga. Here one can look down on thousands of Gannets (Sula bassana), Kittiwakes, and Guillemot (Uria aalge), all in tightly packed colonies on the cliffs.

On the grass slopes are countless Puffins (Fratercula arctica), and in every available niche a Fulmar, whilst lower down amongst the boulders are Shags, Razorbills (Alca torda) and still more Puffins. The noise of all these birds is terrific, and yet the clear notes of a Wren can often be heard above all the cacklings, growlings, and gruntings of the sea-birds. The air is full of birds flying to and from the nest-sites : whirring Puffins, gliding Fulmars, and the larger Gannets, whose plumage is a dazzling white in sunny weather.

One can then follow the coast north, seeing more of the Gannetry, more Guillemots, Fulmars, Kittiwakes, and Puffins amongst the boulders and on the grass slopes full of their burrows. Even without the birds, as in winter, the cliff-scenery is superb, but in summer it is not just a scene but also a living entity. Follow the coast to the tip of Hermaness Hill, and the view is of the Muckle Flugga group of rocks with its light-house---the most northerly in Britain---and still more Gannets.

Then one can return over the summit of Hermaness Hill, where the Great Skuas are thickest on the ground or in the air dive-bombing all that passes. Here we see more Red-throated Divers, Arctic Skuas, Eiders, Meadow Pipits, Skylarks, Dunlin, Golden Plover, and Snipe, and so back to Burrowfirth and its Wheatears, Black Guillemots, Arctic Terns fishing in the bay, and noisy Oystercatchers on the grass.

Such a day is one to remember for a life-time; it is a walk I have done many times and have never tired of. It is these tremendous sea-bird colonies which always spring to mind when I think of Unst.

In the past twelve months or so there have been many further additions to the Unst list, but as some of these records are still awaiting acceptance it has been decided to hold them back until some future date, so that they can all be published together.

++ ++ ++

CHRISTMAS BIRD-COUNT IN U.S.A.

F. Kime

Started in 1900, this annual census is carried out under the critical eye of the National Audubon Society, and comprises individual counts organised by local societies throughout the United States and Canada which are synchronised within a time-span set annually by the national society, about ten days encompassing the Christmas and New Year holidays. A few brief statistics include the fact that 827 count-areas, including 61 from Canada, submitted a census last year. The total reports of these fill the 390 pages of the April issue of the Audubon Field Notes, a journal devoted to field investigations in ornithology. The rules of the census limit each area to within a 15-mile diameter, and the count must be carried out between dawn and dusk on the census day, with a minimal time-limit of eight hours, except in Arctic areas.

This year, I had the good fortune to be a member of the St. Louis Audubon Society's census covering the habitats in this area, which are dominated geographically by the junctions of the Mississippi, Missouri, and Illinois rivers. Our society had three count-areas, which included one having a central point in the peninsula formed by the joining of the Mississippi and Illinois rivers; this area covered all the marshes and bottomlands in this large river-junction. There follows a description of this count, which took place on December 26th.

The observers were split up into six groups comprising six individuals, each group detailed to a defined location within the count-area, great care being taken to ensure that no groups overlapped. Any bird seen flying over had to have the observed time noted. The group to which I was attached had the eastern bank of the Illinois river and adjoining marshes in its location. We proceeded at 0800 hours to our starting-point, where the leader of the group detailed pairs of observers to specific locations. I was paired with my good friend Paul Bauer, who would do the observations whilst I kept the records.

The reader, I am sure, will appreciate the fact that the following account does not go into specific count-figures but gives my appreciation of the bird-life that we saw during this full day in the field, a day that was bathed in brilliant sunlight but with the thermometer reading below zero degrees Fahrenheit.

The first habitat visited was a small jetty and sheltered anchorage on the Illinois river, where we were greeted by the slow passing flight of an adult Bald Eagle (Haliaeetus leucocephalus). In its adult plumage of white head and tail, this, the fish-eagle of the rivers and lakes, soared to within fifty feet of us, permitting close observation of this majestic bird. So the morning, although extremely cold, had

started well; and, as our eyes took in the local scene, it was noted that the major activity was on the river.

The Ringbilled Gull (Larus delawarensis) were active all along the river, either in colonies or flying singly overhead. This bird has the same wing-pattern as has the much larger Herring Gull but is identified by the complete black ring round its yellow bill. Also on the river American Mergansers (Mergus americanus) were active; the male (identified by its typical shape) showed his dark-green head, white body, and black back in contrast to the three females with their brown crests.

In the marshy borders that "puddle duck" of the eastern seaboard, the Black Duck (Anas rubripes) were easily separated from the flocks of Mallard (Anas boschas) by their overall dusky appearance. Also observed in this mixed and dispersed flock were the odd male Pintail (Anas acuta) and American Wigeon (Anas americana) whose head-pattern stood out in the flock.

Moving on to the next habitat further up river in the fallow cornfields bordering forest-lands, we left the car and were greeted by the low chatter of the Tufted Titmouse (Parus bicolor) and the blackcapped Chickadee (Parus atricapillus) from the upper branches. The "Tufty", easily identified by his crest, is otherwise a rather drab member of the Tit family, his plain grey plumage being relieved only by the rusty side-patches. The Chickadee has a similar head-pattern to that of our Great Tit (Parus major) but its body-plumage is plain grey. These close relations of the old-world Tits, which they resemble in their energetic activities, flock through the winter in company with the American Treecreeper (Certhia familiaris americana) and are a common sight.

To complete the scene, in the field-margins Cardinals (Richmondena cardinalis) flew up into the surrounding brush, and who could mistake the rather shy male cardinal in his brilliant red plumage, black mask and crest so like a Cardinal's mitre? As we proceeded through the wood, followed by the scolding of the Tits, we disturbed a Blue Jay (Cyanocitta cristata), with his flashing blue plumage (those contrasting blues will never cease to fascinate me). He left no doubt about his identity as he winged over the tree-tops with his typical call, only to have it taken up by every jay within hearing, and he is one of the more common birds of the woodlands.

Suddenly the woods vibrated with the carrying cry of the Redbellied Woodpecker (Centurus carolinus), and this common woodpecker of the American forests suddenly flashed through the trees into an upward glide onto the trunk of a nearby tree. As he clung there, giving a hostile stare to all around, he showed off to advantage his red skull-cap, his black-and-white laddered back, and his red-tinged breast, the last so seldom seen.

As we went our way through long-fallen trees, our attention was attracted to a movement amongst the branches -- was it a Hairy Woodpecker (Dendrocopos villosus) or a Downy Woodpecker (Dendrocopos pubescens) ? These two diminutive woodpeckers have the same colour-pattern: a red cockade and a vertical white stripe on the back. After close observation the short bill showed that it was a Downy Woodpecker, the Hairy Woodpecker having the longer and more typically woodpecker bill.

As we came to the outskirts of the timber, a flash of white drew our attention to that erratic migrant the Redheaded Woodpecker (Melanerpes erythrocephalus), the most distinctive of the American woodpeckers, with his completely red head and heavy white body-markings.

Outside the woods winter had its icy grip on the landscape, for the lake that opened up before us seemed completely iced over; but no, in the distance we could see the dark shadow of flocks of ducks, and yes, that "honk" was unmistakable; there were Canada Geese (Branta canadensis) over there too. Sparrows flitted from our path as we made our way through the marsh.

Identification of the numerous species confounds this visitor to the American scene. Taxed to the limit of my capability I identified the Field-Sparrow (Spizella pusilla) by its fleshy bill and legs; The Tree-Sparrow (Spizella arborea) by its two wing-bars and black stick-pin on plain grey breast; the Swamp-Sparrow (Melospiza georgiana) by its grey cheeks and chestnut shoulder-patch; the Song-Sparrow (Melospiza melodia) by its heavily streaked breast. These are the common winter sparrows. Occasionally a Whitecrowned Sparrow (Zonotrichia leucophrys) was seen perched on the top branch of the underbrush, but all the time the low chipping call could be heard as they appeared and disappeared in the marsh-grass.

How relieved I was, for easy identification, to see the dusky grey shape and flashing white tail of the Slate-coloured Junco (Junco hyemalis). A member of the finch family, and to the American during the winter what the "English" Robin (Erithacus rubecula) is to us, the Junco is everywhere at this moment feeding with Cardinals on the pathway. As we walked, the scene became one of stunted bogged timbers leading into the river. Here a hawk was observed over the timber, followed by a second; soaring into the intense winter sun, number two presented a fine view of his tail, enabling us to identify a Redtailed Hawk (Buteo jamaicensis). Number one had no red tail but one with fine light markings; so a closer look was required to see the slight breast-band --- yes, it was a Redtailed, but immature.

So we came to the marsh to be greeted by an unending noise resembling the slow opening of unoiled gates, identifying a flock of Common or Purple Grackle (Quiscalus quiscula). The Grackle, whose call characterises a walk through these river-bottoms, is easily identified by its

irridescent blue head and boatshaped tail as opposed to those of its numerical competitor the Redwinged Blackbird (Agelaius phoeniceus), whose smart appearance, with bright-red shoulder-patches, is contrasted with his unmusical call.

Then our attention was attracted skyward by the call of geese in flight. There, reflected against the clear blue sky, was V after V, each of about fifty birds, appearing from out of the north. Floating over, at an altitude of about five hundred feet, were mixed flocks of Blue Geese (Chen caerulescens) and Snow Geese (Chen hyperborea) in the ratio of seven hundred to five hundred. Noting the time, we followed them with our glasses to the southern horizon.

So we came to the river, to find that a passing barge had disturbed the river-life. A Great Blue Heron (Ardea herodias) laboured overhead, easily identified by its large size (a wing-span of seventy inches) and dark appearance; this bird was at the northern limit of its winter range. Along the river timber-line our attention was attracted to the noisy hostile hustling of five Crows (Corvus brachyrhynchos), and the centre of their hostility, a single mature Bald Eagle, just roosted and ignored them.

With the approach of noon we motored to more hilly countryside, where we observed a Pileated Woodpecker (Hylatomus pileatus) making the chips fly on a lone tree; with crimson cresh flashing in the sun, he would lean back to an angle of over forty degrees to take further lunges at the widening hole. With the noise of his labours echoing through the cold winter air he provided us with a beautiful picture, until our observation of this, the largest American woodpecker, was terminated by his noisy departure to answer the call of another of his species.

Walking again, we came to a pine-grove, mainly spruce and the odd cedar, first of all hearing the low "tsee" that told us that Golden-crowned Kinglets (Regulus satrapa) were present. A short wait rewarded us with the appearance of the female, with her yellow crown showing to advantage. Then Pine Siskins (Spinus pinus) were seen flashing their yellow rumps as they weaved through the trees.

The count proceeded into the afternoon, and the limit of our observation area was reached, when the sight of twenty-three Bald Eagles filled our binoculars. This gathering of eagles was on the edge of the ice, at the low-water mark of the river, close to a large flock of Mallard. There were six adults and seventeen immature. The ratio of immature indicated that this was but the vanguard of the migrating eagles making their way south with the advancing ice down the river. As we observed, the adults were already displaying in courtship. Occasionally the Mallard would scatter as an eagle made a low run over the flock, and with good reason, for several immature were seen feeding on a dead duck.

So came sunset and the gathering of the groups, first to have a most welcome dinner, followed by the consolidating of all the returns. This proved to be a laborious and stringent task followed by a "post mortem" on the total count compared with last year's list.

So closed a hectic but rewarding day, a fitting end to a memorable year, during which I observed one hundred and fifty species, the most notable of which were the California Condors (Gymnogyps californianus) in Sespe, the Osprey (Pandion haliaetus) fishing the Yellowstone River, migrating Canada Geese and flights of White Pelican (Pelecanus erythrorhynchos) at Swan Lake, and finally this day's gathering of Bald Eagles.

\+ + + + +

NOTICES AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

First overseas branch formed

The Inaugural meeting of the Singapore Branch of the Society was held, by the kind permission of Dr. R. Gooding, at the Zoological Department of the University of Singapore on the 11th August 1967, and was attended by all interested in the branch.

A committee of two comprising a Chairman (Fl.Lt. J.L.Gregory) and a Secretary (Sgt. W.Corris) was elected.

Station leaders, one for each of the three main airfields on the Island, were considered important for administration, co-ordination and instruction, and the two members already mentioned were elected to act in that capacity for R.A.F. Changi and R.A.F. Tengah respectively. Cpl. D. Bodley was elected for R.A.F. Seletar.

The subscription rate was agreed at $10 per annum and membership was extended to include civilians. This was done as it was felt imperative to form a nucleus of local people who would continue the ornithological research envisaged, beyond the mid-1970s when British forces would be withdrawn.

Addressing the meeting, Flight Lieutenant Gregory said that in the past, scientific research, particularly in ornithological studies, had suffered from a lack of continuity and a centralised recorder. Now, with the formation of the branch, worthwhile ornithological projects could be initiated.

Lord Medway of Kuala Lumpur University was particularly interested in the branch and had kindly offered to supply mist nets, rings, chemicals and literature.

Flight Lieutenant Gregory considered that R.A.F.O.S. (S.B.) should participate in projects before the study of migration in Singapore was impaired by man's 'development' causing too great a pressure on the Island's wild life and its habitat. It was important, he said, to remember that Singapore was the southernmost extremity of the Euro-Asian continent and the last stepping stone of migration before passing onto the Southern Hemisphere.

The less scientific side of ornithology was also important, as it would enable members to develop an aesthetic appreciation of tropical flora and fauna and the need to conserve them.

Part of the aims of the branch would be to participate in or initiate a number of projects which included : increasing the nucleus of bird ringers on the Island; assisting Lord Medway in migratory pathological studies including the investigation of possible associations of Japanese encephalitis vectors with winter migrants from N.E. Asia and Siberia, and the building up of a blood smear bank; ascertaining pressures caused by human population growth and determining the seriously threatened species; organising the RAFOS expedition to the Solomon Islands; carrying out a survey of the House Crow and the Jungle Crow and making a study of the bird strike problem at R.A.F. Tengah.

It was agreed to hold monthly field meetings and, to prepare for these, evening indoor meetings would be held one week in advance.

There was unanimous agreement that although R.A.F.O.S.(S.B.) was prepared to assist other service societies in their formation and projects, the branch should maintain its own identity.

\+ + +

Area field meetings

The field meeting held at Portland Bird Observatory in September will be reported in the January Newsletter.

Any member wishing to arrange and/or publicise an area meeting for spring 1968 should notify the Editor by 31 December 1967 so that details may be included in the January Newsletter.

\+ + +

Gibraltar Point Bird Observatory report 1966

Members who attended the first two field meetings of the Society at Gibraltar Point this Spring; who intend making a visit to the Observatory in the future; or who just want to know what happens on the East coast will all find interest in the 1966 report which has recently been published. It is available from Mr. B. Wilkinson, 3, Ocean Avenue, Skegness, Lincs. Price 4/- including postage.

\+ + +

Natural History courses

Members living in the London area may wish to know more about the London University Extramural natural history courses. Details from: 7, Ridgemount Street, London, W.C.1.

Advice to Contributors

The following is given as guidance rather than criticism to those submitting material for publication in the Journal.

1. Articles on any aspect of ornithology are acceptable, but preference will be given to original work from areas especially overseas, in which R.A.F. personnel are or have been stationed; and to that which has some positive connection with the Royal Air Force.

2. The number of articles and therefore the variety presented in each issue of the Journal will depend upon the length of each article. As the length of the Journal has to be limited to between 10,000 and 13,000 words at present, a more balanced issue can be produced if the length of articles is between 1000 and 2000 words. Please try to keep to this as much as possible but do not withhold your article because it is over or under this suggested figure. The number of words should be marked at the end of the article with due allowance for space not filled when tables or systematic lists are used.

3. Whenever possible submit material in typescript - top copy please, not a carbon - with double spacing and on one side only. If a typewriter is not used, manuscript should be clearly written and well spaced.

4. English names of species should have capitals for the initial letter of each word, except after a hyphen (e.g. Alpine Swift, Needle-tailed Swift) but reference to groups should be in small letters such as waders, buntings, etc. Scientific names should follow, in brackets, the first mention of the English name, but not subsequently. The subspecific name should not be mentioned unless relevant to the discussion, and only the first letter of the generic (first) name should be a capital. Each scientific name, but not the English, should be underlined, and put in brackets.

5. Dates in narrative should take the form 1st January, 1967, but can be abbreviated where space does not allow it in full.

6. Reference lists in particular should be checked for accuracy and should take the following form:
ODUM, E.P. & PITELKA, F.A. 1939. Storm mortality in a winter Starling Roost. Auk, 56: 451-455.

- Editor.

BRIEF DETAILS OF THE SOCIETY

The Royal Air Force Ornithological Society was formed in October 1965, primarily to fill the need within the Service for an organisation wherein those interested in the study of birdlife could communicate and co-operate with each other, and publish results of their activities.

The objects of the Society are:-

1. To bring together, both at home and abroad, members of the R.A.F., their dependants, and ex-serving members, interested in birdlife.

2. To arrange for the circulation of members current addresses; information on local ornithological societies; and a list of literature required for given areas.

3. To publish periodical reports and articles on the field activities of members.

4. To promote systematic observation at more isolated localities at home and abroad, and to assist in local ringing schemes and other field enquiries.

5. To stimulate interest in the study and protection of birds.

6. To build up a postal reference library.

Apart from individual studies and research, work on such aspects of ornithology as the Bird Strike problem particularly suited to R A F Ornithologists and of paramount importance in Airfield safety, is actively encouraged. Regular expeditions are organised by the society - the first being to Cyprus to ring pulli Eleanora's Falcon.

Full membership is open to all serving and ex-serving members of the Royal Air Force and their dependants, and persons serving with or employed by the Royal Air Force; annual subscription £1.

Associate membership (without voting rights) may be offered to anyone interested in the work of the Society at an annual subscription of 10/-; and affiliated membership at £2 annually is available to other interested groups or societies.

Duplicated by: Solent Secretarial Service, 48 Gordon Road, Gosport, and
Published by: the Royal Air Force Ornithological Society.