

NESTING HABITS OBSERVED ABROAD OF SOME
RARE BRITISH BIRDS.

BY

F. C. SELOUS.

BIRD'S-NESTING was always one of the chief delights of my boyhood, so when, some ten years ago, I settled down in this country—comparatively speaking—after having spent a quarter of a century of my life in the interior of South Africa, I naturally turned for occupation and recreation to my old hobby.

Finding, however, that a large proportion of the birds on the British List never bred in any part of the British Isles, or had become very rare through persecution or the encroachments of civilization upon their breeding haunts, I determined to make a collection of the eggs of Palæartic birds, which relieved me from all temptation to harry really scarce and vanishing species in this country.

I want to see the nests and take the eggs with my own hands of as many species of European birds as possible; but I value the Kite's eggs I have taken in Spain quite as much as if I had taken them in England or Wales.

During the last few years I have made several bird's-nesting trips to Asia Minor, Hungary, Spain and Bosnia, and in the course of these excursions have taken the nests of a good many species of birds which, though they are on the British List, never, or very rarely, breed in any part of Great Britain. I trust, therefore, that the following notes on the nesting habits of some of these birds may prove of interest to readers of BRITISH BIRDS.

ORPHEAN WARBLER.

Sylvia orphea, Temm.

This bird is a very common nesting species on all the

lower slopes of the hills in the neighbourhood of Smyrna, and I have a good series of its eggs taken in 1899 and 1901.

The nests were very easy to find, being placed either in very small trees, at a height of from six to ten feet from the ground, or high up in bushes. In 1901 I saw several broods of Orphean Warblers with the parent birds in the hills above Sochia during the last week in May, and at the same time found nests with fresh eggs.

The usual number of eggs in Asia Minor is five, but I have taken several clutches of six, and some of only four.

All my eggs of the Orphean Warbler from Asia Minor are of one type and vary very little one from another; but they are all absolutely different from the eggs of the same species which I have taken in Andalusia. In the Asia Minor eggs the ground colour is white and the markings are nearly always of a pale grey, only rarely greyish brown, never dark brown or blackish. In my Spanish eggs the markings are very dark and the eggs themselves smaller than those from Asia Minor. My Spanish Orphean Warbler's eggs are in fact very similar to those of the Lesser Whitethroat, whilst those I took in Asia Minor bear but little resemblance to the eggs of the last-named species.

That the eggs of the Orphean Warbler in Asia Minor should be so uniform in coloration and so constantly different from the eggs of the same species laid in Western Europe is, I think, a point worthy of the attention of ornithologists.

SABI'S WARBLER.

Locustella luscinioides (Savi).

I have found a good many nests of Savi's Warbler in Hungary, and one in Southern Spain. This bird seems to be a common breeding species in the former country in all the lakes and marshes situated in the level country through which the Danube runs to the east of Budapest.

The following notes I have copied verbatim from one of my note books, and refer to a visit paid to the Valence

Lake on May 29th and 30th, 1899, in company with Mr. C. G. Danford:—

“We also found several nests of Savi’s Warbler, but only three with eggs—a four, a two, and a one. These nests are very difficult to find, being built on the ground, at the base of the reeds on one of the many floating islands in the lake. They were invariably built of flat dry reed leaves, with a deep and beautifully formed cup. In some cases, on parting the reeds and looking down, the nest was visible from above, looking like a little brown cup, amongst the dry reed leaves, amongst which it was built; but in most cases the nests were absolutely invisible from above, and could only be found by pulling away the dry reed leaves by which they were completely hidden.

“One soon learns, however, to know a likely looking spot at the base of a cluster of reeds, and then the ground must be carefully cleared with the hand, when possibly a little brown cup of a nest may be discovered right down in the swampy ground. Although the substructure of the nest will be found to be wet, the cup itself is always dry and snug.”

Besides the nests which we found on the ground we also found three built in a mass of old dry reeds, about eighteen inches above the water. The ordinary full clutch of eggs is five, and fresh eggs may be found from the 15th of May to the first week in June.

(To be continued.)

NESTING HABITS OBSERVED ABROAD OF SOME
RARE BRITISH BIRDS.

BY

F. C. SELOUS.

PART II.

(Continued from page 27.)

ISABELLINE WHEATEAR. *Saxicola isabellina* Rüppell.

DURING my visit to Asia Minor in the spring of 1899 I saw several pairs of these birds on the level plain near the Lake of Sakizbounou, and found one nest with young birds about a week old on May 13th. Two years later, in the spring of 1901, I found the Isabelline Wheatear quite a common species on the plain through which the Meander River runs, below the town of Sochia.

On May 16th of that year I found, by watching the birds, two nests, one containing four very hard-set eggs, besides an addled one, and the other three young birds a few days old and two addled eggs. All three nests were placed in the burrows of a small rodent, the entrances to which were on the level ground. The nests were in each case a considerable distance from the mouth of the burrow—from four to five feet. The addled eggs which I obtained are of a very pale blue colour, some shades lighter than those of the common Wheatear (*Saxicola œnanthe*), they are also considerably larger than the eggs of that species.

BLUE-HEADED WAGTAIL. *Motacilla flava*.

In the spring of 1899 I took six nests of this species at a place called Szunyog, near Budapest.

They were all placed in tussocks of grass, growing out of the water, in what might be described as a flooded meadow. A colony of Black Terns had built their floating

nests on the same piece of flooded ground, though more in the centre of it, where the water was deeper. But I had to walk some distance through water at least a foot in depth to get to all six of the Wagtails' nests.

As I believe that when the Blue-headed Wagtail nests in England it builds its nest on dry ground, as does the Yellow Wagtail in the part of Surrey where I am now living, I have thought that this note of the breeding habits of this species in Central Hungary might be of interest.

Of the six nests which I took, five contained six, and one five eggs. These eggs vary in colour from grey to brown, but on the whole closely resemble those of our Yellow Wagtail. The first nest was taken on May 25th, the last on June 1st, and the eggs in all were quite fresh.

When in the south of Spain in the spring of 1900, I took, on April 22nd, two nests, each containing five fresh eggs, of a Wagtail which I thought belonged to the same species as those of which I had found the nests in Hungary the preceding year. But according to the Rev. Francis C. R. Jourdain, the form of Yellow Wagtail which breeds in Southern Spain is not the Blue, but the Grey-headed Wagtail (*Motacilla flava cinereicapilla* Savi). The two nests which I took near the Lucia Real were both built at the foot of small bushes on quite dry ground, at some distance from water.

NUTCRACKER. *Nucifraga caryocatactes* (L).

On paying a visit, in April, 1899, to my friend, Mr. C. G. Danford, who was then living in Transylvania, near the foot of the Southern Carpathians, he showed me the nest, containing three eggs, of the Nutcracker which is now exhibited in the bird gallery of the Natural History Museum at South Kensington. He had brought it down from the mountains a few days previously. Mr. Danford and I then went up into the mountains and searched for more Nutcrackers' nests, but without success, as, although the birds were numerous, the forests in which they breed are of enormous extent.

Last year, accompanied by Mr. J. C. Musters, I paid a visit to Bosnia. With the kind assistance of Herr Otmar Reiser, the well-known ornithologist and curator of the Museum at Sarajevo, we searched for Nutcrackers' nests in the mountains near that town. It was an unfavourable season, as during March the weather had been very cold, and a great deal of snow had fallen in the mountains. This seemed to have very much interfered with the building operations of the Nutcrackers.

A Bosnian peasant first showed us a nest, which was not yet ready for eggs, on April 8th. When we first visited this nest the Nutcrackers were busy lining it. They were excessively tame, and both birds kept continually flying to and from the nest with moss and other materials required for the lining, without showing any sign of fear, although we sat watching them for a long time at a distance of less than twenty yards. Subsequently two eggs were laid in this nest, and the hen bird then commenced to sit.

Herr Reiser, however, who has had a greater personal experience of the nesting habits of the Nutcrackers than any other European ornithologist, tells me that it is most exceptional for this bird to sit on two eggs. The usual clutch is three or four, the latter number being less usual than the former.

During the next four days, assisted by several Bosnian peasants, we hunted hard for fresh nests; but although we were shown at least a dozen from which Herr Reiser or one or other of the peasants had taken the eggs during the three previous seasons, we only found one nest ourselves. This nest was placed close against the stem of a small spruce tree, about a foot in diameter, and about twenty feet from the ground. When we found it the bird was on the nest, and did not fly off till I commenced to climb the tree. There were only two eggs in the nest, and as I could see that they were fresh, I left them. Two days later we again visited the nest, and found the bird again on. There were still only two eggs in it, but we

found a third lying broken at the foot of the tree. How it came there I cannot say.

Judging from my limited experience the nest of this bird is not placed either in large trees or far from the ground. Two nests were placed in very small trees, and were certainly not more than ten feet from the ground. The usual height seemed to be from twenty to thirty feet. None of the nests we saw were in dense forest, but usually near the edge of clearings, amongst trees not growing thickly together.

(To be continued.)

NESTING HABITS OBSERVED ABROAD OF SOME
RARE BRITISH BIRDS.

BY

F. C. SELOUS.

PART III.

(Continued from page 51.)

WHITE-TAILED EAGLE. *Haliaëtus albicilla* (L.).

On February 8th, 1895, whilst hunting wild goats on the Maimun Dagh, Asia Minor, I saw an Eagle, disturbed by some wood cutters, fly off a nest built on the decayed top of a large stone pine far below me, and with my glasses I thought I could see something white in the centre of the nest. On the evening of the same day I went down to examine the tree, and again put the bird off the nest, which had evidently been used for many years, as it was a huge structure, quite eight or nine feet in height, and six feet or so in diameter. I got up to the base of this nest without much difficulty, but could not get round it.

Two days later I returned with some Turkish peasants, who chopped a passage up the side of the nest, and brought me down the one egg it contained, which was white, but small, I thought, for the egg of a White-tailed Eagle. Moreover, the tail of the bird, which flew off the nest, although whitish did not seem to me to be pure white, and at the time I did not feel quite sure as to its identity.

Seven years later, however, early in February, 1902, I revisited the Maimun Dagh and took one egg from the same Eagle's nest on February 8th, and a second on February 16th. At this date the entire tail of each bird appeared to be snow white, and there can be no doubt that they were White-tailed Eagles.

On February 16th, as my Turkish companions and I were approaching the tree on which the nest was placed, we put one of the birds off. We then sat down to take a

rest before getting up to the nest. Presently we saw one of the Eagles approaching, carrying something in its claws. It had evidently come to feed its mate, and was almost on the nest before it saw us, when dropping the bird it was holding it flew off again in a great hurry. Its prey proved to be a Coot, which had been caught amongst the reeds and coarse grass which grow round the edge of the large shallow salt pan which extends for many miles over the plain at the foot of the Maimun Dagh.



Nest of the White-tailed Eagle on the borders of a salt lagoon
in Asia Minor.

There are no fish in this shallow salt lagoon, which is two hundred miles inland from Smyrna, so that this pair of White-tailed Eagles must live entirely on Coots, Ducks and other birds.

Before coming to the Maimun Dagh in February, 1902, I had already taken several White-tailed Eagles' nests on the slopes of the wooded mountains above Lake Latmos,

a few miles to the south of the spot where the Meander River enters the sea.

In this district the White-tailed Eagle is a very common bird.

My friend Mr. Hodder, who accompanied me on this trip, and who has lived for many years in Asia Minor, had taken a nest containing two much incubated eggs of this species on the previous Christmas Day.

On January 20th, 1902, Mr. Hodder and I took three nests on the same mountain, and only a mile or so one from the other, and on February 1st and 2nd four more nests in the same district. Each of these nests contained two eggs, some of which were fresh, whilst others were considerably incubated.

There are no precipitous cliffs in this district overlooking the sea, and the White-tailed Eagle has therefore taken to nesting in trees. All the nests we found were placed on the tops of large stone pines, and some of them must have been used, and constantly added to, for many years. One was quite twelve feet in height, and must have contained a good waggon-load of sticks.

GREAT WHITE HERON. *Ardea alba* L.

On the 18th of April, 1906, I visited, in company with Mr. J. C. Musters, a certain very large reed-covered swamp in Central Hungary, where we knew that a limited number of Great White Herons annually nested.

In the course of the morning we found one nest containing three eggs, from which the sitting bird flew when my friend's boat was within a few yards of it. In the afternoon we found a second nest, quite 300 yards away from the first. This nest also contained three eggs, from which the sitting bird did not fly until my boat was quite close to it.

The eggs in both these nests were very much incubated, and must have been laid at the end of March. The nests, built of reeds, were large, solid structures, placed on bent down growing reeds, at a height of about six feet above

the water. They were exactly like the nests of Purple Herons I have taken in Spain and Hungary. The eggs in both nests of Great White Herons were very light in colour, as light in fact as the eggs of Buff-backed Herons.



A Nesting-place of the Great White Heron in Central Hungary.

The Hungarian fishermen who took us into the reed-bed in their small flat-bottomed boats told us that the Great White Herons never nested in colonies, but that the nests were always some distance one from another. It is, however, I think, quite possible that, in countries where these birds are still numerous and unmolested, they may breed in colonies like other species of Herons.

BAILLON'S CRAKE. *Porzana bailloni* (Vieill.).

I found a number of nests of Baillon's Crake in Hungary in 1899 and 1902, and also in the south of Spain in 1900. The following note of the nesting habits of this species is copied from the journal I kept in 1899 :—

“I went with two men into the swamp after the Baillon's Crakes. The swamps in this district are more like flooded meadows, hundreds of acres in extent, with water about a foot in depth on a hard bottom, and grass and water plants, with here and there a kind of fine rush growing up to a height of one, two or three feet above the water.

“The two nests of Baillon's Crakes which we found during the morning were in little tufts of this rush-like grass, very small, and their bases just resting on the water, but the cup of the nest quite dry. These nests were so well hidden that they were quite invisible without a very close scrutiny. In one nest there were eight eggs, in the other nine. In the afternoon we found a third nest, with four eggs. This nest was beautifully hidden in a little tuft of fine rushes. It was composed of green grass-like rush stalks, and was not more than from three to four inches in diameter.”

The nests of Baillon's Crake which I found in reedy pools and swamps in the south of Spain, not far from Seville, were not so well concealed as those I had previously found in Hungary. In several cases the thin reeds amongst which the nests were placed had been bent over above the floating nest, at once attracting one's attention to it from a considerable distance.

In Hungary I took nests of Baillon's Crake with full clutches of eggs during the last week in May, whilst in Spain I found this species nesting about a month earlier.

(*To be continued.*)

NESTING HABITS OBSERVED ABROAD OF SOME
RARE BRITISH BIRDS.

BY

F. C. SELOUS.

PART IV.

(Continued from page 80.)

LITTLE CRAKE. *Porzana parva* (Scop.).

I found this species nesting in some numbers on the islands in the Valencze Lake in Hungary at the end of May, both in 1899 and in 1902, and also in some swamps on the other side of the Danube in the latter year. In my diary I wrote, on May 29th, 1899, concerning the first nests I ever saw of this species at the Valencze Lake as follows :—

“In the course of the day I took two Little Crakes’ nests. One of these was built in an old nest of a Great Reed Warbler, about two feet above the water. The other was placed among some thick dry reeds, and at about the same height above the water. This nest looked just like a very small Moorhen’s nest, being built of flat dry reed leaves. The cup, however, was much smaller and deeper than in a moorhen’s nest.”

On May 30th I made the following notes concerning the nesting habits of this species :—

“Found three more Little Crakes’ nests containing seven, six, and five eggs respectively. Two of these nests were built close down upon the ground amongst reeds, on little swampy islands, and not covered over in any way ; but the third, which was placed in exactly the same position as the other two, except that it was just on the edge of a lane of open water, was completely covered so as to be invisible from above. It was exactly like a larger form of a nest of Savi’s Warbler, having a beautifully formed deep cup, and being made of the same flat and dry brown reed leaves.”

The eggs of the Little Crake are, on the average, distinctly larger than those of Baillon's Crake, and have not the same shiny appearance as the latter. The Little Crake seldom lays more than seven eggs, whilst Baillon's Crake often lays nine.

PURPLE GALLINULE. *Porphyrio cæruleus*.

The eggs of this bird have not often, I believe, been taken by British egg collectors, and although the bird is only a doubtful visitor to this country, the following notes from my diary for 1900 may be acceptable :—

“ April 12th. Waded all day in a large reed bed (La Madre, in the south of Spain). Found a Purple Gallinule's nest with four eggs, very much incubated—within a few days of being hatched out. Also found several other nests building, but not yet ready for use, which apparently belonged to the same species. During the day we saw eight Purple Gallinules, which flew up out of the reeds close to us, and there must have been many more which did not rise.

“ The nest which contained the four eggs, and the other nests which, though there were no eggs in them, belonged, we thought, to Purple Gallinules, were built about a foot above the water, in thick reeds, and were like large nests of the Moorhen, but were lined with the flowers of the reeds. Above the nests the reeds were broken and bent together, forming a kind of very light canopy over them.”

On May 24th of this same year (1900) we (Mr. J. C. Musters and I) visited the Laguna Medina, not far from the town of Jerez de la Frontera, and found a Purple Gallinule's nest containing four perfectly fresh eggs. This nest was built in the centre of a large tussock of high reeds growing in water about three feet in depth. These reeds had no flowers which could have been used as a lining for the nest, nor were they of a kind which could have been bent over in order to form a canopy above the nest.