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Bird Notes No 3

Survey of last five years

The main changes in habitat that have occurred since the writing of the systematic bird list for ERDE in 1969 have been associated with the reconstruction of the waterways as part of the Lea Valley drainage scheme. This has resulted in there being few undisturbed stretches of river inside the Establishment, and the spectacular sight of twelve or more herons standing together on a river bank during winter is now a thing of the past. There have been no winter floods, which often brought gulls, ducks and snipe within view of a laboratory window. The meadows outside the boundary fence are drier, and, especially if there is a drought during the breeding season, they are no longer so attractive to redshank, lapwing, and possibly yellow wagtail. To compensate for these changes, the gravel pits surrounding the Establishment have been much extended. The North Side pit in particular, with its many small islands, is perfect breeding habitat for the great crested grebe, and five or six breeding pairs are normally present on this pit alone. However, any changes in the status of a bird since 1969 must be viewed with some caution. There are more observers inside ERDE now, and no doubt we have all become more competent. There is, however, some cause for optimism. Of the 98 species listed in 1969, only five - smew, buzzard, osprey, barn owl and nightingale - have not been seen subsequently. All, with the possible exception of the barn owl, are outside their normal range or habitat, and can only be regarded as "vagrants" as far as ERDE is concerned. On the other hand, no fewer than 23 new birds have been seen. These are recorded below as an Addendum to the ERDE List.

Breeding Season Changes

There have been few changes in the status of breeding birds inside ERDE since 1969. Whitethroats, which have been very scarce nationally since 1969, possibly due to drought conditions on the southern edge of the Sahara, are still common on New Hill. (Seven territories are occupied in 1974.) A bird which has greatly increased is the reed bunting. There are now several pairs on New Hill. This movement into drier habitat is occurring throughout the country, and there has been speculation whether inter-specific competition with the yellowhammer will occur. There has been no reduction of yellowhammer territories on New Hill, but, of course, the area is too small for any significance to be read into this observation. Another bird which suffered a dramatic population crash in 1969 was the sand martin. Nationally, recovery was rapid, but the ERDE population (12 nests occupied in 1974) is probably lower than that in the past. Birds which are increasing on a national level include the grasshopper warbler, goldcrest, and possibly the lesser whitethroat. All are moving into marginal territory. The grasshopper warbler has been heard reeling on New Hill in two seasons (including 1974), the goldcrest has been seen in the breeding season and a nest was found in a sloe bush on New Hill in 1972, and a lesser whitethroat has been heard regularly for several years and held territory on New Hill throughout the breeding season in 1974.

The above paragraph refers to any changes which are due probably to changes in the national status of the bird. There have been a few changes which reflect local alterations in habitat. There are far fewer sedge and probably no reed warblers inside the Establishment. Kingfishers nested successfully in 1971, but probably not since then. The rivers are more sluggish and turbid, and there are no small streams with shallow pools so attractive to kingfishers. The yellow wagtail has been seen less frequently than in the past. Other records cannot really be related to any changes of status either national or local. Kestrels nest regularly inside the Establishment, and little owls in the New Hill area. Two interesting (and probably once-only) occurrences were the nesting of grey wagtails in 1970 (described in Bird Notes No 2) and the red-backed shrike in the South Site area in 1973.

Outside the Establishment, mention has already been made of the increased population of great crested grebes on the gravel pits. 1971 was a spectacularly successful breeding season. About 10 pairs were present on the West Side and North Side pits and breeding went on from early April throughout the summer. Juveniles were still being fed by their parents as late as mid-November, and one pair was suspected of raising three broods. 1972 and 1973 were poor breeding years. In 1973 in particular, although the population was high, no nesting occurred until very late in the season, and then only two broods were seen. Any explanation of this must be speculative. Perhaps at high population territorial stress is such that breeding is inhibited. It is not just that the nesting is unsuccessful, but that no attempt is made. This has been suggested as a factor which regulates population in certain colonially-nesting sea-birds. Another possibility is a reduction in the fish population of the pits. Certainly the hot summer of 1973 caused excessive algae growth and consequent de-oxygenation and fish mortality in many rivers. Fish-eating birds are, of course, particularly susceptible to pesticide poisoning, being at the end of a food-chain. It seems unlikely, however, that this would have stopped the birds from attempting to breed, even if their clutches were unsuccessful. 1974 augers well. Two broods have already been hatched and several birds are sitting at the time of writing.

Winter Records

Siskins have been present in good numbers in all winters, generally with a maximum in February (1969/70 300, 1970/1 350, 1971/2 100, 1972/3 400, 1973/4 150). Redpolls have been variable; by far the largest flock (80) was in 1972/3. They arrived earlier than the siskins (Nov 1972) and appeared to consist entirely of the Continental sub-species the Mealy redpoll. This is a little surprising, since most books state that meallies come to this country only in small numbers. However this is one sub-species that can be satisfactorily identified in the field, and there is little doubt concerning the observation. Redwings have been present in good numbers in all years (100-150), and always follow the same pattern. Arriving in October they stay on New Hill until all the berries are eaten and then disperse into the alder-woods and on to the grassed areas by about the end of the year. A huge flock of about 400 tree sparrows spent early 1974 on the Town Meads or in the surrounding ERDE trees. Up to a dozen bramblings were present amongst them. The only regular winter visitor which seems to have decreased is the grey wagtail. Its favourite area, the weir on the West River, has been changed beyond recognition.

The gull and duck populations of the local reservoirs and gravel pits have changed little since 1969. There were some inaccuracies in the 1st report, however. The

common gull, after the black-headed gull, is undoubtedly the commonest gull of the Lea Valley. The figures given for the common gull (500-1000) and the lesser black-backed gull (10,000) should perhaps be interchanged. One noticeable change has been in the number of cormorants wintering on the reservoirs. During the day they move out to smaller waters, and can be seen returning with the gulls at dusk. A flock of 31 was counted in February 1974.

ERDE Systematic List. Addendum.

RED-NECKED GREBE (*Podiceps grisegena*) Present on W Side pit Jan 27-30, 1970

SLAVONIAN GREBE (*Podiceps auritus*) Present on N Side pit Nov 28, 1972

CORMORANT (*Phalacrocorax carbo*) An increasing tendency to winter on the Lea Valley reservoirs, and to move out to the gravel pits by day. May be seen returning in formation at dusk, eg 5 on Nov 29, 1972; 31 on Feb 15, 1974.

BITTERN (*Botaurus stellaris*) Seen on W Side pit Jan 5, 1970. One also wintered at Fisher's Green during 1970/1.

BEWICK SWAN (*Cygnus bewikii*) Flocks seen on two occasions flying over the Establishment towards the reservoirs. Nov 9, 1968 (5 birds) and March 13, 1974 (9 birds).

PINTAIL (*Anas acuta*) A pair present on the W Side at March 8, 1972.

GOLDENEYE (*Bucephala clangula*) A female present on the W Side pit during Feb 1970 and Feb 1974.

WATER RAIL (*Rallus aquaticus*) Seen on many occasions in winter around the W Side pit. A secretive bird, the best chance of a sighting is either when the pits are frozen, or at dusk, when the bird is rather more active.

LITTLE RINGED PLOVER (*Charadrius dubius*) A summer visitor in small numbers to the Lea Valley, where it nests on freshly exposed gravel before vegetation takes over. Seen frequently in 1970, a few times in 1971 and 1972, but not during the last two years.

JACK SNIPPE (*Lymnocyptes minimus*) Not infrequent in winter in the Lea Valley. The only sighting by members of the ERDE Society was at Fisher's Green on Feb 26, 1971, but several reports have been received from outside observers of sightings around the W Side pit.

BLACK-TAILED GODWIT (*Limosa limosa*) A rare passage migrant. Seen, knee-deep in water, on the N Side pit on May 12, 1971. Surprisingly, this bird showed no sign of summer plumage.

ARTIC TERN (*Sterna paradisaea*) This bird is very difficult to distinguish from the common tern. However, on Aug 20, 1973 a perfect view from about 30 yards was obtained of two terns standing on a shingle bank. One bird was in full breeding plumage. The absence of a black tip to the bright red bill, and the short legs clearly identified as an Arctic.

LITTLE TERN (*Sterna albifrons*) Rare passage migrant. One present on N Side pit on May 1, 1974.

LITTLE OWL (*Athene noctua*) Appears now to be a breeding species in the New Hill area. Single birds were present Aug 8 - Sept 1, 1971, June 12, 1972, whilst two adults and two juveniles were present July 13 - Aug 2, 1973. These birds are quite active during the day, and spend much time perched on the eastern boundary fence.

GREEN WOODPECKER (*Picus viridis*) One seen on S Site April 15, 1970, and one heard on N Site, Feb 16, 1973.

RED-BACKED SHRIKE (*Lanius colluria*) A male and a juvenile were seen on several dates during the first week in July 1972, in the extreme south end of the South Site. They probably nested outside the Establishment, but this was the only breeding record for Essex for 1972. The red-backed shrike is now an exceedingly rare bird.

GREAT GREY SHRIKE (*Lanius exubitor*) Rare winter visitor. One seen on New Hill, March 1, 1974.

WAXWING (*Bombycilla garrulus*) One seen in a garden on the ERDE estate, Feb 4, 1970. Though not strictly an ERDE record, this seemed too interesting to omit.

GRASSHOPPER WARBLER (*Locustella naevia*) Much increased summer visitor to the country as a whole. This has resulted in several appearances on New Hill - July 13 and 19, 1971, April 17, 1974. Since the reeling song is normally delivered at night, this bird may be more common than here indicated.

LESSER WHITLTHROAT (*Sylvia curruca*) Perhaps now a regular summer visitor to New Hill. Heard and seen May 20, 1970, May 20, 1971, and May 6 and many subsequent dates in 1974.

STONECHAT (*Saxicola torquata*) Irregular winter visitor. Seen around N Side pit, Oct 6, 1969 and Oct 13, 1973.

REDSTART (*Phoenicurus phoenicurus*) Rare passage migrant to ERDE, though breeds in Epping Forest and Broxbourne Woods, April 15, 1970, Sept 10 and 21, 1971.

NUTHATCH (*Sitta europaea*) Two birds seen on S Site on Feb 18, 1970. Common in Epping Forest, Whitewebbs Park, etc.

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