

SPANISH SPARROWS EATING SWARMING TERMITES (INSECTA: ISOPTERA)

Two species of Termite inhabit the Maltese islands, *Kaloterms flavicollis* (*Kalotermitidae*) and *Reticulitermes lucifugus* (*Rhinotermitidae*). Both these species are reputed to swarm in spring (*Kaloterms* in early spring and *Reticulitermes* from April to June) (Chinery, M. 1986. Insects. Collins, London). I have records of *Reticulitermes lucifugus* swarming in May (7/5/89) and 25/5/91) at San Anton gardens, where Termites are common.

A few specimens were collected from the swarms present at San Anton on 25/5/91, and the species involved was subsequently identified as *Reticulitermes lucifugus* (identification confirmed by S. Schembri). At about 09.50 hours (C.E.T.), large numbers of termites were observed descending slowly to the ground. Two flocks of Spanish Sparrows (*Passer hispaniolensis*) were seen feeding on these termites. The two flocks were quite small (8 and 20 individuals) and each flock included both males and female. The larger flock contained two fledglings which were begging for food continuously.

The sparrows hopped over the ground, stopping at intervals to capture a helpless termite. Generally, the termite was picked off the ground and eaten immediately, but the two females which were feeding fledglings were seen gathering several termites and holding them in their bill. It was noticed that most of the birds did not attempt to catch termites while in flight, but tried to locate helpless grounded termites. On one occasion, however, a male was seen flying horizontally to catch a termite (in the bill) which was hovering close to the ground. In addition, a female was seen trying to catch a termite by picking it off the soil. The termite managed to fly off. The female Spanish Sparrow promptly picked up a dead leaf and held it in her bill for about one second.

Given the low diversity of Termites in the Maltese islands, swarming is probably a relatively rare event at any one locality, occurring on a handful of dates every year. This must make termites relatively unimportant quantitatively as a food source. The significance of this behaviour probably lies in the fact that it reduces the impact the sparrows have on their food supplies for a day or so. This ought to make supplies of foods such as seeds and fruits last longer. While this explanation may account for the existence of this behaviour in sparrows as a species, it does not provide a satisfactory answer in the case of the sparrows at San Anton. Food is abundant at San Anton gardens, and food supplies are unlikely to run out.

M.A. Thake

M.A.T. — 169 Fleur-de-Lys Rd., B'Kara BKR 08, Malta.

CHIFFCHAFF *PHYLLOSCOPUS COLLYBITA* FEEDING ON THE FRUIT OF THE PRICKLY PEAR***OPUNTIA FICUS-INDICA***

B. & D. Snow (1988) stated that of the *Phylloscopus* warblers perhaps the Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita* takes fruit most often, but even so records are few. They mention elder, red elder, blackberry, persimmon (kaki fruit) and *Vaccinium* sp. for this species.

On 29th December 1990 a Chiffchaff was noted pecking at and eating from the fruit of a prickly pear *Opuntia ficus-indica* tree. The fruit in question, which was also pecked at by a Sardinian Warbler *Sylvia melanocephala*, a Black Redstart *Phoenicurus ochruros*, a Robin *Erithacus rubecula* and 2-3 Spanish