

~~SOME OBSERVATION NOTES ON THE SHORT TOED LARK *CALANDRELLA BRACHYDACTYLA*~~

Various parental anti-predator strategies are described for the Short-toed Lark *Calandrella brachydactyla* in Cramp (1988). Feigning injury to lure a snake away has also been noted (Sultana & Gauci 1970).

A different type of anti-predator strategy was noted on 8 July 1989 at is Sanab, Gozo. The author was in a photography hide which was about 3 m away from a nest of the Short-toed Lark which contained three young. These were nearly fully fledged so much so that one of them was leaving the nest to meet the parents each time these visited the nest with food. Then, all of a sudden, the regular visits by the parents stopped and after about 8 minutes the young started calling for food. Looking out from a side hole in the hide, a Western Whipsnake *Coleuber viridiflavus* was seen moving along the field about 4 metres away from the nest. The female was also there walking briskly with head held high on a stretched neck looking intently at the snake and walking alongside it about a metre away. They moved together in a seemingly parallel way until the snake was about 20 m away from the nest, when the adult bird flew up. A few minutes later it was back feeding the young.

The Short-toed Lark's song is well known to be frequently interspersed with mimicked calls. Some of its calls are reminiscent of other species which do not even belong to its genus or family (Cramp 1988).

While trying to locate nests of this species at Ta' Cenc on 19 May 1991 one bird was distinctly heard using a few notes from the staccato alarm calls of the Sardinian Warbler *Sylvia melanocephala* as a sort of an introductory phrase to its main normal song. This was repeated several times. Sardinian Warblers breed in the area and are frequently heard uttering their chattering calls.

References

- Cramp, S. (ed.) 1988. The Birds of the Western Palearctic. Vol. V. Oxford University Press. Oxford.
Sultana, J. & Gauci, C. 1970. The breeding birds of Malta. *Malta Year Book* 1970. 329-336, 339-346.

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EGG LAYING IN THE MEDITERRANEAN SHEARWATER *P. YELKOUAN* IN MALTA

In the Maltese Islands the Mediterranean Shearwater *Puffinus yelkouan* has been recorded laying generally in late March or early April (Sultana & Gauci 1970a, 1970b, 1982).

While on a night visit to a partly accessible colony of this species in the northern part of Malta on 7 March 1991 an adult bird was found incubating its single egg, very deep inside a burrow in the cliffs. On the same night seven other birds were caught for ringing before entering their burrow. During the ringing process three adult females were found ready for laying. The egg inside could easily be felt and the cloaca was already much extended.

It seems that the Mediterranean Shearwater in the Maltese Islands may commence laying in the first half of March, earlier than previously recorded.

Acknowledgement is due to Manwel Mallia, who, with difficulty, entered the deep burrow and found the incubating bird, to Joe Sultana who examined the birds during the ringing process, and to Alex Casha, Victor Falzon and Desiree Falzon who formed part of the visiting team.

References

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 Sultana, J. & Gauci, C. 1970b. Bird Studies on Filfla. Malta Ornithological Society: Malta.
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Editorial Note: The Records Committee of the British Ornithologists' Union in its fifteenth report in April 1991 has recommended the separation of *P. yelkouan* (including the race *mauretanicus*) from *Puffinus puffinus* (Manx Shearwater) which should now be treated as monotypic. It has also recommended that *Puffinus yelkouan* be known as Mediterranean Shearwater (*Ibis* 133:438-441). Local ornithologists should be very careful not to be confused as in former times the Cory's Shearwater *Calonectris diomedea* was known as Mediterranean Shearwater. The separation has been recommended due to recent works (Bourne *et al.*, *Br. Birds* 81: 306-319 and Yesou *et al.*, *Br. Birds* 83: 299-319) which show that there are consistent and recognisable differences in the plumage, breeding range, migration pattern and winter distribution of *P. puffinus* on the one hand and *P. yelkouan* (both subspecies *yelkouan* and *mauretanicus*) on the other.

SPANISH SPARROWS DISMEMBERING FLOWERS

Over several years in late March to May, Spanish Sparrows *Passer hispaniolensis* have been watched dismembering the flowers of Orange trees (*Citrus sinensis*) in a private garden at Fleur de Lys and at San Anton. The sparrow deliberately bites off part of the flower and chews the part in its bill. The bill movements used are similar to those used by sparrows to immobilise a large insect before swallowing it. The flower part, usually a petal or a group of stamens, is held transversely in the bill, which executes many sequential pressing movements on the flower part, as the latter gradually moves through the bill in a transverse plane. The flower parts are not swallowed, and are discarded immediately afterwards. It looks as though the sparrows are pressing the flower parts in order to extract and drink the cell sap which oozes from the pressed petals and stamens. *Hma zaghhar*, made by pressing orange blossoms, is a traditional Maltese medicinal drink, well known in Maltese domestic culture.

On two occasions in June 1987 and June 1989, Spanish Sparrows were seen treating flowers of Japanese Honeysuckle *Lonicera japonica* in a similar way. It may be that the technique extracts some of the nectar held at the base of the corolla. *L. japonica* flowers in May-June, just after the Citrus trees have stopped flowering, and it may be that some sparrows have extrapolated the technique to extracting nectar from this species.

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