

NECTAR FEEDING BY CHIFFCHAFFS

The purpose of this short note is to amplify the information on nectar feeding by this species which was published in an earlier paper (Ihake, M.A. 1980. Nectar : a supplementary food source for wintering Chiffchaffs *Phylloscopus collybita*. Riv. Ital. Ornitol. 50: 167-168.).

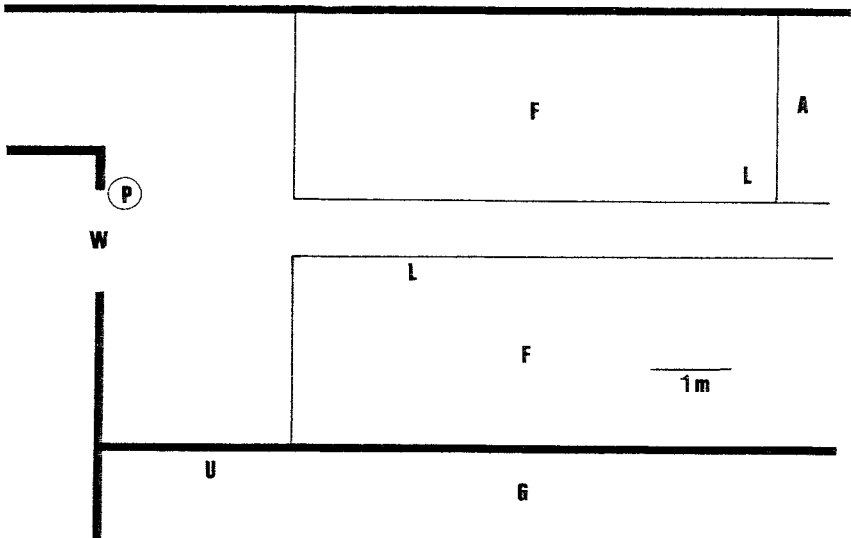
Part of the garden where the Chiffchaffs were observed is shown in Figure 1. Thick black lines are stone walls, three metres high at U. The larger flower beds are marked F. An aviary (A) housing various finches lies towards the end of the garden. The positions of *Lapeyrouisia cruenta* plants are labelled L. The *Ponsettia Euphorbia pulcherrima* plant was held in a large pot (P), three metres below the window (W) from which observations were made. The *Ponsettia* plant was about three metres high. The gardens (G) nearby contain orange trees *Citrus aurantium* on which Chiffchaffs frequently forage by gleaning insects off the foliage.

Nectar feeding was first noted in 1977 and was observed during every subsequent winter until 1982, when the *Ponsettia* died. Chiffchaffs were seen feeding on nectar during late afternoon, but observations were not made at other times. No binoculars were used.

Early in the season, the *Ponsettia* was utilised exclusively. As many as three Chiffchaffs at once were observed perching on the wall at U, from whence they flew to the inflorescences. After alighting singly on the inflorescences, each bird was observed to insert its bill into the flower. Birds visited the plant singly. As observations were made at very close range, 1 to 2m away from the birds behind a closed window, it could be ascertained that the birds were actually taking nectar, and not eating pollen or small insects attracted to the inflorescences. Nectar was seen glistening in the open bill as the birds fed. No bill or tongue movements were noted. Several short bouts, each about one second long, were made before the bird returned to its perch. Each bird generally sampled more than one inflorescence. No obvious aggression between birds was detected. Displacement of one bird by another at the inflorescences was not observed, but instances when more than one bird was present were infrequent.

The *Ponsettia* was visited by the Chiffchaffs regularly, perhaps daily, as long as the inflorescences remained. When several inflorescences were cut off the plant, Chiffchaffs were observed hovering over the positions formerly occupied by the inflorescences.

Later in the season, flowers of *Lapeyrouisia cruenta* were visited for nectar. These



were further away from the window and observations were necessarily less detailed. Birds alighted singly on the peduncle below the lowermost flower. Nectar was obtained by inserting the bill into the corolla. Nectar would often spill out of the tilted flower onto the Chiffchaff's head. On several occasions, Chiffchaffs pecked at the bottom of the corolla, the flowers often falling off the plant in the process. No attempt was made to recover nectar from fallen flowers. Feeding from *Lapeyrouisia cruenta* involved considerable predation risk. The flowers were all within one metre of the ground, in a garden which harbours several cats. Mature fruits of *L. cruenta* developed from flowers which had been visited by chiffchaffs, but pollination need not have been due to the Chiffchaffs.

The birds alternated bouts of nectar feeding with hawking for *Chironomidae*. At no time was nectar feeding observed to be the sole mode of feeding.

Ponsettias, and other winter flowering plants whose flowers are rich in nectar are widely cultivated in Maltese gardens. There is no reason to believe that nectar feeding was confined to the neighbourhood in which the observations were made. Elsewhere, nectar feeding from *Aloe arborescens* by Chiffchaffs can be inferred from the observations of Fiteni and Finlayson (Fiteni, J. 1981. Facial stains in the Sardinian and other warblers in Gibraltar. *IL-Merill* 21: 25.). Facial stains on Sardinian Warblers *Sylvia melanocephala* and Blackcaps *Sylvia atricapilla* have also been noted in Malta (editorial note to Fiteni's paper). Besides providing sugars and amino acids, the nectar ought to be a welcome source of water in a relatively xeric environment. The extent to which *Sylviidae* wintering in the Mediterranean region utilise nectar as a supplementary food source has yet to be determined.

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#### ~~SOME NOTES ON SPOTTED FLYCATCHERS BREEDING AT BUSKETT DURING 1983-86~~

~~Records of breeding Spotted Flycatchers *Muscicapastriata* from 1971 to 1982 have already been documented by Sultana and Gauci (*IL-Merill* 10:10, 15:4, 17:29-30, 20:24, 22:21, and A New Guide to the Birds of Malta, page 157).~~

~~Following are some notes and records for the years 1983 to 1986:~~

~~1983: There were no breeding records, but an adult bird was seen on 28 June and again on 2 July.~~

~~1984: A record year. At least 5 pairs were present during June and July. Five nests were found and from four of these, fifteen birds are known to have fledged successfully. The other nest contained 5 eggs which never hatched. One of the nests was built on a lower outer twig of an Aleppo Pine *Pinus halepensis*. This is the first nest to be locally found on such a tree; all other nests had been found on Cypress trees *Cupressus sempervirens* and in a broken sign post hanging from the same type of tree.~~

~~1985: Three pairs were present. One raised two broods in the same nest, fledging 5 birds in all. Another pair had a nest with 3 young; on 16 June these were about 7 days old, but two days later the nest was not found and was presumed to have been stolen by man. It was also built on the lower branch of a Pine tree, very low and visible. Nests for the third pair were not found.~~

~~1986: A pair raised a brood of four, the young fledging successfully on 20th July. Another female laid two clutches of eggs, one of 4 and the other of 5. This female was presumably unmated as the eggs never hatched. It is to be noted that this bird built its first nest on an old nest from last year, and again the second clutch of eggs was laid in a freshly built one on top of the two other nests. The eggs from the first clutch were still beneath the last one.~~

~~It was noted that the same areas are used year after year, and the colour of eggs is exactly the same in such areas. This indicates that some of these Spotted Flycatchers are the same ones year after year.~~

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