

still in the nest. The nest was examined again on 12 May and the egg, presumed infertile, was still there.

There is a possibility that the female layed her first clutch (which included only one infertile egg) earlier in the season, and then re-layed her second clutch in the same nest (this time laying six eggs which all hatched). Another possibility is that the female layed a clutch of seven eggs one of which was infertile.

A case of a Fan-tailed Warbler's nest containing eight eggs comprising two clutches had been recorded previously (Gauci, C. & Sultana, J. 1980. Instances of birds re-laying in same nest containing infertile eggs. *Il-Merill* 21 : 21).

R.G. - 'Sunview', Potters Street, B'Kara, Malta.

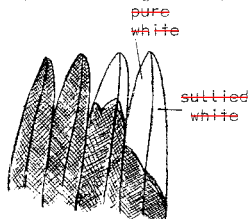
Raymond Galea

THE SECOND OCCURRENCE OF THE OLIVE-BACKED PIPIT IN MALTA.

An unusual pipit was mistnetted by the writer while bird-ringing at Xemxija on 2nd November 1983. On close examination the bird turned out to be an Olive-backed Pipit *Anthus hodgsoni*. The identification was also confirmed separately by John Borg and Charles Gauci; the latter had also seen the first specimen which was trapped and ringed at Ghadira on 30th October 1975 (Gilia, V. 1977-78. Olive-backed Pipit - an addition to the list of the birds of Malta. *Il-Merill* 19 : 11).

In size it was smaller than a Tree Pipit *Anthus trivialis*. Its overall colour was olive-green with darker streaks on the head and very faint streaking on nape and mantle. The rump was greenish and completely unstreaked. The wings and tail had greenish edges to the feathers. The ear coverts were dark, the chin white and the throat cream. The breast was creamy white with black spots, the belly was cream and the flanks were pale fawn buff with darker streaks. The axillaries and under-tail coverts were cream tinged yellow. The broad white supercilary stripe was quite unlike that of any other European pipit.

The bill was dark grey on top and pale underneath and the inside of the mouth was greyish. The legs were pinkish and the iris dark olive brown; the eye-ring was brown. White on the outer tail feathers was present as in the accompanying figure.



The biometrics in mm. were as follows: wing 78; tail 54; tarsus 32.2; bill 15; bill depth 3.5; bill width 4.2; and hind claw 8.8. The bird weighed 20.0 gm.

While in the hand the bird called continuously a high pitched 'sip' similar to a call of the *Regulus* sp. On release its call was like a Tree Pipit's but higher pitched, a feature which was also reported by Gilia loc. cit.

This pipit is a vagrant from Asia to Europe.

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Ecs. Since the above occurrence another Olive-backed Pipit was trapped and ringed at Lunzjata, Gozo on 3rd November 1984.

SPECTACLED WARBLERS AT PLAY?

The incident reported here was observed at Ghadira Nature Reserve on 29th October 1983, at approximately 11.00 hrs. Several Spectacled Warblers *Sylvia conspicillata* were seen engaged in a social activity on the embankment which protects the south western fringe of the nature reserve. Observations were made from the road which skirts the southern border of the reserve, at a distance of from 20 to 25 metres from the birds. Powerful (16 X 50) binoculars were used.

At least three (perhaps five) Spectacled Warblers were seen chasing one another around an elevation of bare earth on the embankment. The birds followed a circular to ob-long path around a ten metre stretch of embankment. At intervals, the birds perched on the bare earth to posture with cocked tail and vocalise. The behaviour was first detected by the frequent loud vocalisations produced by the interacting birds. The vocalisations consisted of snatches of song, interspersed with the churring 'alarm' call. At least two of the birds were seen carrying large (4-5 cm) green and black caterpillars in their bill. Circular chases were observed between birds which lacked caterpillars in their bill. In addition, a bird holding a caterpillar was seen being chased by another bird whose bill was empty. This behaviour was repeated at short intervals during the 10 minutes devoted to the observations. The behaviour was still in progress when observations were stopped.

Anthropomorphic interpretations of animal behaviour are risky, but the behaviour reported here was strongly suggestive of little children playing tag ! This seems to be an instance of social play in the Spectacled Warbler.

Martin A. Thake

~~SARDINIAN WARBLER : UNUSUAL FEEDING BEHAVIOUR.~~

~~On 10th January 1978, a single male Sardinian Warbler *Sylvia melanocephala* was seen pecking at a piece of bread. The bird flew away when approached without attempting to lift the bread. The item lay in the middle of Old Railway Road, in front of St. Aloysius College, B'Kara and had probably been dropped by one of the college students. Scraps dropped by students form an important part of the diet of Spanish Sparrows *Passer hispaniolensis* during the academic year. Similar behaviour was observed during winter 1982-83, but the date was not recorded.~~

~~In late January 1983, while on a country walk at Buskett, a single male Sardinian Warbler was seen foraging within one of the large barrels which serve as dust bins. It was not possible to determine whether the bird was feeding on flies or on food scraps among the rubbish.~~

Martin A. Thake

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~~PURPLE HERON EATING A SKINK.~~

~~While bird-watching with some friends at Ghadira Nature Reserve on 9th April 1984, we noticed that a Purple Heron *Ardea purpurea* had caught a prey. The bird then flew a short distance to one of the islands in the reserve with its prey dangling in its beak.~~

~~The heron took several minutes to swallow its prey, during which time we could identify its food. The prey was a reptile and we all were in agreement that it was a skink. Only one species of skink is found in Malta, the Ocellated Skink *Chalcides ocellatus*, which is fairly common in the reserve. The skink was a fully grown specimen and seemed to be about 25 cm in length.~~

~~The heron held the skink by its neck, suffocating it to death and then succeeded to swallow it after several attempts, head first.~~

~~Purple Herons are rarely seen feeding in the Maltese Islands. They are very vulnerable to the local bird-shooters, when they are flying low or when they alight. Appropriate feeding areas are very scarce and these, with the exception of Ghadira, are regularly visited by bird-shooters.~~

~~During spring 1984 up to three Purple Herons were present at Ghadira for several days. Their main diet during their stay at the reserve consisted of killifish *Aphanius fasciatus* and Grey Mullet *Mugil sp.*~~

Denis-Cachia

~~D.C. - 17 Gardenia Street, Santa Lucia, Malta.~~

~~AN UNSUCCESSFUL BREEDING ATTEMPT BY THE SHORT-EARED OWL.~~

~~During the nineteenth century odd pairs of Short-eared Owls *Asio flammeus* used to breed in the Maltese Islands (Schembri, A. 1843. *Catalogo Ornitologico del Gruppo di Malta*, & Wright, C. 1864. *List of the Birds observed in the Islands of Malta and Gozo*). In the present century only two nests were found - one with 5 young in the vicinity of Siggiewi on 4th May 1906 and another with a clutch of 3 eggs at Wied Zhuber on 18th May 1909 (Despott, G. 1917. *Notes on the Ornithology of Malta*).~~

~~Since then there have been no other breeding records of this species; not surprising when considering the prevailing intense human interference and the ever-shrinking adequate habitat. On 17th March 1983 an employee of the Department of Agriculture reported to us that he had flushed a large owl from a nest containing 5 eggs while on duty on the island of Comino which is a bird sanctuary. On visiting the locality on 24th March a Short-eared Owl was found incubating 5 eggs in a nest which was situated on the remnants of a base of a rubble wall which divided two uncultivated terraced fields. The nest had little material and was a shallow hollow, sheltered by vegetation. Unfortunately the nest was found destroyed a few days later. Only two cold eggs remained and the site appeared much disturbed. During the period in which the nest was under observation only one owl was seen and it is worth noting that a Short-eared Owl had been shot from a dinghy just off Comino in mid-March.~~

~~Joe Sultana & Charles Gauci~~

~~J.S. - 3 Seiberras Flats, Fleur-de-Lys Junction, B'Kara, Malta.~~

~~C.G. - 'Skyline', Targa Gap Estate, Mosta, Malta.~~