

Ornithological Record for Derbyshire. 1917.

By N. H. FITZ HERBERT.

AN interesting article in the *Times* on "The scarcity of Birds," written, as subsequently transpired, from Herefordshire, mentions the fact that the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* for the year 671 has only a single entry:—"This year was the great destruction among birds." As the writer justly remarks, in 1917 history has repeated itself. At any rate this is true of Derbyshire and the Midland Counties, though in a later issue of the *Times*, a correspondent wrote from East Anglia to say that the same shortage was by no means to be found in that district.

The weather was extraordinarily severe in the early months of the year. Up to the middle of February there was very hard frost almost continuously, and on March 7th there was a particularly sharp snap. On April 1st there was a sharp frost followed by a heavy snowstorm and blizzard, and from the beginning of the month till the 13th, there were constant snowstorms. I have never seen the trees so severely barked, and the spring was extraordinarily backward, with the grass brown and the hedges black. Summer came with a burst in May and there was then some very hot weather. August was a very wet month, and the verdure at the end of this month and the beginning of September was wonderful for the time of year; at the end of September and beginning of October there were some glorious autumn days. So much for the weather up to the time of writing, the end of October. It can well be imagined that the resident

birds suffered severely in the inclement weather at the beginning of the year. At Somersal the most remarkable feature was the lack of Blackbirds; never has fruit of the most tempting kind been allowed to ripen with such impunity, and in the early autumn when a very fine crop of yewberries was ripe, there was only about one Blackbird to every half dozen Song-Thrushes. In this neighbourhood the hardy Goldcrest suffered, as well as the Long-tailed Tit, and I did not see a single specimen of either species, though last year both were numerous, especially the last named. Tree-Sparrows of late years have been very plentiful, and they usually nest in large numbers in the many oaks to be found in the surrounding country, but this year there were certainly fewer. Other birds less numerous than usual were the Tree-creeper, Wren, Coal-Tit, Missel-Thrush, and even the House-Sparrow. Mr. E. Peat informs me that the number of Lapwings nesting in the neighbourhood of Curbar was very much smaller than usual, but I did not notice any diminution in their numbers at Somersal. Mr. E. Grindey writes that in North Derbyshire most of the resident species paid toll to the weather with the exception of the Curlew and Golden Plover, the Linnet and Twite being especial sufferers, while in the Thorpe district the Bullfinch, formerly very abundant, has become almost a rarity. During the cold weather several Grouse came down to Bakewell from the moors and on January 24th, Mr. Storrs Fox put one up in his garden, while others were seen in the neighbourhood. Partly no doubt in consequence of the lack of birds there was a plague of caterpillars in many parts. No doubt during the severe weather there were many unusual visitors to the rivers, of which I did not hear, but on February 7th, while walking along the Derwent from Belper to Ambergate, Judge Alan Macpherson saw a Cormorant, four Pochard, a Tufted Duck and two Golden-eye. All the early nesters were naturally behind-

hand ; I did not see a Lapwing's egg till April 17th, and there were hardly any nests of any sort till the end of the month. On the 20th, a Song-Thrush had begun to sit on five eggs at Somersal, but this was an exception. On April 17th the Yellow Hammers and Reed-Buntings were still in flocks, and the male Reed-Buntings in winter plumage, and I did not see one in summer plumage till May 1st. On April 25th I saw a pair of Linnets together, the male still being in winter plumage.

ARRIVAL OF SPRING MIGRANTS.—Under the circumstances it was to be expected that the early arrivals would be later than usual. The first warbler I saw at Somersal was on April 11th, in the middle of a snowstorm, but I could not say whether it was a Willow Warbler or Chiffchaff. On April 15th I saw two Willow Warblers, and again on the 17th, but I did not hear the song till the 20th ; they were common on the 28th, but the great influx did not come till the 30th. The first was seen at Fenny Bentley on the 26th and they were common on the 28th (E. Grindey), while in the Riber district they were common on May 1st (H. G. Attlee). The Ring-Ouzel was first heard at Curbar on April 16th (E. Peat). The Wheatear was very late ; on April 15th one was seen at Buxton (H.G.A.) and on the 17th one (a cock) at Somersal and another near Sudbury on the 22nd (N.H.F.), while on the same date twelve were seen near Ashbourne (E.G.). A pair was building at the top of Lathkill Dale on May 16th and one egg had been laid on the 21st (N.H.F.). The first Swallow recorded was at Bakewell on April 17th and eight were seen there on the following day (Rev. R. H. Fuller). On April 22nd two were seen near Somersal and about six together on April 25th and they were getting common on the 28th (N.H.F.). They were first noted at Fenny Bentley on the 26th (E.G.). The Sandpiper is first recorded on the Dove near Sudbury, where four were seen on April 22nd, while on the 30th nine were seen

together (N.H.F.). On May 13th several were observed on Bentley Brook (E.G.) and on May 16th a pair at Cromford (H.G.A.). The Cuckoo was first heard on April 23rd near Curbar (E.P.), and at Somersal the following day (N.H.F.), but it was not noted at Fenny Bentley till May 1st (E.G.). This species was particularly numerous this year, perhaps owing to the large numbers of insects. The Tree-Pipit was heard at Fenny Bentley on April 24th (E.G.), and near Somersal on the 28th, and it was getting common in the neighbourhood on the 30th (N.H.F.). The Chiffchaff was not heard at Somersal till April 27th (N.H.F.); on the day following it was noted at Fenny Bentley (E.G.), and on May 4th at Riber (H.G.A.). It was heard this year in the Bakewell district, where it is extremely rare (N.H.F.). The Martins arrived at Fenny Bentley on April 28th (E.G.), but they were not observed at Somersal till the 30th and were not common till May 2nd (N.H.F.); on May 1st several were seen at Riber (H.G.A.). The Yellow Wagtail and Sand-Martin were both seen near Sudbury on April 30th (N.H.F.), and on this date the Lesser Whitethroat was heard at Fenny Bentley (E.G.), the last named being also recorded at Riber on May 4th (H.G.A.). The Swifts reached Bakewell on April 30th (W. Storrs Fox); on May 1st twelve were seen at Riber (H.G.A.) and on May 2nd two passed over Somersal (N.H.F.). On May 1st the Corn-Crake was heard near Kniveton (E.G.) and at Riber on May 5th (H.G.A.), but at Somersal it was not heard till the 17th (J. West), and at Bakewell not till the 20th (N.H.F.). On May 15th a nest was found with one egg near Kniveton, and five different birds were heard calling in the same meadow, about eleven acres in extent (E.G.). This species was very common everywhere. On May 1st a cock Blackcap arrived in Mr. Storrs Fox's garden at Bakewell and stayed for two days; this Warbler was also observed on the same date at Riber (H.G.A.) and was heard singing

at Fenny Bentley on the 21st (E.G.). The Whitethroat was first heard near Somersal on May 1st and was fairly common on the 3rd (N.H.F.), and on this date it appeared at Bakewell (W.S.F.), and on the 4th at Riber (H.G.A.). The first Whinchat was seen on May 1st near Somersal (N.H.F.), and on the following day it was common at Fenny Bentley (E.G.), while on May 3rd it was seen at Riber (H.G.A.). On May 2nd the Redstart was noted at Riber (H.G.A.), and the next day at Somersal (N.H.F.). The Wood Warbler was first observed at Riber on May 2nd (H.G.A.) ; on May 6th one was heard at Ashford Lake near Bakewell, and on the following day several in Manners Woods (N.H.F.). There were several Sedge Warblers at Ashford Lake on May 6th, and on June 4th a nest with three eggs (N.H.F.). The only note I have of the arrival of the Garden Warbler is at Riber on May 4th (H.G.A.) ; on June 4th one was sitting on five eggs in Manners Woods (N.H.F.). The Spotted Flycatcher was seen at Somersal on May 14th (J.W.), on the 18th in Lathkill Dale (N.H.F.), and on the 19th at Fenny Bentley (E.G.). The Nightjar was first heard on May 20th at Curbar (E.P.), and at Riber on the 25th (H.G.A.) ; a pair of young birds were seen on Froggatt Edge on June 23rd (N.H.F.). The Turtle-Dove is reported from Riber on May 20th (H.G.A.).

DEPARTURE OF SPRING MIGRANTS.—I was able to pay some attention to this point in the immediate neighbourhood of Somersal, chiefly in the garden of the Hall. The Willow Warblers stayed in fair numbers up to September 6th, and on this date I heard the song for the last time, uttered by two different birds. On the 7th there were certainly fewer and on the 8th none at all, but on most of the following days I saw two or three right up to the 19th, on which date I saw two, one of which stayed in the garden the whole day. A Chiffchaff was singing hard on August 26th, and I heard the song almost every day afterwards up to September 3rd, and for the last time on September

7th. After this date I saw one or two frequently, often calling loudly but never singing, up to September 19th. The number of Flycatchers seemed to decrease at the end of August, but there were still a few on September 12th, and on the 15th, 16th and 18th I saw a single bird. On August 25th there were several Whinchats near Marston Montgomery but none a week later; one was seen at Fenny Bentley on September 8th (E.G.). I saw a Redstart once or twice towards the end of August, but not later than September 1st. Whitethroats were to be seen in small numbers as late as September 15th, and Lesser Whitethroats up to September 12th. On September 3rd a cock Blackcap came into the garden on his way south, and as late as October 1st another male bird was caught in a bedroom. A pair of Tree-Pipits hatched out their young ones in front of the house on what was a lawn in pre-war days, and it was a very pretty sight to see the parent birds planing down with deflected tail to the nest from the top of a Wellingtonia close by. They stayed about the garden till after the beginning of September, and I saw three on September 2nd and one on the 5th and again on the 10th. On September 10th a Sedge Warbler came into the garden and stayed for the whole day; it spent nearly the whole time in the parsnips and was very tame, allowing itself to be watched from close quarters. On September 9th a Corn-Crake was cut to pieces by a reaper at a farm near Thorpe (E.G.). The Swifts left Bakewell about the usual time and the last was seen on September 2nd (W.S.F.); on August 24th one passed over Somersal (N.H.F.). The Swallows and Martins were very numerous this year both in my own and other districts. At the beginning of September large numbers began to collect at Somersal and their numbers kept increasing till the 6th, when a contingent apparently left, for on the 7th there were fewer though still very many. When I left home on the 20th there were still a

fair number and I found plenty at Bakewell, but nearly all had gone from there before the end of the month. On October 3rd I saw several Martins at Stoney Middleton, and on the 8th, 9th, 10th and 13th several Swallows at Bakewell. On September 15th great numbers of Swallows and Martins were seen collecting on the telegraph wires at Fenny Bentley, and on October 7th a Martin was observed entering a nest on the station master's house at Thorpe Cloud, while on the 9th several Martins were seen at Fenny Bentley, and on the 11th a pair of Swallows at the same place (E.G.).

WINTER VISITORS.—On April 21st I saw two flocks of Fieldfares at Somersal, on April 24th a very large and noisy flock in Sudbury Park, and on May 1st three birds together near Somersal.

UNCLASSIFIED NOTES.

On May 10th at Bakewell I heard a Hedge-Sparrow singing after 11 p.m. (summer time), during a storm of rain. On May 20th near Bakewell I got a good view of a Corn-Crake calling, and saw it clearly flinging its upstretched head from side to side; this would perhaps account for the fact that the bird often appears to possess ventriloquial powers, and the distance of the sound seems to vary. On June 24th I almost stepped on a nest of young partridges beside the Bakewell-Moneyash road; the mother ran, or rather dragged herself on her belly, across the road and called, and it was the prettiest sight to see the little ones one after another run down upon the road, tumble head over heels and then scamper across. On August 31st I put up a Sparrow-Hawk from the bottom of a hedge at Somersal and found it had been devouring a young Swallow, of which only the feathers were left.

Mr. Grindey sends me an interesting account of a battle

à outrance between two male House-Sparrows. It took place on November 22nd, 1916, near the school house at Thorpe, and after a fierce fight of short duration one of the birds was killed. An examination of the body disclosed two very severe wounds in the head and neck, out of which blood was oozing. Mr. Grindey also mentions another fight, this time between two male Redbreasts, of which he was told by a postwoman, who, while bicycling from Ashbourne to Bentley, observed the pair in desperate combat. She separated them twice, but they only renewed the battle with greater fury. At last she carried one of them for about a mile on her bicycle, only to find that on its release it made a bee-line for the scene of the struggle!

The following curious incident was recorded in the *High Peak News* by Mr. Geo. H. Wood of Little Longstone. On November 17th, while he was standing on the platform of Great Longstone station, a covey of Partridges flew against the signal wires and three fell dead so close to him that he was bespattered with their blood. Occasional accidents to low-flying birds are not uncommon in the dust or fog, but this occurred in broad daylight.

On November 22nd a Blackbird with a perfectly white head was seen on the lawn at The Nether House, Wirksworth, but it never appeared again.

CLASSIFIED NOTES.

Carrion-Crow, *Corvus corone*.—This species is increasing in numbers in the Somersal district, and there were several nests this year. On September 11th I watched a pair bullying a Kestrel for a considerable time.

Hawfinch, *Coccothraustes coccothraustes*.—This bird undoubtedly breeds in the grounds of Sandybrook Hall near Ashbourne, where a pair were watched on July 12th and

23rd. A family was observed at Mappleton near Hinchley Wood on July 29th and another at Fenny Bentley on August 2nd (E.G.). From this it would appear that its numbers are increasing in that district.

Goldfinch, *Carduelis carduelis britannica*.—On August 18th and 19th I saw two young birds at Somersal feeding on the seeds of the hard-iron.

Chaffinch, *Fringilla caelebs*.—Several times at the beginning of September I heard a Chaffinch singing at Somersal, sometimes only a few notes and sometimes the complete spring song, which I heard as late as September 18th.

Whitethroat, *Sylvia communis*.—On the very late date of August 23rd and again on the 27th a Whitethroat was heard in full song at Fenny Bentley (E.G.).

Dipper, *Cinclus cinclus britannicus*.—At the beginning of April I saw a Dipper several times on the Somersal Brook, where I have never seen one before.

Pied Flycatcher, *Muscicapa atricapilla*.—I am indebted to Mr. H. M. Leach for a very interesting note on this species, a specimen of which he saw in Dovedale on May 5th. The bird was a cock and he watched it for several minutes about half-way between the Dove Holes and Sharplow Point. Probably it was only on passage, but possibly it may have nested in the locality, which would be very suitable. Before leaving the subject I may mention that Mr. Grindey remembers a pair nesting in the trunk of an old ivy-clad elm at the top of Mappleton churchyard many years ago, but not being so keen a bird lover in those days he did not record the date. Mr. Storrs Fox during a long residence in Derbyshire has only seen the bird once, on May 7th, 1898, when he saw a cock near the Chequers Inn, Froggatt, and he informs me that there is or was a stuffed specimen in the keeper's cottage at Curbar, which the late Mr. David Peat received in the flesh from a man who shot it at Froggatt.

Great Spotted Woodpecker, *Dryobates maior anglicus*.—The female bird of this species mentioned in last year's notes, reappeared again this autumn. I noticed some nutshells under the mulberry tree as early as August 2nd, but did not see the bird till the 18th. From this date till September 6th she did not miss a day, usually paying several visits, and after this she came irregularly right up to the latter part of October. Besides the mulberry she used a thorn near by and an oak at the Rectory to crack nuts in. On several occasions I saw her on the end of a dead branch at the top of a tall oak uttering her loud "chick, chick." Apparently there was a male in the neighbourhood as well, for I certainly heard an answering call, and believe I saw him once, but I could find no evidence of his eating nuts; dozens of times I watched the bird at the tree and it was invariably a female. There was always a nut ready for her in the crevice, and on September 20th I watched her for more than a quarter of an hour after eating it; all this time she remained on the trunk, as if expecting a nut to be miraculously produced, and eventually flew off, to return immediately with another.

Barn Owl, *Flammea flammea*.—On February 12th a Barn Owl was taken in a rabbit snare at Mappleton, but liberated later none the worse for its adventure (E.G.).

Marsh Harrier, *Circus aeruginosus*.—A very interesting event in the bird life of the county was the appearance of a specimen of this rare species in Dovedale. On November 7th, 1916, it was seen by Mr. Grindey and a friend flying across the valley from the Derbyshire to the Staffordshire side near the Dove Holes. "There was rather a strong gale" he writes "blowing at the time and we observed the bird drifting with the wind towards us; it eventually passed overhead and we distinctly noted the white head-marking. It glided beautifully along almost without an effort and passed out of sight on the opposite

side of the river. On November 10th a bird answering the description and in all probability the same specimen was observed to alight on the top of a large fir in Peg's Wood near Thorpe by the Misses Tomlinson of Thorpe Rectory."

Buzzard, *Buteo buteo*.—On November 18th, 1916, Mr. Grinley was informed that a bird had been seen in Dove-dale, which from the description he had little difficulty in identifying as a Buzzard. I quote his interesting account almost *verbatim*. "The bird appears to have taken up its residence in the large gully leading from Dove Holes to Hanson Grange, where I had the pleasure of observing it repeatedly. Thinking it would procure a mate and that we should eventually get them nesting in this ideal situation, we succeeded in keeping the matter a secret from the specimen hunter. Unfortunately in the following January, during a period of very severe weather, the magnificent bird came to an untimely end. The ground became frozen as hard as a rock and the Buzzard appears to have had difficulty in procuring its usual food, eventually resorting to any carrion it could discover. This enforced diversion from its usual habits ended disastrously. Some rabbits had been poisoned and put in suitable places for vermin and the Buzzard was attracted and paid the penalty. On January 27th it was found dead on the hillside and brought to me, and judging from the sunken condition of its eyes it had apparently been dead for some days. Its claws were drawn up tight like a clenched fist, conclusive evidence of its having been poisoned by strychnine. On January 29th I forwarded the dead bird to the curator of the Derby Museum for preservation." This very fine specimen is now in the Museum, together with a handsome specimen of the Hooded Crow which apparently met the same fate, and was also presented by Mr. Grinley.

Peregrine Falcon, *Falco peregrinus*.—One was observed near Fenny Bentley on August 18th (E.G.).

Gannet, *Sula bassana*.—On March 1st a Gannet passed over Thorpe village at a fairly low altitude, flying in a south-westerly direction (E.G.). This bird is rarely observed in Derbyshire.

Common Snipe, *Gallinago gallinago*.—On May 20th Mr. H. M. Leach saw a Snipe calling loudly and repeatedly from the topmost twig of a tall tree in a field above the Bradford near Youlgreave, in which unusual position it remained for about five minutes.

Grey Plover, *Squatarola squatarola*.—On January 29th Mr. Grindey was shewn by the Rev. W. M. Tomlinson, the rector of Thorpe, the wing and leg of a Grey Plover, the remains of a female bird which had been shot in the Ashbourne district a few weeks earlier and forwarded to him by an Ashbourne resident. This species is rarely met with in Derbyshire.

Ringed Plover, *Aegialitis hiaticula*.—On September 1st Mr. E. Peat saw a Ringed Plover near Ramsley Lodge on the Sheffield road towards Owlter Bar, this being the first he has seen in the district, though they are often met with in the Trent valley.

Gulls.—Three Herring Gulls (*Larus argentatus*) were seen at Fenny Bentley on April 24th and one on August 24th; one Greater Black-backed Gull (*Larus marinus*) at Fenny Bentley on September 21st; ten Lesser Black-backed Gulls (*Larus fuscus affinis*) at Fenny Bentley on August 3rd, fourteen on August 15th, and one at Thorpe on September 2nd (E.G.).

Moor-Hen, *Gallinula chloropus*.—On June 1st a nest was found at Woodeaves containing the unusual number of twelve eggs. All were similar in shape, and ten were of the same colour, but the other two varied considerably and were very handsomely marked, one in particular

having a cream ground beautifully blotched and spotted with violet (E.G.).

Red-legged Partridge, *Caccabis rufa*.—A brace were seen near Thorpe on March 19th (E.G.).

In conclusion I wish to express my thanks to those who have contributed to these notes, Messrs. H. G. Attlee, W. Storrs Fox, E. Grindey, H. M. Leach and E. Peat. Mr. Grindey in particular wrote me most interesting letters. If fault is found with the scope of the article as being too small and only covering a fraction of Derbyshire, the remedy lies in the hands of members themselves, and I shall be only too pleased to receive notes from other observers.
