

## The Long-crested Helmet Shrike

### *Prionops plumata plumata*

(Bates p. 441. Sclater. Systema Avium Aethiopicarum, p. 597).

THE following notes recorded by Mr. J. D. Clarke in 1935, on the Long-crested Helmet Shrike should prove to be of interest and value :

On the 5th March a party of Helmet Shrikes started to build a nest in a small tree within twenty-five yards of the verandah of my house. Three times in succession I saw four birds fly to the tree carrying small sticks, and each in turn cemented its stick to the edge of the nest. On a later occasion only three of the four worked at the nest, and on another four birds worked at it and then flew off leaving one only, which then hopped into the nest and did a little cementing, presumably with saliva ; with my glasses I could see it masticating before applying its bill to the work. The next day I only saw the birds occasionally, but they must have worked regularly for the nest was finished in the afternoon. The nest is a small cup-shaped structure resting on top of a horizontal bough and composed entirely of small twigs, glued together. On the 8th I saw one bird sit on the nest for a few minutes and then fly off, and I did not see the birds again that day. This again occurred on the 9th. On the 10th a bird sat on the nest all day, even when people walked beneath the tree. It appeared to go through the motions of turning eggs over. I was greatly astonished when I took the opportunity of the bird being off the nest at 8 a.m. on the 11th to find that there were no eggs in the nest. I then saw six birds visit the tree and perch near the nest.

During the afternoon the sitting bird became very excited and stood up in the nest uttering its call, and on the arrival of its 'mate' fluttered its partly extended wings vigorously while calling. It then flew off and its place was taken by the new arrival which, however, merely stood in the nest with wide open beak for a couple of minutes until the other bird returned. This occurred again sometime later, and the relieving bird occupied itself by doing a little plastering to the rim of the nest. Five birds paid an evening visit and the sitting bird was relieved. I put the relief off the nest and found one egg—approximately 16 mms. long, pale blue in colour with a zone of brown markings. On the 12th one bird sat fairly regularly all day. It was relieved on one occasion by one of the others, which spent the time apparently

calling to the remainder, and possibly because none would come deserted the nest. After this I am unable to account for what happened ; perhaps the birds came to the conclusion that they had made a mistake in choosing such a bare tree so near a house. However, on the following day the nest was visited regularly but was very little sat on, merely for half an hour at various intervals. The end came on the 14th when the nest was visited once only by one bird for about a minute ; it appeared to be very agitated and flew away. Examination later proved the nest to be empty, and a most exhaustive search through the surrounding vegetation failed to find another nest.

Mr. Clark goes on to say that Bates states the Fulani name Modibboru is derived from Modibbo, a Mohammedan Doctor of Divinity and Laws, and that it is due to the learned appearance of the bird. Perhaps, however, the observant Fula knows that it is not in appearance only but also in matrimonial habits that this birds resembles a mallam.

This concludes Mr. Clarke's observations, and several theories might be put forward in explanation, but until further observations are recorded theorising is valueless. Further notes on the mating and nesting habits will prove to be extremely valuable, and it is hoped additional notes will be recorded.

## Notes on Gardening in Degema

(Owerri Province)

By Dr. A. L. Forbes

**T**HE SOIL here is sandy : it appears to be reclaimed land inasmuch as a section through the earth reveals on the surface sand with a small amount of humus, extending to about the depth of a spade, then a narrow layer of clay of two inches depth in which are embedded various molusc shells, and underlying that again a depth of several feet of compact sand. Other parts of the station have a much richer soil, being composed apparently of dried mangrove swamp—the soil here is dark and is quite good if transported to places with good drainage. This sandy soil compares unfavourably with the rich loams met with in many parts of the north.

*Manures.* The absence of a cattle raising industry here precludes the obtaining of animal manure. The scarcity of meat as a native diet here means that no slaughtering of cattle takes place, and consequently those most valuable products of the incinerator, *viz.*, burnt bones and dried blood are not available. Recourse has been had to the burning of vegetable matter,