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NOTES ON SOME PALAEARCTIC MIGRANTS IN THE GAMBIA

SPRING 1969.

J. O. Andrew.

The Gambia lies approximately between  $13^{\circ} 5'$  and  $13^{\circ} 50'N.$  and  $16^{\circ} 40'$  and  $14^{\circ} 14'W.$ , i.e. south and slightly east of Cape Verde. The vegetation is savanna and thin bush, though near the coast there are patches of dense vegetation along the streams. The average rain-fall is 40", falling between June and October, but the annual figure varies wildly, from over 60" (1966 and 1967) to under 20" (1968). In a wet rainy season, birds such as Gray's Blue-billed Weaver Malimbus nitens, Buff-spotted Woodpecker Compethera nivosa and Red-tailed Buzzard Buteo auguralis have been recorded well outside their normal range. In a dry dry season, on the other hand, birds from the sahel zone appear, and Palaeartic migrants that usually winter to the north.

1969 has been interesting for two reasons (a) less rain fell in 1968 than for many years. (b) as well as the unusually dry and hot winter, the Spring was rather cool, with very low humidity. These factors may explain the unusual records of Palaeartic birds, and the very late departure of some species.

I have omitted from the following systematic list;

(i) species with mixed populations, e.g. Grey Heron Ardea cinerea, Black-winged Stilt Himantopus himantopus and Hoopoe Upupa epops because of the difficulty of determining which individuals are migrants and which are not.

(ii) most terns and all waders, because more than most species the records mirror the preferences of observers for certain localities, and because therefore the status of many species is extremely uncertain.

(iii) species for which I have no 1969 records, when there are only a few records in previous years, e.g. Honey Buzzard Pernis apivorus.

I am particularly indebted to Bray, Mulholland and Vittery whose 1966 survey of the status of birds in The Gambia is by far the most useful reference work.

SYSTEMATIC LIST:

Shoveler Spatula olypeata: a pair shot on 20th January, out of a flock of 12, later identified by T. Sims, are the first record for over 30 years.

Garganey Anas querquedula: present in large numbers on rice-fields in the Middle River (ca. 80 miles inland). T.Sims recorded over 1,500 at one locality during the wildfowl count on 12th January.

Pintail Dafila acuta: a female shot on 2nd February was later identified by T. Sims.

(These winter records have been included as the areas where the ducks gather are visited regularly only by hunters, and only when the numbers are sufficient, so that final leaving dates are not known. Numbers start to decrease in February and March in a normal year).

- Kestrel Falco tinnunculus: common and widely distributed in winter, up to 6 seen together. There is one previous record for May (Bray et.al. 1966). In 1969 most left at the end of April, but one was seen on 1st June.
- Lesser Kestrel Falco naumanni: one male and some possible females seen at a bush-fire 18th February are the first certain records since Bannerman (1953).
- Marsh Harrier Circus aeruginosus: common and widely distributed, as usual. Most had left by the end of March, but an immature bird was seen over mangroves near Bathurst on 15th June. Bray et.al. (1966) have two June records.
- Montagu's Harrier Circus pygargus: a male was seen 70 miles east of Bathurst on 18th February, and several "ringtails", very possibly of this species were present at Yundum airport in January. There are few previous records: Cawkell and Moreau (1963) and Bray et.al. (1966).
- Lesser Black-backed Gull Larus fuscus: Bray et.al. (1966) record it up to 30th April. An immature was seen on 21st May 1969 and what was probably the same bird on 14th, 15th and 30th June.
- Black-headed Gull Larus ridibundus: Bray et.al. (1966), and my observations in 1968 agree that small numbers are usually present until May. They also have one June record (1964) and a record of one bird summering (1965). In 1969 up to a hundred were present in January, and an adult in brooding plumage until, at least, 3rd July, and two immatures until 13th July. To judge by the dates, this may be a genuine extension of range.
- White winged Black Tern Chlidonias leucoptera: There are six previous spring records (17th April-30th May), but in 1969, birds in various states of plumage were present from 15th February to 15th June, when no less than 3 were observed.
- Common Quail Coturnix coturnix: not recorded in The Gambia for many years, but 2-3 present in fields within a mile of the centre of Bathurst 9-13th March 1969. They could easily have been overlooked.
- Common Swift Mioropus apus: Bray et.al. (1966) record small numbers in the spring. No certain records in 1969, but some probabls passing with the next species.
- Pallid Swift Mioropus pallidus: No certain previous records. On 22nd April 1969, I saw one certain and two possibles over Bathurst. There was a considerable passage of Hirundines in progress. The swift was watched head-on from a fourth-floor flat at 25 yards with 10X binoculars and the distinctive features were clearly seen.
- European Bee-eater Merops apiaster: many more than in 1968, nearly always in flocks of up to 20 birds. More noted on passage, the last seen on 27th April (cp. Bray et.al. 1966 3rd April).
- White Wagtail Motacilla alba: present all winter until April, as usual. No stragglers were observed.
- Blue-headed Wagtail Budytes flava: present all winter and widespread, but numbers increased about the end of March. Bathurst maximum for 1969 is 150 on 26th March. It is my impression that "flava" wagtails, like hirundines, migrate on a broad front; many were seen inland from 14th-19th April far

into Senegal (ca.  $12^{\circ}50'N.$ ,  $13^{\circ}10'W.$ ). Bray et.al. (1966) record birds well into May, and many were present in May 1969. I have three June records and one on 13th July.

Tawny Pipit Anthus campestris: no previous spring records; four records in 1969, between 10th March and 4th May, with a maximum of 7 birds.

Tree Pipit Anthus trivialis: many previous spring records. In 1969, only one on 16th April, near Bathurst.

Red-throated Pipit Anthus cervinus: Bray et.al. (1966) record parties of up to 12 in the spring. Again I have only one record in 1969, a bird with a red throat, on 19th April, with a loose flock of "flava" wagtails, on Bathurst rubbish dump.

Pied Flycatcher Ficedula hypoleuca: there have been several autumn records the latest being January (Cawkell & Moreau 1963) but no spring ones to my knowledge until 3rd April 1969 (a female).

Wheatear Oenanthe oenanthe: a common winter resident whose numbers increase in March. The latest date for spring 1969 is 4th April. Bray et.al. (1966) have 24th March. 300 miles inland however, birds were still present 10 days later. This is the hottest month there, the average April temperature being approximately  $105^{\circ}F$ ; one bird was seen in the shade of the fork of a tree with wings and beak open, presumably to keep cool.

Whinchat Saxicola rubetra: most left at about the normal time, the last on 22nd April. However one bird appeared on Bathurst dump on 22nd May, and stayed for at least three days.

Redstart Phoenicurus phoenicurus: a passage migrant in small numbers March-April in a normal year. In 1969 the only one seen was a male in breeding plumage at Government Wharf, Bathurst 24th-25th May.

Nightingale Luscinia megarhynchos: one record 22nd February. Bray et.al. (1966) give 27th March as their latest date.

European Whitethroat Sylvia communis: almost the only warbler to leave at the normal time, mid-March.

Garden Warbler Sylvia borin: apparently no previous spring record. However, from 20th April to 21st May 1969, birds (max. 10) were always present both in Bathurst and at Brufut, 15 miles S.W. on the coast.

Blackcap Sylvia atricapilla: Bannorman (1953) gives no record west of Ghana. Cawkell and Moreau (1963) have a few. Bray et.al. (1966) have spring records to 21st April 1965 but none in 1966. In 1968 I had two May records; in 1969 the main passage took place in April (max. 4 on 29th) but many were seen in May; 11th two records, 18th a male, and a female on 25th. Field (1968) considers it uncommon in the Freetown area, but it would be strange if it has just been overlooked here. These records may show a fluctuation at the edge of its range, perhaps depending on the weather further north.

Orphean Warbler Sylvia hortensis: no previous records for The Gambia, but one record in every month January-March 1969, and one on 25th May, which was thought to be in first-winter plumage. Both this and Sedge Warbler Acrocephalus schoenobaenus have been recorded in the Senegal delta, 200 miles north, (Cawkell & Moreau 1963).

Melodious Warbler Hippolias ployglotta: no previous spring records and latest certain observation in 1969 on 22nd February. However a bird probably of this species was seen near Bathurst on 29th June.

Olivaceous Warbler Hippolias pallida: again no previous spring record. For 1969 I have five records in March, and one on 20th April and one of 2 or 3 birds on 31st May. This record was from MacCarthy Island (ca. 13°37'N., 14°45'W.). The birds were in thin gallery forest backed by wooded savanna, and were very alarmed at my intrusion. Can they have been breeding so far south?\*

Reed Warbler Acrocephalus scirpaceus: Bray et al. (1966) record it until April. The latest certainly of this species in 1969 were on 11th March, but things were mightily confused by the arrival of two probable Tropical African Reed Warblers Acrocephalus baeticatus on 1st May.

Sedge Warbler Acrocephalus schoenobaenus: No previous records in The Gambia, though two possibles, September 1967 and October 1968, and recorded in the Senegal delta (Cawkell & Moreau 1963). I have two January records, one in Bathurst and one 80 miles east. Field (1968) has one April record near Freetown. It will probably turn out to be a winter visitor in very small numbers.

Willow Warbler Phylloscopus trochilus:

Chiffchaff Phylloscopus collybita: Bray et al. (1966) consider the first a passage migrant until 3rd April, and have no records of the second after January. Subject to the usual reservations of identification, the dates of departure have been much later in 1969. Very yellow phylloscopi were observed in April and on 25th May, the latter being as brightly coloured as Melodious Warbler. Greyish birds (some grey on upperparts and almost pure white below) were seen throughout May (11 records) until 26th. Indeterminable phylloscopi (the majority) were also present, notably one at Fatoto, 250 miles east of Bathurst, and one at MacCarthy Island on 30th and 31st May respectively.

European Swallow Hirundo rustica: many more were seen in 1969 than in 1968, and Bray et al. (1966) record only small numbers. 200 or more were present at the groundnut secoc near Bathurst on 20th April, and 68 were seen in one hour on 22nd April. Last date of passage 11th May, but a bird was seen clearly on 14th June.

European Sand Martin Riparia riparia: Bray et al. (1966) have records until 21st March. In 1968 I had no spring records at all. In 1969 they first appeared on 23rd March, a few were seen in April but most at the beginning of May (Max. 7 on 1st May). Latest data, 12th May.

European House Martin Delichon urbica: Bray et al. (1966) have records from 16th March to 6th June, a very late date. Passage in 1969 began on 14th March, but they were last seen on 22nd April (max. 31 birds on that day) an early date of departure compared to the other Hirundines.

Woodchat Lanius senator: previous latest date is 15th May (Bray et al. (1966)), and in 1968 none were seen after 24th March. In 1969 birds were seen almost every day at Bathurst dump until 17th May, and a male was seen at the same place on 26th May.

\*\* Possibly a western extension of Hippolias pallida laeneni which breeds considerably further north than 13.50°N., at Air and Khartoum. A breeding biology of this race can be found in this issue on page 107.

An unusual number of Palaearctic migrants have been recorded in The Gambia in 1969, particularly on passage. Some of these records may be referable to changes of status (Black-headed Gull and perhaps Blackcap) others to the small numbers involved (Sedge Warbler). Nevertheless, of the Palaearctic recorded in spring 1969, half have been seen later this year than ever before, so late in some cases, that the birds may have summered here. Among the many possible explanations are:-

- (a) Some are not summering but are extremely late in migrating, because of the unusual dryness of the last rainy season.
- (b) Some stay here because they are returning too late to breed.
- (c) Small numbers of some species (immatures ?) summer every year south of the Sahara and because of the dryness, these birds have stayed south or west of their usual summer quarters.

The Gambia is a long way from Nigeria, but if anyone has Nigerian records that might throw some light on these questions, particularly the last possibility, I would be very pleased to hear from them.

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MALLAM FATORI, SPRING 1969.

R. E. Sharland.

No expedition from U.K. was able to visit Mallam Fatori in the spring of 1969. This was mainly due to lack of financial support.

Dr. G. Kemp of the Rockefeller Virus Research Unit at Ibadan visited Mallam Fatori from March 28th to April 7th, collecting specimens for virus research. His specimens were identified by Dr. R. W. Ashford of the Department of Zoology, University of Ibadan.

I visited Mallam Fatori from 30th March to 6th April. I carried out a ringing programme by netting mainly in the area of Salvadora bush, behind the observatory. I was assisted by David Coleman and by Dick Ashford when he could spend time away from the virus research work. I found that the gardener, Bukar Gao, had been trained by the Hopsons to remove birds from nets and he was of great assistance in the afternoons.

The departure of the Hopsons from Mallam Fatori is greatly regretted. Fortunately their influence remains and the Fisheries Department and Mr. Mudd made us very welcome and made a great contribution to our work and comfort by