

WHAT IS SO RARE?

As a Fieldfare in April? In Massachusetts, perhaps only a Western Reef Heron or a White-faced Ibis. April here is a month of avian surprises. The 1986 birdwatching spring was off to a happy start with the discovery by schoolteacher Ralph Richards, during a lonely vigil on the cold and rainy Sunday of April 6, of a Fieldfare (*Turdus pilaris*) in a Concord cornfield near the Sudbury River. According to a bulletin promptly issued by the Massachusetts Audubon Society, this is a first state record, and there have been, since 1878, ten prior records in North America, the most recent being the occurrence of four Fieldfares in St. John's; Newfoundland, from December 1985 to mid-January 1986. "It seems not unlikely that the Massachusetts bird originated with the same midwinter flight that brought the Newfoundland birds to North America. . . ."

In winter, the Fieldfare ranges from southern Scandinavia, the British Isles, and central Europe south to the Mediterranean. Outside of the breeding season, the bird's habitat choice is open fields and pastures, where it occurs gregariously in large flocks, often accompanied by Redwings (*Turdus iliacus*). The Fieldfare nests in northern Scandinavia (it is Norway's most common thrush), in north and central continental Europe east to Siberia, and also in Iceland and southern Greenland. The story of the establishment of the disjunct Greenland population is well documented. In January 1937, a strong southeast gale swept a flock of Fieldfares across Europe and the Atlantic to the island of Jan Mayen and the Greenland coast. The survivors made their way across Greenland in the next week and discovered a birch woods (a preferred Fieldfare nesting habitat), settled down, nested that spring, and wandered no more - forming a resident, nonmigratory population that wintered near its nesting place. Another sudden expansion of this species, unrelated to weather, had occurred a century earlier when Fieldfares spread from East Prussia southwestward to eastern France, where they now nest.

This European species is irregular not only in its migratory habits but in its nesting style. Its nests are variously placed - in trees or bushes on the margins of woods (birch, especially); sometimes in town parks and gardens; occasionally on buildings or haystacks; or, when nesting occurs in the mountains above tree line, directly on the ground. Most Fieldfares nest early in the spring, before the trees leaf out. It is to their advantage to breed as early as possible, because earthworms, a main food resource, are more plentiful in the north at that time and less available later in the season. (That earthworms are a Fieldfare delicacy was amply demonstrated by the Concord gourmand, who consumed eleven worms within fifteen minutes, according to *The Boston Glöbe* of April 8.) The pairs that nest early in the spring often form colonies of nests, probably as a defense against predators, whereas later nesting birds, protected by the cover of leaves, may construct solitary nests. Studies have confirmed that, in early spring, synchronous breeding (in colonies) produces greater nesting success for the Fieldfare than does solitary nesting.

Another remarkable social adaptation was revealed by this same research (abstracted in the *Journal of Field Ornithology*, 56: 432, Autumn 1985). When a Little Owl (*Athene noctua*) was presented to colonial and solitary nesting Fieldfares, the birds engaged in mobbing and "simultaneous aimed defecation on" the unfortunate owl, regarded by them as a predator. The number (and efficacy) of the attacks by the colonial nesters was, of course, higher - they could deliver a devastating "guano" shower! This unseemly tactic may increase Fieldfare nesting success, but my sympathies are with the Little Owl, who measures only eight inches compared to the ten-inch thrush and who feeds mostly on insects and rodents.

Many observers of the Massachusetts Fieldfare remarked about its beautiful bright plumage; it was much less drab than depicted in the field guides. This species does vary in coloration (and size) but retains the same general pattern. The depth of color in this bird suggests that it was probably a male. Other comments mentioned its well-nourished appearance, how much less active it was than the accompanying robins, and how *hard it was to see the bird!* The Fieldfare's handsome coloration was striking when viewed against green grass, but when it appeared in the stubble of the field or against the soil or a tree trunk, the gray head and rump blended with the background and broke up the silhouette - a fine demonstration of how a bright pattern can be very protective. In contrast, the white flash of the underwings made its undulating flight easy to follow, as useful a signal to watching birders as it is an alarm in nature to other Fieldfares. Although the bird was heard to call - a sound similar to the familiar chucking of the robin, no one reported hearing it sing. No great loss. The song, a twittering, squeaking, or chattering, often given in flight, is not very musical.

The Fieldfare lingered at Nine Acre Corner in the cornfield or on the Nashawtuc golf course through the next Sunday, providing scores of birders (and golfers) a week and a weekend to enjoy the sight of this lovely bird, gorging eagerly on earthworms or resting contentedly in a nearby tree. The Fieldfare was not reported again after April 14, 1986.

RALPH RICHARDS of Shrewsbury, a Worcester public school English teacher for sixteen years, began birding as a young adult, is now an officer of the Forbush Bird Club, and belongs to Brookline Bird Club. His solo birding jaunt on April 6 began at 6:00 A.M. He planned to see the Western Grebe in Winthrop, birding along the way. However, all his stops at known birding spots proved fruitless. Frustrated and alone, but a dedicated birder, he stopped to scope the robins in the cornfield, grateful to find any birds on such a disappointing day, birding in the cold rain and sleet. He deserves commendation not only for his sharp-eyed discovery but for his exemplary persistence. There were no other birders about. Lacking an appropriate field guide, he went to the nearby Audubon Gift Shop - closed on Sunday until 1:00 P.M.! Thwarted, he returned home, called Mark Lynch (Ralph knew that Mark had birded in England), alerted all the birders he could reach, and came back to relocate the bird. He never did get to the Western Grebe.

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