

## NOTES ON THE BIRDS OF JERUSALEM.

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TO THE student of religious history and to the archaeologist the territory around Jerusalem must always hold great interest; but it is perhaps not so generally recognized that the bare stony mountains, terraced hillsides and olive groves of this same region hold most unusual and intensely interesting attractions for the ornithologist or the casual observer of bird life.

Here in this mountainous, historical country, roughly within a fifteen miles radius of the Holy City, may be found many diverse forms of bird life representative of three separate continental faunas, European, Asiatic and African.

During the winter months of December, January and February this Judean hill country, two to three thousand feet above sea level, is apt to be cold, wet and somewhat desolate looking; but, from the beginning of March, when great masses of flowers begin to appear on the hillsides, until the end of May when things commence to scorch up, vegetation, in the form of flowering plants, grasses and low growing shrubs, if not exactly luxuriant, is nevertheless abundant in the valleys and on the lower hills.

Throughout these six months, from the beginning of December until the end of May, being the time the writer was in this part of the country, birds were found to be more or less plentiful under nearly all conditions of weather and environment.

One of the most abundant and conspicuous of the small birds to be met with in the vicinity of Jerusalem during the winter months, is the White Wagtail (*Motacilla alba*). From December until about the middle of March, this species is to be found in small flocks and scattered parties on all the bare stony hill-sides and, during bad weather, it was most entertaining to watch their fearlessness in coming around camping areas and other human habitations for, when the wind and rain were at their worst, these cheerful little black and white exponents of perpetual motion would become so bold that they would scarcely hesitate to enter our tent or bivouac shelters in search of food.

Another bird which is very common on all the hillsides, is the Crested Lark (*Alauda cristata*) and, although perhaps not so conspicuous as the species just mentioned, it is probably the most numerous and generally distributed bird in the country for it is everywhere abundant and even on the most barren mountain summits the Crested Lark appears to find sustenance.

A small party of the finch-like Desert Lark (*Ammomanes deserti*) was met with, on one occasion, feeding on the slope of a sandy mountain overlooking the plains of Jerico; but we are inclined to believe that this is a comparatively rare species in the Judean hill country, although possibly common enough in the adjacent Jordan Valley.

In the barren rock strewn country bordering the roads leading north from the city of Jerusalem, the Black Redstart (*Ruticilla titys*), a handsome bird with black body and bright reddish-chestnut tail, is occasionally to be seen and the rare glimpses of this species, together with the more frequent occurrence of a black and white chat probably referable to the species *Saricola lugens*, does much to cheer the ornithologist on his way over these stony roads in mid-winter. Later on, toward the end of February, another black and white Chat (*Saricola melanoleuca*) becomes very numerous and is to be met with everywhere among the bare stony mountains. It was noticed to be especially numerous in the immediate vicinity of Jerusalem and on the terraced mountains north of the village of Ramah; becoming, at that time, one of the most conspicuous small birds in the country.

Another small bird which appears to be quite numerous, is the common European Linnet (*Acanthis cannabina*). This species was found to be more or less generally distributed over the mountainous country during the early months of the year when it is to be met with in wandering flocks and small parties which appear to favor the more open hillsides and the broad valleys where large tracts of land have been cultivated for growing barley or other grains.

Several other common European finches were observed; the Greenfinch (*Ligurinus chloris*) being not at all uncommon in gardens on the outskirts of Jerusalem where it appeared to show great partiality for the Italian Cypress and, in fact, was seldom seen to frequent any other species of tree; whilst the Goldfinch

(*Carduelis elegans*) was occasionally encountered, toward the end of January, feeding in large flocks among the young plantations of coniferous trees in the vicinity of the Mount of Olives. Later in the season, as spring advanced, Goldfinches were frequently seen, in pairs or small parties, among the olive groves in the valleys.

Although not by any means a common bird, the Chaffinch (*Fringilla coelebs*) was also occasionally met with in the olive groves and, early in the year, a few were noticed associating with the Goldfinches in the coniferous plantations near the Mount of Olives. Another finch, which was found to be quite common in the olive groves during the spring months, was the Meadow Bunting (*Emberiza cia*) a species which was also found to favour the terraced slopes of the hills, being especially partial to those which were well cultivated. Toward the end of March, one other bunting, the Corn Bunting (*Emberiza emberiza*), appeared in great numbers and, at this time, its somewhat monotonous song was very much in evidence in the valleys of the hills immediately above the plains of Jerico.

In and around the city of Jerusalem, the common House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*) was found in large numbers whilst every small town and village or other human habitation appeared to have its quota of this ubiquitous species. The Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*), which is now so widely distributed over both eastern and western hemispheres as to be associated with the House Sparrow as one of the world's commonest birds, was occasionally noticed during the winter months, in small flocks or parties, in the outskirts or suburbs of the holy city.

Among other common European birds, observed in this country, the Great or Oxe-eye Tit (*Parus major*) was frequently heard and occasionally seen in the olive groves while, on one occasion only, the Robin Redbreast (*Erithaca rubecula*) was met with in a sheltered valley, near the village of Enab, some six or seven miles northwest of Jerusalem.

The swallow family appears to be well represented in Judea, both in summer and winter; a fortunate circumstance in view of the general prevalence of flies. One species, the Oriental Swallow (*Hirundo savignii*) was met with in the vicinity of most of the towns and villages and was common in and around Jerusalem

during the winter months. During the periods of wet and stormy weather, which occur somewhat frequently in January and February and often last for several days at a time, these swallows disappeared to return again at each succeeding period of warm sunny weather. The frequent disappearance and re-appearance of these Swallows, although at first a little puzzling, was later explained by the close proximity of the Jordan Valley to which deep depression, with its tropical heat, these entirely insectivorous birds appeared to retire, before the mountain storms, to seek the warmth and abundant insect life which is perennially found in these sheltered plains.

The European Chimney Swallow (*Hirundo rustica*), which closely resembles the preceding species, put in an appearance quite early in the spring and was later to be found in the neighbourhood of nearly all the towns and villages; while on one occasion only, on a day in the month of May, a pair of Red-rumped Swallows (*Hirundo rufula*) were seen flying up and down the course of a stream which flowed through a deep ravine in the vicinity of the village of Ain Arik.

Of the two other species of the swallow family, which were recorded in my notes from this part of Judea; the Sand Martin (*Cotile riparia*) was occasionally observed, in the vicinity of Jerusalem, during the early Spring months; while, a little later, the Crag Martin (*Cotile rupestris*) was met with in fairly large numbers in the ravines and dry water courses which intersect the mountains in the district between the Jerusalem-Jerico road and the plains of Jerico.

Probably owing to the general lack of shade trees and other suitable cover, birds of the warbler group are far from being plentiful; but the Chiffchaff (*Phylloscopus minor*) was quite frequently observed among the olive groves during the late winter and early spring months, while on mild sunny days, toward the end of January, numbers were to be seen feeding in the young coniferous plantations and in the almond and fig trees which are scattered here and there over the hills in the neighbourhood of the Mount of Olives.

One Rufous Warbler (*Aedon galactodes*), or more probably the eastern form known as the Grey-backed Warbler (*Aedon familiaris*),

was observed, in somewhat thick cover, on the lower western slopes of the mountains and close to a road winding down into Ludd a village in the maritime plains.

That beautiful bird the Blue Rock Thrush (*Monticola cyanus*) was met with on one occasion only when a few were found inhabiting the cliffs of a very deep gorge among the mountains to the northwest of the plains of Jerico. The birds were observed and their wonderfully sweet song was heard from the ledges below us whilst lying on the edge of the cliff and watching, through field glasses, the movements of a tribe of cave dwelling Arabs on the opposite side of the gorge. The exquisite song of this bird is perhaps heard to the best advantage in this romantic setting of flower decked mountain wilderness.

Although the majority of the species mentioned, so far, as inhabiting this Judean hill country are more or less typically European in character, one species the Palestine Bulbul (*Pycnonotus xanthopygos*), which was met with among the fruit trees in the gardens of the village of Ain Arik, is decidedly Asiatic in character, and is very similar in general appearance to the better known Red-vented Bulbul of India.

The crow family is represented in the country around Jerusalem by the rather handsome black and grey Hooded Crow (*Corvus cornix*); the Syrian Rook (*Corvus agricola*); and the Common Jackdaw (*Coloeus monedula*). The former species is to be met with everywhere among the hill country, becoming very numerous in localities where there is an abundance of carrion, such as in the immediate neighbourhood of towns or villages. The second species, the Syrian Rook, is not an uncommon bird in the vicinity of the city of Jerusalem where they were usually seen in pairs or small parties which appeared to be partial to the neighbourhood of olive groves. The groves outside the northern walls of the old city, near the Mount of Olives, were much frequented by this bird. The third species, the Jackdaw, does not appear to be a particularly common bird in Judea, but a few individuals were seen, from time to time, frequenting the hills above the plains of Jerico.

The well-known Cuckoo (*Cuculus canorus*), so popular in England and continental Europe as a harbinger of spring, would appear to travel through Palestine in one of the lines of flight from its

winter home in Africa; for, about the beginning of April, it was repeatedly heard and occasionally seen among the hills west of Jerico; while, a little later on, it was found to be very much in evidence among the plantations of fig and olive trees on the terraced mountains, to the north of the village of Ramali.

Two species of swift were noted: the Common European Swift (*Cypselus apus*) which was observed in small flocks, on several occasions, during the month of April, and the Alpine or White-bellied Swift (*Cypselus melba*) which was found to be very numerous in the early spring, at which time it was found in large numbers flying low down over the grassy hills to the northwest of the Dead Sea. Like the swallows of Jerusalem, this bird also appeared to desert the hills for the sheltered Jordan Valley at the first sign of rain or storm.

Birds of prey, such as eagles, hawks, vultures, and owls, appear to be always very much in evidence throughout the Judean hill country. Of the last mentioned group, the Southern Little Owl (*Athene glaux*) was found to be not uncommon in the vicinity of Jerusalem where it frequents the olive groves and probably preys upon the small birds which are always to be found there, such as Goldfinches, Great Tits and Meadow Buntings.

Another owl, the Short-eared Owl (*Asio flammeus*) would appear to be extremely numerous everywhere among the more open hill-sides for here its weird, persistent, cat-like call can be heard from sunset to sunrise of almost any night unless the weather be exceptionally stormy.

As would be expected in a country where dead animals are left to lie where they have fallen by the road-side, and powerful odours are of little moment, vultures and kites find conditions much to their liking and here, in this promised land, appear to have waxed fat and multiplied.

Two species of vulture and two species of kite were commonly met with and of these the large Griffon Vulture (*Gyps fulvus*) was quite frequently observed gathering over dead camels or mules, while the smaller Egyptian Vulture (*Neophron percnopterus*) appeared in great numbers, during the spring and early summer, in the country between Jerusalem and Jerico, becoming increasingly numerous in the vicinity of the latter city.

Of the two kites, the Red Kite (*Milvus iclinus*) was found to be extremely numerous almost everywhere and frequented the outskirts of Jerusalem in large numbers; while the Black Kite (*Milvus migrans*), although frequently seen, was certainly much less plentiful than its red congener.

A large eagle, most probably the Golden Eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*) or possibly the Imperial Eagle (*Aquila heliaca*), was observed on a number of occasions, hunting in pairs over the mountainous country. They were noticed to be of especially frequent occurrence in the rugged country bordering the Jerusalem-Jerico road and among the grassy hills to the northwest of the Dead Sea, where they apparently feed upon hares and partridges which are very numerous in the last mentioned locality.

Two species of buzzard were noted, one which was taken to be the Long-legged Buzzard (*Buteo ferox*) was to be met with in varying numbers almost anywhere in the Judean country, but were particularly noticeable in the localities especially favoured by the Golden or Imperial Eagles; while the other, undoubtedly the Honey Buzzard (*Pernis apivorus*), was found to be not uncommon in the more fertile areas during the spring months.

One other member of the hawk family to be observed, and the only small hawk or falcon noted in this country, was the European Kestrel (*Cerchneis tinnunculus*) which appeared to be abundant everywhere and was usually seen hunting in pairs.

The Judean hill country does not appear to be particularly well favoured by game-birds, but a variety of the Red-legged Chukar Partridge (*Caccabis chukar*), which is so well known to sportsmen in India, was to be found everywhere over the mountains north and east of Jerusalem. This fine partridge becomes quite abundant on the grassy hills overlooking the Jordan Valley and the Dead Sea; while in this same district there would seem every reason to believe that the Houbara Bustard (*Houbara undulata*) is occasionally to be found for on one occasion, early in March, a glimpse was obtained, through field glasses, of a large bird which appeared to be an adult cock of this species.

A pigeon of the *Columba livia* group, and probably referable to *Columba schimperi*, was found to be not uncommon in the vicinity of those valleys which are more or less cultivated every season by

wandering tribes of Beduin Arabs; while a large flock of this same pigeon was observed in the deep ravine which has been previously mentioned in the account of the Blue Rock Thrush.

Toward the end of March or early in April, vast flocks of the common White Stork (*Ciconia alba*) were seen making their way slowly in a northerly direction up the valley of the Jordan while occasionally smaller parties were observed to break off from the main body and, after flying around in large circles for some considerable time, make off in a northwesterly direction over the Judean hills.

Later on in the spring or early summer, White Storks were frequently seen, either singly or in small scattered parties, feeding on the slopes of the hills bordering the Jerusalem-Jerico road.

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