

ORNITHOLOGICAL LITERATURE

OUR AMAZING BIRDS. By Robert S. Lemmon. American Garden Guild and Doubleday & Company, Inc., Garden City, New York, 1952: 7 × 10 in., 239 pp., 102 black and white text-figs. and pls. \$3.95.

This attractive work can hardly fail to teach the lay reader a great deal about birds, and to impress him with some of "the little-known facts about their private lives." Based on the not-unreasonable premise that facts about almost *any* bird are "little-known" and "amazing," it presents much basic and interesting life-history information, in easily readable form and embellished with numerous fine illustrations. The latter were done by Don Eckelberry, who according to the foreword had also a considerable part in the selection and preparation of text material.

While each of the 102 one- to two-page accounts treats a single North American species, or occasionally a small group, there has been a commendable effort to include comments of broader taxonomic and geographic application. The selected representatives of about 51 families include some rare and spectacular (and even extinct) birds, as well as some of the most commonplace. There is no semblance of systematic arrangement, and scientific names have properly been almost entirely omitted. The breezy, colloquial style is highly anthropomorphic, and laden with superlatives and glowing comparisons. It is sometimes refreshing, sometimes tiresome, and occasionally not altogether lucid ("The brown creeper belongs to a very small bird family . . . But it is not at all embarrassed by loneliness."). Some errors of fact are apparent. The male Tree Swallow, for example, ordinarily does *not* incubate; and "all true woodpeckers" do *not* "live primarily" on food gathered by "banging away with chisel-pointed bills until they have hammered a hole." The illustration showing a male hummingbird hovering solicitously beside the nest, while not impossible, at once strikes a false note.

Eckelberry's wash drawings are unquestionably the main attraction for the ornithologist. As is frequently the case, the best of the smaller text figures have more freshness and life than some of the more ambitious plates; but with few exceptions they range from good to superb. Throughout the series the artist's originality and excellent draftsmanship are apparent. We are looking up from below at the kingfisher, and down from above at the robin, and the Blue Jay is facing almost directly away; there are few conventional profiles. In almost every case the portrayal of forms and attitudes is impressively convincing. The backgrounds, employing a wide variety of treatments, are excellent, except for occasional lapses, as in the case of the branch which to my eye persists in making the Winter Wren appear several times as large as it should.

I noticed only one typographical error. The format of the book is neat and modern throughout, the paper and print very good, and the brief index adequate for its purpose.—WILLIAM A. LUNK.

THE YELLOW WACTAIL. By Stuart Smith. Collins, St. James Place, London, 1950: 5½ × 7¾ in., xiv + 178 pp., 26 paintings, 11 black and white photographs, 4 line drawings, 4 maps. 12s. 6d.

This is one of the excellent "New Naturalist Monographs." Based on seven years' study it discusses *Motacilla flava* in general and particular as may be judged from the table of contents: the bird and its breeding distribution; winter quarters and migrations; territory, pair-formation and aggressive display; nuptial display; the nest; the clutch; the brood; the final phase; the story of a name; the Yellow Wagtail group.

This bird prefers water-meadows as a rule, but certain colonies nest in heather and on moor-lands. The life history story is given in leisurely manner with description of typical events and comparisons with other species. No birds appear to have been banded, but plumage differences facilitated recognition of individuals. The birds immediately distinguish each other's sex through the respective coloration.

Wagtails are highly social birds outside of the nesting season, but decidedly territorial after being joined by mates. Territorial display and fighting are described and vividly portrayed in paintings by Edward Bradbury. The male's initial displays to his mate are simple affairs but later become spectacular with hovering over the mate and a song flight. "During this fluttering descent, the cock sings with a musical trill, 'sree-sree-sree', very rapidly repeated, which is a beautiful and musically refined edition of the normal call notes" (p. 45). "There are, however, very few people who appear to have heard the true song of the Yellow Wagtail."

The female chooses the nest site and builds the nest, yet the male helps incubate. Incubation lasted 12 to 13 days; the young left at 12 to 13 days and were able to fly at 16 days. A very high rate of success was found in the 19 nests watched, only three nests coming to grief. From 99 eggs 66 young were raised, or 66.6 per cent. Strangely enough Dr. Smith states that baby wagtails are not fed nor do they defecate until "the second day after the hatch," (p. 76) *i.e.*, when they are about 24 hours old (p. 81). The author assumes a 40 per cent survival of adult birds and 25 per cent of young that left the nest. From my experience with Song Sparrows, *Melospiza melodia* I would consider 50 per cent survival of adults and 20 per cent survival of young a better estimate for many small birds. Where only 38 per cent of returns of adults are reported I suspect that some survivors were missed.

It is surprising to read in regard to "starvation in winter or death from a predator" that "it is fairly certain that the number of small birds which die from such causes is trivial compared with those struck down by the unseen army of parasites which infest the bodies of birds" (p. 147). The author does not discuss the intriguing problem of why the wagtail wags his tail. There is an index and a 21-page bibliography, besides appendices that give details of breeding distribution in Europe and Britain and list the parasites of wagtails. The paintings and photographs add much to the attractiveness of this interesting book.—MARGARET M. NICE.

THE REDSTART. By John Buxton. Collins, St. James Place, London, 1950: 5½ × 8 in., xii + 180 pp., one color photograph, 19 black and white photographs, 20 maps and diagrams. 12s. 6d.

It was a pleasure to read John Buxton's fine monograph, "The Redstart," and become acquainted with this European thrush, *Phoenicurus p. phoenicurus*. Although the author disclaims credit for describing behavior of all Redstarts, the thoroughness of his observations and his keen awareness of the ornithological literature are apparent throughout the book. He studied Redstarts in Britain, Norway, and during the five years that he was a prisoner of war (World War II) in Germany. Most of his studies were concentrated on a small number of birds, particularly four pairs. For one pair a mass of notes covering 850 hours of observation by the author, with the help of camp comrades, was accumulated in April, May and June, 1941, in Germany.

The book conveys the subtle joy that the author experienced in this study and his appreciation of Redstart individuality. He deplores a fact that is true of many migrants—that specimens are brought back from their winter homes frequently enough, but no information on the habits of the living birds there accompanies the skins.

Full song by the male, usually from low perches, starting early in April when the bird is taking territory, is continued vigorously after the arrival of the female, especially when he is enticing her to the nest hole which is always selected by the male. As soon as the female starts building, song suddenly ceases, but is resumed when the nest is complete and reaches its peak during the incubation period. Song ceases when the young hatch, not to be resumed unless there is another nest. Some individuals mimic other species.

The cock makes several types of display. In courtship pursuits, wings and tail are spread widely, the latter depressed. In a post-coition display, he makes circular flights around the hen, uttering excited calls. All Redstarts have a peculiar mannerism of "shivering" the bright chestnut tail in a rapid up-and-down motion which the author believes has definite functions.

During courtship, to interest the female in the nest site, there are three types of enticement display, which occur in the following order of frequency: (1) Entering box or hole, flashing white frontal patch at entrance. (2) Entering box, flying out a few inches, and back in at once without alighting. Both displays are made in silence. (3) Gliding down to box from a branch, singing in flight, wings and tail spread.

Nests are built by the female in cavities between rocks, in rock walls, trees, or in nest-boxes in open areas at varying heights, and sometimes on the ground. Incubation is also done by the female and starts with the laying of the last egg. The light blue eggs, usually unmarked, hatch in 12 to 14 days. The male flies to the nest often, presumably to see if the eggs are hatched. The pair cooperates in feeding the young, which leave the nest on the 15th or 16th day and are dependent for about three weeks longer.

The Redstart is a short-lived bird; more than three-quarters die within their first year. The oldest known lived six years.

Chapter 9 is devoted to migration; Chapter 10 to history and distribution; Chapter 11 to taxonomy. These are followed by a Select Bibliography which gives page numbers of the references cited. The text of the book is not interrupted by their inclusion.

Appendices provide distributional maps and banding recoveries.

A beautiful color photograph by Eric Hosking shows a male Redstart at the nest cavity.—AMELIA R. LASKEY.