

## NOTES ON THE OCCURRENCE OF MIGRANT WHEATEARS AT NAIROBI.

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These notes are compiled from a series of observations made at High Ridge Golf Course, Nairobi, from September, 1943, to March, 1944. Most of the observations were made in the evenings after 5-30 p.m. It was only possible on a few occasions, as at week-ends, to observe at other times of the day.

Of the six species of the Genus *Oenanthe* described in Jackson's *Birds of Kenya Colony and the Uganda Protectorate*, three migrants and one resident were noted in the area. The resident bird, *Oenanthe pileata livingstonii* (Tristram) (Zambezi Capped Wheatear) was uncommon. On four days in February, single birds were seen, but that was all. The other three form the subject of these notes.

The three species under review are:—

- (1) *Oenanthe oenanthe oenanthe* (Linn.), the Common Wheatear, a migrant from Europe, including Great Britain;
- (2) *Oenanthe isabellina* (Temm.), the Isabelline Chat, a visitor from Russia and Asia; and
- (3) *Oenanthe leucomela leucomela* (Pall.), the Pied Wheatear, another visitor from Russia.

### OCCURRENCE AND DISTRIBUTION.

The Common Wheatear was first recorded on 29th September, 1943, and last recorded on 24th March, 1944, cf. Jackson (op. cit.) who records the earliest and latest dates as 26th September and 26th March respectively.

It soon appeared probable that a definite, though small number of the birds had adopted the observed area as their winter quarters. With the object of ascertaining whether this was indeed the case, a count of the three species was begun on 13th December, and was continued until it was clear that the last bird had departed. A summary of the results is given in the appendix.

Up to 24th March, which was the latest date on which any bird was seen, the total number of days on which records were made was 47. Except after 11th March, when the number of Common Wheatears fell off very rapidly, I failed to find any at all only on two days, 5th and 23rd January. The largest number counted on any one day was seven (twice), and the average number was about three to five. The figures remained remarkably constant, and such irregularities as there were, suggest incompleteness in the count rather than trends towards irruptions of fresh birds or of departures. From 11th March, however, there was a definite downward trend, when the numbers gradually fell to zero and never increased again.

There were probably never more than two adult males. On 15th December, three males were recorded, but at that time it was often very difficult to distinguish the sexes, and an error is quite possible. The remainder were females or juveniles, which were difficult to distinguish. Males in breeding dress were recorded first on 12th February, but before that a good deal of grey was often noticed in the plumage, and also the blackening of the wings due to the fulvous edges to the feathers becoming

worn. The skins in the Coryndon Museum show this grey on the back as early as November in some specimens, and one specimen, taken in January, is quite grey and has the wings completely black. No adult males were recorded after 11th March. During the last week of observations, which ended, as stated above, on 24th March, only one bird, which appeared to be a juvenile, could be found anywhere in the area.

Common Wheatears were scattered rather evenly over the area, there never being more than three as close together as 100 yards, and it soon became clear that single birds or pairs could be looked for with confidence at any time, in certain well-defined parts of the area. There was one outstandingly bright fellow, who was noted, if it was always the same bird, as seems likely, some six times in late February and early March. Four times out of the six he was seen about the same place, and the greatest distance between any of his situations was not more than 300 yards. Such observations as were made in the mornings and afternoons gave the same results as the evening ones.

This uniformity suggests that the same birds were actually resident throughout the season, and that each bird tended to establish its own territory, with or without a companion. More detailed observations on individual birds in a future season would help to verify this.

I was unable to determine the date of arrival of the Isabelline Chat with any certainty, as owing to its superficial resemblance to the female Wheatear, it may have been confused with the latter until experience made its appearance familiar. I first recorded it on 13th December, but up to about 6th January its identity was still doubtful. After that date the regularity of the record is even more striking than that for the Wheatear. About half the counts gave two birds, and about half gave one bird. Only very seldom were none seen. Except once the birds were in a definitely restricted area all the time. In the exceptional case one of two birds was about two hundred yards from the normal territory. They departed about 4th March, one bird having been seen for the last time on that day. These results indicate that the same birds were resident in the area for the season, as is suggested in the case of the Wheatear.

There is no such indication in the case of the Pied Wheatear, which appeared merely to visit the locality at irregular intervals, although there is some indication, to be referred to later, that one or two females used to roost in a ditch that crosses the golf course. On one occasion a male was watched flying from one side of the course to the other. He paused to perch in a bush in between, but then flew on and disappeared through the trees outside the course. I never saw either of the other two species do this; in fact, I cannot recollect one of them flying more than a hundred yards or so at a time. The Pied Wheatear first appeared on 13th January, and was last seen on 10th March. There were never more than a male and a female, or two females. Altogether the male was seen only four times, and there was no sign that he had a territory or anything like permanent quarters.

#### HABITS.

Although the habits of the Genus *Oenanthe* are well-known, it may be of interest to give a few points of comparison. There were no great differences in behaviour, and the Wheatear and Isabelline Chat were particularly alike. These two preferred the short grass of the fairways, and were usually found in that situation. If by chance, one strayed into the rough, it usually found a convenient bare patch. The Wheatear

sometimes perched in a bush or tree, but the Isabelline Chat as a rule found a small mound or the edge of a tee sufficient elevation for a look round. The Pied Wheatear, as Jackson indicates (op. cit.), was much fonder of getting off the ground, and on three of the four occasions when the male was seen, he chose a small bush about two feet high as a look-out post. On 10th March, however, he was out in the fairway, where his behaviour was exactly like the other species. He hopped and ran about in the short grass in search of food, occasionally flying a few yards to explore fresh territory.

All three hop as well as run, the gait being suited to the ground. On the smooth sand of the putting "browns," for instance, where any might sometimes stray, they would run, but on the grass which might be as much as two inches long, they appeared to find hopping more convenient as a means of getting about in search of food. The normal flight of all three was similar. When moving from place to place, they flew steadily, but, particularly if the whole journey was a short one, this might be varied by a pronounced dipping. The Wheatear after alighting almost always flicked his wings and bobbed his head two or three times. Both the Wheatear and the Isabelline Chat seemed to delight in flying in odd places, such as round the edge of a bunker, or along a ditch, keeping all the time below the top. Another type of flight was indulged in by females of the former species, and appeared to be a play flight. This was noticed chiefly in the evenings, just before dusk. The bird would rise almost straight up, whirl round in a circle and alight almost where it had started from. The call note "tchick tchick" seems to be uttered both in flight and on the ground, the latter particularly if there were two birds moving about together.

The Pied Wheatear had a play flight and call-note of its own, different from the others. It was noted at dusk, and was performed by females only. My note made at the time reads as follows:—

"On 22nd February, two females were near a dry ditch on the golf course, just before dusk. They were close to a pair of *Myrmecocichla aethiops cryptoleuca* in a patch of rough grass. They both hovered at a height of about two feet, remaining stationary in the air and maintaining themselves by means of a rapid wing-beat, and uttering cries like a thumbnail being drawn rapidly over a comb. At the same time the Anteaters were hopping about and uttering whistling cries. After a minute or so, the Wheatears flew off a little way and settled on flat ground."

Similar behaviour was noted on subsequent evenings. It should be added that it is very difficult to distinguish these birds from female or juvenile common Wheatears in fading light. It was easy enough to make sure that they belonged to the Genus *Oenanthe*, as the characteristic rump and tail showed up well, but efforts to make a more precise identification were not helped by their persistent habit of keeping their backs to the observer. However, after watching one bird for quite a long time, she at last faced towards me, and, with the aid of an electric torch, I made out the dark brown throat of a female Pied Wheatear.

The call-note referred to by Jackson (*The Ibis*, 1901, p. 77), was never heard. In fact, I never heard the male Pied Wheatear make a sound of any kind.

The well-known Wheatear habit of standing bolt upright was much more noticeable in the Isabelline Chat than in the Wheatear. The latter often adopted such an attitude when perched on a small hillock or clod of earth, but just as often stood or perched in the normal attitude. The

Isabelline Chat could always be seen in such a posture. It would often stand so, as I approached, facing me with an air of great boldness, and would allow me to pass within three or four yards.

Indications were found during February, that some of the birds were in the habit of using the ditch mentioned already as a roosting place. On the 22nd of the month a Common Wheatear alighted in the ditch at dusk, and began to settle down on a little ledge in the side of it. It looked like a male, although the light was too bad to make certain of this. Unfortunately an incautious move caused it to fly off in alarm. Both the Common and Pied Wheatears were seen on several evenings in and around this ditch at dusk. Indeed, one of the hovering performances of the female Pied Wheatear, was begun by a bird which rose out of the ditch close to my feet, just after sundown. On two different evenings, well after dark, birds were flushed from the ditch by shining an electric torch along it. These could not be positively identified under the conditions, but I thought they were Wheatears, especially as once, shortly afterwards, the call of a Wheatear was heard. An examination in daylight of those parts of the ditch haunted by the birds revealed excreta in several little nooks and crannies in the sides of the ditch. In most cases, the excreta could not have been dropped from above, but must have been dropped by a bird actually perched in the cavity. Round about 3rd March, this ditch became waterlogged, and after this no birds were found there in the evenings.

In the case of the Isabelline Chat, nothing like such clear evidence was obtained. They did not appear to resort to the ditch at dusk. One might be seen not far from it at this time, but they were just as often near it in the day-time.

On 21st February, one bird was kept under continuous observation for an hour from 6 p.m. to 7 p.m. During the whole period, it made only three flights, each quite short, and the last one brought it to within thirty yards of its starting point. Practically the whole time was spent feeding. At 7 p.m. the light was so dim that the bird could hardly be seen. Then I realised that I could not see it at all, so I moved carefully forward. If it flew off, I certainly did not see it do so; in fact, I never saw it at all, but just at the spot where it had last been, there were a number of rat-holes. The possibility that it had entered one of the holes for the purpose of roosting would hardly be worth mentioning, but that I had a similar experience about a week later. On another evening an Isabelline Chat, instead of remaining near one place, as was usual, varied the procedure by moving frequently from one place to another, without however, leaving its territory. It finally disappeared while flying at a height of about twenty feet. It was then nearly dark.

These evening observations were started too late in the season, so that it was not possible to get a long enough series on roosting habits. I have been able therefore to do little more than make suggestions in the hope that other observers will be able to confirm them or otherwise.

TABLE OF OBSERVATIONS.

Date.	<i>O. oenanthe oenanthe.</i>	<i>O. isabellina.</i>	<i>O. leucomela leucomela.</i>	Remarks.
1943				
Sept. 29	... Several ...	...	—	Winter plumage.
Oct. 6	... Several ...	...	—	Winter plumage.
9	... Several ...	...	—	Winter plumage.
19	... Several ...	...	—	Winter plumage.
24	... Several ...	...	—	Winter plumage.
31	... Several ...	...	—	Winter plumage.
Nov. 1	... Several ...	...	—	Winter plumage.
10	... Several ...	...	—	Winter plumage.
13	... Several ...	...	—	Winter plumage.
14	... Several ...	...	—	Winter plumage.
20	... Several ...	...	—	Winter plumage.
21	... Several ...	...	—	Winter plumage.
27	... Males and females	...	—	Plumage wearing.
28	... Some seen	...	—	—
30	... Males and females numerous (7 or 8)	...	—	—
Dec. 2	... Fewer ...	...	—	—
5	... Numerous	...	—	—
13	... M. 2 F. 2	...	1	<i>oenanthe</i> , plumage well-worn.
15	... M. 3 F. 2	...	2	—
16	... M. 2 F. 3	...	3	Figure for <i>isabellina</i> doubtful.
21	... M. 2 F. 3	...	2	—
22	... M. 2	...	5	Many of these identifications may be wrong.
23	... M. 1	...	1	More seen unidentified.
1944				
Jan. 5	... Nil ...	...	1	—
6	... M. 1 F. 2	...	1	A good identification of <i>isabellina</i> .
11	... M. 1 F. 1	...	1	—
13	... 3	...	—	M. 1 F. 1
14	... F 1	...	1	—
23	... Nil	...	Nil	—
25	... M. 1 F. 1	...	1	—
26	... M. 2 F. 1	...	1	—
27	... 4	...	2	—
Feb. 6	... 5	...	Nil	—
8	... M. 2 F. nil	...	2	M. 1
10	... M. 2 F. 1	...	2	—
11	... M. 2 F. 1	...	1	—
12	... 5	...	2	Includes one paired male in full breeding dress. ( <i>oenanthe</i> .)
13	... 2	...	1	M. 1
16	... M. 1 F. 2	...	2	Male <i>oenanthe</i> in full breeding dress.
18	... 7	...	2	One pair. One full-dress male solitary.
19	... 2 or 3	...	1	—
20	... 5	...	2	<i>oenanthe</i> one breeding male.

Date.	<i>O. oenanthe oenanthe.</i>	<i>O. isabellina.</i>	<i>O. leucomela leucomela.</i>	Remarks.
1944				
21	M. 1 F 1	1	—	At dusk
22	2	2	F. 2	At dusk.
24	2 or 3	1	F. 1	At dusk.
25	1	1	—	At dusk.
27	3	—	F. 1	At dusk.
28	Heard	—	—	At dusk.
March 1	Heard	1?	—	At dusk.
2	M. 2 F. 2	1	—	Two <i>oenanthe</i> males in breeding dress, especially one of these.
3	F. 1	Nil	F. 1	At dusk.
4	M. 1, indeterminate	1	—	At dusk.
6	Juvenile 1	—	—	—
10	M. 2 F. 5	—	M. 1 F. 1	Males were not very bright — probably first season.
11	M. 1, indeterminate	—	—	The male in breeding dress.
14	3	—	—	—
15	Young M. 1	—	Nil	—
16	F. 1	—	—	—
17	M. 1 F. 2	—	—	—
19	Juvenile 1	—	—	—
20	Juvenile 1	—	—	—
21	—	—	Nil	—
23	Juvenile 1	—	—	—
24	Juvenile 1	—	—	—

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