

BIRD NOTES FROM MOLO — 1. THE DAM.

BY MRS. D. M. SHEPPARD.

To any bird lover a stretch of water, however small, is an irresistible attraction; there is always something to watch. If one's hopes of seeing a rare duck or wader are rarely realized there are still the birds of the reeds and grass verges, the birds that come down to drink and those that fly overhead.

Since I came to live up here just eighteen months ago the bird life of our dam has proved a fascinating study, particularly having regard to our altitude which is nearly 9,000 feet. The dam is quite small, only about three acres, very shallow and weedy, lying at the foot of a steep hill on the edge of the forest.

Last year, when there was still plenty of water our more common residents were two pairs of Red-knobbed Coots, which bred in July, Dabchicks, Moorhens, Black Crakes and Yellow-billed Ducks varying from a solitary pair to forty or fifty. African or Southern Pochards were fairly regular visitors and sometimes we would have a pair of the attractive Red-billed Teal or their more drab cousins the Hottentot Teal. In April of last year a solitary Garganey was seen on two occasions, presumably on migration. In August I was excited to spot my first White-backed Ducks and so fast asleep were they (a party of five of them among the water-lily leaves) that it took me some time to identify them, their white backs only showing when preening or in flight. They remained with us almost continuously until the dam started to dry out in December.

Our most common small waders are Green and Wood Sandpipers, the latter very tame and in large numbers in February when the rapid drying up of the dam made conditions ideal for them. During this month a Marsh Sandpiper was also seen and the Common Sandpipers visit us occasionally. In December and again in February we were lucky to have a pair of Stilts for a few days. In January and February two pair of Snipe became temporary residents of the grass verges. They would sit so tight that they were in danger of being caught by the dogs. Whether they were the Ethiopian or Common variety we were never able to discover.

In July I went to England for three months and returned to find the dam empty save for a few small puddles but one pair of faithful Wood Sandpipers were still with us and an occasional Green one still visits us.

Of the large wading birds, we have had Grey and Black-headed Herons, Hammerkops, Yellow-billed Egrets and the stately Kavirondo Cranes as regular visitors. Sacred Ibis and White Storks were seen in February, and in May, for the first time, we had a Saddlebill Stork. I have always associated this magnificent bird with lower and warmer regions but he

seems to like it up here and has been a fairly regular visitor ever since. But our greatest thrill was when, one day last month, we spotted two strangers stalking about the dry floor of the dam and these turned out to be a pair of Woolly-necked Storks (*Dissoura episcopus*). Their visit, alas, was all too brief, for as we were watching them from close by a Mountain Buzzard swooped out of the forest and saw them off in no uncertain fashion. They circled over our heads, then up and up they soared to such a tremendous height that even through our field glasses we could no longer see the two specks that were our Woolly-necked Storks.

But it was not long before we had another new species to add to our list. About three weeks ago a solitary Black Stork (*Ciconia nigra*) appeared and at the time of writing (November 26th) is still with us. He is a big bird, a good deal bigger than Abdim's and very smart with his red legs and bill.

And what of the little birds that find their living around the dam and among the rushes? Wagtails are the most numerous and varied. Wells' and the African Pied species are residents — the latter, though, preferring the garden to the dam. During the winter months we have large numbers of Yellow and Blue-headed, and solitary Grey Wagtails have been seen on migration.

Yellow-throated Long-claws and Pipits (species unidentified) are also residents as is the ubiquitous Stonechat. At intervals large flocks of Masai Waxbills swarm among the rushes and sometimes we are lucky enough to have an influx of the beautiful Malachite Sunbirds — though what should attract them to the dam, where they perch on the rushes, I have never been able to discover.

And last, but by no means least, mention must be made of the birds of prey that are so much part of the life of the dam. Augur Buzzards, Mountain Buzzards and Crested Hawk Eagles are always to be seen somewhere near and in the winter months African and European Marsh Harriers and Pallid Harriers quarter in fields around. All these species have been seen on many occasions motionless on the ground either on the edge or on a tuft of grass in the middle of the dam, the male Pallid Harrier looking from a distance very like a seagull. The ducks are very nervous of these birds of prey, particularly the Harriers, and when the water is too low for them to be able to take cover in the rushes they become so jumpy that they will make off as soon as one appears in sight, often before I am able to spot it. The sandpipers, on the other hand, take little notice of them.

On one occasion our dogs put up a Marsh Owl in the long tussock grass near the dam. It flew a short way then flopped down in the grass again, repeating this several times and never going far away.

And so when my husband comes in from riding or I from walking before breakfast, the first question usually is — "Seen anything new on the dam today?" and there is nearly always something of interest to record or discuss. Life is never dull with a stretch of water nearby.