

# Journal of the East Africa Natural History Society

December, 1952

VOL. XXV

Nos. 2(92)

## SOME FIELD NOTES ON THE BIRDS OF MOGADISHU

By B. G. Lynn-Allen.

These notes are a record of birds seen in the Mogadishu area from mid-October until the end of March. All the species mentioned were seen on the shore, or on the maritime sand-dunes a few hundred yards from it: no attempt has been made to include the numerous varieties existing in thorn scrub a mile or so inland. The great majority of observations were made within two and a half miles of the town itself: an excellent reef (uncovered at low tide), some miles south of Mogadishu was visited about a dozen times: a single trip was made to Gezira, about fifteen miles farther south: and a morning and evening were spent at Brava, some 110 miles down the coast. About a hundred afternoons or evenings were spent watching these shore birds. It is hoped that these rough notes may prove of interest in giving some indication of the incidence of the various maritime species which occur on this part of the Somalia coast during the European winter.

### 1. Reef Heron (*Demigretta schistacea*)

Seen continuously and regularly between October and March. White and dark forms observed; worked out in the rough proportion of two to one. Several times a white Reef-Heron was seen flying with an apparently smaller brown one. Never observed further inland than a few yards from the water's edge. (Probably immature examples).

### 2. Grey Heron (*Ardea c. cinerea*)

Single birds seen regularly throughout the season.

### 3. Night Heron (*N.n.nycticorax*)

One only observed, on March 23. The bright orange-yellow legs were most conspicuous in flight. This bird was seen on the rocky fore-shore and allowed a close approach.

### 4. Abdim's Stork (*S.abdimii*)

A large flock of thirty or forty birds seen on the maritime plain some few miles outside Mogadishu on Feb. 20 and Feb. 23.

### 5. Greater Flamingo (*P.r.antiquorum*)

Three specimens, presumably of this species, were seen in the dam of a salt-works at Gezira on November 3.

### 6. Osprey (*P.h.haliaetus*)

First seen on October 28. From then onwards Osprey were observed on most days right up to the end of March. Twice, one was seen carrying

a fish of 1 lb to 1½ lbs, held lengthways in the talons; on both occasions the Osprey was uttering "a chirping mew" as it passed overhead. The following are a few notes on the dive:—

"December 20—a wonderful exhibition of diving, about five dives in half an hour; but saw nothing caught. The bird beat slowly up against the wind, hovering like a huge Kestrel. The dive starts in a steep slant and then becomes a straight plummet drop. The wings are kept open for at least three-quarters of the descent, and occasionally seemed to stay open until the surface was struck. At other times they were shut considerably before the water was reached. The time under the surface was 2—3 seconds. Immediately it was clear of the water the Osprey shook itself vigorously, giving several more shakes when it was up in the air: very reminiscent of a dog and most interesting to watch. This bird seemed to be able to dive with impunity in very few feet of water".

It was most noticeable how the small waders completely disregarded Ospreys. Occasionally one of the latter would rest at water's edge on the bare sand, and Ringed Plover, and such like, would scuttle about unconcernedly within a yard or so of it. Again, when an Osprey sailed low overhead, they would pay no attention whatsoever. From time to time older birds with very white heads would be seen. The normal distribution seemed to be a pair to every two or three miles of coast. I never saw more than two in the air at any one time.

#### 7. *Arabian Kite (M.migrans arabicus)*

Ubiquitous over the town and harbour, but never noticed away from human habitations. I had eye-witnessed accounts of this species swooping down on the shallow water of the harbour and seizing small fish; but I never saw this myself.

#### 8. *European (?) Kestrel (F.tinnunculus)*. (Probably *Falco rupicoloides fieldi*).

Seen on ten occasions and always in the same locality from December onwards. The female was usually the bird noted; but a browner and smaller male was twice seen in the air at the same time. The female was a very rich tawny-red, copiously spotted with blackish on the wing-coverts and underparts; the thighs were rufous and there seemed to be a single black bar across the tail. I never succeeded in confirming the colour of the claws. A large sized Kestrel, which "worked" the sand dunes assiduously. No kill was observed.

#### 9. *Siberian Ringed Plover (C.h.tundrae)*.

Very common, either singly or in small flocks. At high tide retired to the sand dunes, where it rested in parties of 20 or 25. Seen every day on the shore, from October 11 until the end of March.

#### 10. *Lesser Ringed Plover (C.d.curonicus)*.

A pair seen on January 14 and on February 4, and single birds on January 27 and 29. The white collar very pronounced, but the black ring on the front of the neck somewhat inconspicuous, and the head and neck markings in general less bold. Upper parts browner than in better-known bird. The legs were lemon rather than orange-yellow; but the only sure field identifications seem to be the smaller length and bulk when seen side by side with the larger species, and above all, the total lack of

a white wing-bar which is to be noted in flight. When flushed, uttered a single note, thinner and quieter than that of the commoner bird.

11. *White-Fronted Sand-Plover* (*C.m.tenellus*).

Seen practically every day on the shore or on the dunes when the tide was high. Very confiding. Its little sideways runs were a noticeable characteristic. Some birds were paired in late March.

12. *Crab-Plover* (*D. ardeola*).

Seen twice in late October and twice in November, but not again during the season. Six were seen together on October 27. An old bird and a juvenile were observed in company on November 4 and November 22. The young bird had the crown and upper parts grey-brown, and not black, and the legs a very dark grey. The first adult seen (October 24) flew low over the crests of the waves like a petrel.

13. *Grey Plover* (*S.s.squatarola*).

Two or three observed on October 26 with breasts still dark. (The Grey Plover is one of the last of the waders to moult its summer plumage. Ed.) Thence onwards seen regularly throughout the winter in numbers: still in residence at the end of March, when breasts were again darkening. In a rising tide Grey Plover would sometimes stay on the reef until the water reached their bellies. Never seen more than 30-40 yards inland.

14. *Great Sand-Plover* (*C.leschenaulti*).

First seen on November 4, and from then on practically every day until the end of March. In the field can only be distinguished from the next two species by its larger size, longer legs, and longer and thicker bill. Always appeared in very small parties, from one to three. On November 19 I watched one attack a small crab, pursuing it backwards and forwards for some time. The crab showed some fight, but was never allowed to reach the safety of its burrow. Finally it was worn down, dismembered and eaten. At Brava on January 25, I saw a Sand-Plover with one leg completely missing, it was plump and very active. In the last week in March, two individuals were seen with the nape and chest-band becoming very chestnut. Sand-Plovers were frequently somewhat truculent towards the other small waders.

15. *Caspian Plover* (*C.a.asiaticus*).

*West Mongolian Sand-Dotterel* (*C.m.atrifrons*).

I place these two species together as I found they were difficult to identify in the field. Consequently I was never certain which I was watching. On December 9 what proved to be a Sand-Dotterel was accidentally shot by a stray pellet, aimed at a Grey Plover, flying low. (The bill was about 16 mm. there were ill-pronounced traces of a brown chest-band and the upper tail-coverts were edged with white). One or other of the two species was seen continuously from early November to late March. At high tide these birds resorted to the dunes, together with Ringed, White-Fronted, Kentish and Kittlitz Plovers.

16. *Kittlitz Sand-Plover* (*C.p.pecuarius*).

As a resident species, was seen throughout the season, and could be noted in parties up to 15-20 on any day on which its favoured haunts

were visited. This is a bird of the maritime sand-dunes, and not of the shore: out of several dozen appearances, I have only three records of seeing one on the beach itself. Two were first noticed as being definitely paired on March 14, and on March 27 the nest was found. The female had then been sitting for several days. The nest was cunningly sited on top of a sand-bank, and surrounded by stones and loose rubbish. These not only helped to hide the sitting bird, but also constituted a site where Somali sheep were unlikely to trample the eggs. There were two, very large for the owner and highly pyriform. They were densely obscured with dark yellowish-green markings and a few black lines. The female was amazingly deft and quick in covering her eggs with sand on my approach.

17. *Kentish Plover (C.alexandrinus subsp.)*

Probably seen in October, but passed unrecognised. Noted regularly in all months from early November to late March; generally only a pair or so seen in any one day. At first I found these Kentish Plover somewhat hard to pick out from Caspian Plover or Sand-Dotterels. I think the best field identifications are the blackish legs (the two other species named have greyish legs), and the dark lines ("collar ends") on each side of the chest. In autumn and spring the crown was noticeably rufous—as usual accentuated when viewed in a strong light. These Somalia Kentish Plover may have been European migrants or of the local Indian Ocean race.

18. *Eastern Golden Plover (C.d.fulvus).*

Three identified during winter, one of which was shot. I saw a single bird in the same area on December 28, 30 and 31. This was on the shore itself. In the field it resembled a slightly smaller Grey Plover, except for the complete lack of white on the rump and the suffusion of light brown on the chest and upper breast. My own experience, with all three birds, was that even with glasses the gold spangling was invisible from 40 yards. On March 2 a pair were seen on the sand-dunes within 100 yards of the sea: I flushed them several times (I was without a gun) and on one occasion they settled at the very edge of the water. M.E.W. North obtained what was probably one of these birds when he shot a Golden Plover in the same area the following morning, March 3. This was definitely of the Eastern race, with dark axillaries and in very handsome spring plumage, the gold spangling very bright. The call on being risen is disyllabic TER-WEET. In the field I would give the following five distinctions from the Grey Plover:—

- (a) Slightly smaller size.
- (b) Wings more cut-back.
- (c) Whole upper surface dark—the lack of any white on the lower back is very noticeable on the wing.
- (d) Fore under-parts suffused greyish-brown rather than whitish.
- (e) In general colouration, the bird appears medium to dark brown rather than grey-brown.

19. *Crowned Lapwing (S.coronatus)*.

A small party seen at the African Cemetery on the out-skirts of the town on February 25. They were presumably residents there.

20. *Eastern Curlew (N. a. lineatus)*.

First seen on October 20, thence regularly throughout the winter. Specimens shot on November 13 and March 24: in both cases the bill was 162 mm. and the axillaries unbarred white. In living birds which were observed the length of the bill seemed to vary a great deal. On January 28 and 30 and February 7 a solitary Curlew, apparently of appreciably smaller size, was noted. (Possibly *N.a.suschkini*?) At high tide Curlew stayed on the sea-front or else flew inland on to the sand-dunes. Flights of up to 25 were sometimes seen. The call seemed indistinguishable from the European race. In a falling tide their long legs enabled them to share with the Reef Herons the opportunity of entering the smooth water above a submerged reef, some time before the other waders. Generally wary, as is the custom with Curlew, but could be approached from behind sand-dunes to within close range. Still present in the last week in March.

21. *Whimbrel (N.p.phacopus)*.

Seen throughout from mid-October until the end of March. Lower mandible pinkish on basal half, as with Curlew. High "tittering" call. Never observed away from the shore. One was seen disinterring a crab of about 3" across from a mound of wet sea weed, and carrying it off in its bill when disturbed. A common species, seen on most days.

22. *Common Sandpiper (A.hypoleucos)*.

Very common. Seen practically every day throughout the season; but never more than a few yards from the edge of the sea. Occurred singly, in twos, or threes; was most partial to the coral cliffs. Constantly on the move (even at high tide), and very confiding. One was seen catching small crabs.

23. *Curlew-Sandpiper (C.testacea)*.

The first (four) were seen on October 28: from then on it appeared regularly in good numbers. Still resident at the end of March. On March 10 M.E.W.North noted one already with a lot of red on its neck. Very restless little birds at all times.

24. *Terek Sandpiper (T.cinerea)*.

The first (a lone bird) seen on November 1: another one observed on November 3: and two (possibly the same pair) on November 13, 25, and December 9. No others were noted until February 24, when two or three were seen. Finally, a singleton observed on March 10. The brown bill, very long and slightly recurved, and the bright-coloured legs, make this Sandpiper very conspicuous amongst other waders. The legs are a deep orange-yellow; but in certain lights appear to be red. This is an extremely active species, tirelessly working the shallow pools (and covering a lot of ground in doing so), seemingly with never a pause for rest or for taking stock of its surroundings.

25. *Turnstone (A.i.interpres)*.

First seen on October 25. The following day about a dozen were noted, at least one with pronounced chestnut streaking on the back, and still with the full black chest band of summer. Most had only a straggling black bar across the chest. In flight the black and white streaks on the back are invariably conspicuous. A very confiding variety, which was never seen away from rocks or water's edge. When scrabbling in piled-up sea-weed, presumably for sandhoppers, these birds are most amusing to watch, tossing over lumps of weed with a sideways motion of the head, for all the world like hay-makers. This species appeared regularly throughout the season in some strength.

26. *Greenshank (T.nebularia)*.

Two or three seen on October 27 and odd ones observed until mid-November. No others were noted on the coast until January 30, when they were seen in larger numbers; they were still numerous at the end of March. (N.B. During November and December the seasonal swamps from the Webi Shebelli, some 20 miles inland, where there were a lot of Greenshanks, were at their best).

27. *Bar-tailed Godwit (L.lapponica)*.

A single bird seen on October 23, and from then on Godwits were seen regularly throughout the season. In their most favoured haunt, the reef at Warego, six to twelve were usually observed during a visit there. Seemingly a voracious feeder, "shovelling" continuously in shallow sand-pools with the slightly uptilted beak. At such times they became very engrossed and paid little attention to a human approach in the open. Two were shot on October 27, and as this bird appears to be regarded as uncommon on the coast of Kenya, a feather-description is attached as an Appendix. Godwits were carefully scrutinised for the presence of any Black-tailed; but only Bar-tailed were seen.

28. *Oyster-Catcher (H.o.ostralegus)*.

Appeared quite indistinguishable in the field from Oyster-Catchers in Great Britain. A pair seen on October 27 and also on November 1: thereafter one only was seen regularly in the same locality throughout the winter.

29. *Sanderling (C.alba)*.

Present in large numbers. First seen (four) on October 26: still in residence in last week in March. On October 31, a few still retained patches of warm chestnut on the head and neck. From early February onwards, many tended to pack in "trips" of two hundred or so. This species tirelessly active when feeding at water's edge, and very tame.

30. *Little Stint (C.minuta)*.

Only two identified throughout the winter. One on November 12 and one on November 26. This is an even smaller wader than the white-fronted Sand Plover. The very tiny size and the dark brown back with the feathers shafted with black, form field-characteristics which materially help in picking out this minute wader. Both birds which

were seen were very tame, and fed unconcernedly within a few yards of me.

31. *Jubaland Courser (C.c.littoralis)*.

A single bird seen (and shot for M.E.W.North) on February 7. Two other singletons seen on March 2 and March 24. On March 21 a pair were observed. All these appeared on the sand dunes adjoining the shore.

32. *Sooty (or Hemprick's) Gull (L.lemprichii)*.

Seen every day in mid-October, but only once in November, (the 25th) and not again until February 24 when a single bird was observed, mixed up with a flock of Red Sea Swift Terns. Another singleton was seen on March 31. During a night's stay at Brava, several dozen were in evidence. This was in late January.

33. *Lesser Black-Backed Gull (L.f.fuscus)*.

Only two seen during the season. Both solitary. The first was on November 26 and appeared to be entering its third winter. The crown, upper parts and chest were streaked with brownish, but the lower under parts were pure white. Primaries tipped with black or dark brown, without "mirrors". The eye was dark brown and so was the bill. Legs were fleshy. A second gull was seen at Brava on January 26. Although not fully mature, this was an older bird with the upper parts appreciably darker, but again no "mirrors" were visible on the outer primaries. It may well have been approaching its fourth year.

34. *Red-Sea Swift Tern (S.b.velox)*.

Several dozen of these very large terns were first seen at Brava on January 25 and 26. Subsequently I saw about two dozen on the reef at Warego (outside Mogadishu) on some six occasions between the end of January and March 24. When not feeding they tended to pack at water's edge, and would allow approach to within 50 or 60 yards.

35. *Grey-Headed Kingfisher (H.l.leucocephala)*.

Presumed to be of the typical race. Seen on one or two occasions in the town itself, generally at, or near the bathing-pool in Government House garden. Appeared perfectly at ease in its urban surroundings.

36. *Somalia Thekla Lark (G.t.elliotti)*.

I am postulating these birds as belonging to the above species on the grounds that their accepted range seems more likely to include the Somalia coast-line than does that of the Somali Crested Lark (*G.cristata* the former, making identification based on appearance alone practically *somaliensis*). On the other hand, the only field distinction between the two species seems to be a general more pinkish tone in the plumage of the former, making identification based on appearance alone practically impossible. The birds seen were certainly somewhat of a warm shade, and the balance seems to tend towards their being Thekla Larks. In the strong light their legs appeared of a very bright flesh-orange colour. A pair were seen five times in the same locality: first noted on December 11, and last seen on February 19.

## 37. ?? Lark.

A small party of unidentified larks of a non-crested variety were seen on February 5, 19, and March 12. In the field presented a most neutral appearance, with an entire lack of outstanding characteristics. About the same size as the last mentioned. Appeared to resemble descriptions of the Masai Fawn-Coloured Lark (*M.a.intercedens*).

38. *East African Sparrow-Lark (E.l.madaraszi)*.

Seen in small parties on the sand dunes about ten times between December 5 and March 21. Extremely tame little birds, which could be approached to within 10 yards. Weak, "bouncing" flight.

39. *Chestnut-Headed Sparrow-Lark (E.signata)*.

Seen once only — a little group of two or three on November 14. Two males with dark chestnut crowns were noted; but white coronal patch was not observed. These confiding little birds were found squatting in a sand-hollow, within a few yards of a bathing-hut on the "Lido".

40. *White Wagtail (M.alba — race unknown)*.

Seen on eight or nine occasions between November and mid-February. All these occurrences were in the town itself. Only one was seen in the vicinity of water.

41. *Yellow Wagtail (B.v.lutens)*.

Seen on eight occasions between January 18 and March 12. Generally observed in threes or fours briskly pattering round a flock of Somali sheep and goats and feeding on insects. It was most noticeable how close they stayed to the grazing animals, and how completely the latter ignored them, even when the wagtails were within a few inches of their eyes.

42. *Pipit (??)*.

A very small pipit of about  $4\frac{1}{2}$  inches in length which I failed to identify. Generally seen in a party of four or so, though on March 21 (the last time met with) two seemed to be definitely paired. These tiny pipits were met on a dozen occasions from December 5 onwards. The head and all the upper parts bore heavy streaks (or lines of spots) of black on a background of medium-brown. The throat was similarly striped, but the chin may have been paler unmarked. The fore under parts were likewise streaked, these markings continuing well down on to the breast; but the belly was uniform paler brown. There was a whitish eye-brow, or eye-streak; a slightly darker uniform patch on the middle of the back; and no white visible on the tail. The primaries appeared to be a lighter brown. Bill horn-brown: legs fleshy. The flight was low and very undulating. Although these little birds were fairly tame, their natural colouring, and tiny size, and (particularly) their restless and active behaviour on the ground, made them a difficult study for accurate scrutiny. Always found on the maritime sand-dunes in very low grass.

43. *Isabelline Wheatear (O.isabellina)*.

Very common on every stretch of sand-dunes on the coast and inland. Seen from late October up till the end of March.



44. *Pied Wheatear (O.l.leucomela)*.

First noted on November 6 and last bird seen on March 25. In Mogadishu this species seemed to become almost completely urbanised, being far more often seen right inside the town than just outside it. Owing to these specialised surroundings, was constantly observed using telegraph wires, high walls and other un-wheatear-like vantage points. Out of some two dozen recorded appearances, only three were females.

45. *Desert Wheatear (O.deserti—race unknown)*

What appeared to be the same male seen about a dozen times, always in the same area between early December and mid-February (last seen February 19). The large amount of jet-black on the fore parts made this bird very conspicuous amongst the numerous Isabelline Wheat-ears. Invariably seen on the maritime sand-dunes. I believed that I saw a female on January 27; but it was a most doubtful identification.

46. *Fiscal Shrike (Probably the Teita Fiscal L.dorsalis)*.

Seen nearly every day in urban surrounding, perching on telegraph wires, buildings, etc. in and around Mogadishu. A very obvious nest on the rafters of a verandah surrounding an occupied guard room was half-built on January 27.

47. *Dwarf Raven (C.corax edithac)*.

A pair seen regularly near the shore from the end of January onwards. On March 14 they were carrying small sticks to a nesting site on an overhung ledge on the coral cliffs, about forty feet above the beach. On March 17 both birds were carrying small six-inch twigs for the inner frame-work: on March 18 long grasses were being conveyed. By March 21 a sheep's wool lining had been added: but the cup of the nest had not been fashioned to shape. On March 25 the female(?) was seen moulding the inside to a cup. On the last visit on March 30 tragedy had occurred and the nest was turned inside-out and pendulous, with the remains of two or three broken eggs on the beach below. Agency unknown.

48. *Pied Crow (C.albus)*.

Seen almost daily near the town rubbish dumps in the sand hills and around military camps, etc. They swept low over the dunes in true crow-fashion, and would attempt to drive off the European Kestrel if the latter bird came too near.

N.B.—A few species, such as swallows, found entirely in the town, have been omitted. This includes finches, which were glimpsed only, and ox-peckers.

#### APPENDIX.

*Plumage state of Bar-tailed Godwits shot on October 27.*

The feathers of the crown, dark brown edged with grey: lores, whitish grey. A narrow and ill-pronounced white stripe above the eye. Sides of face and the upper neck, grey with narrow medium-brown shafts: neck, greyish-brown. Mantle, back and scapulars, medium-brown with narrow darker brown shaft-stripes, and light buffy spots on both edges

of the feathers. Rump, white, a few feathers having sub-terminal "spear-head" sepia markings: upper tail-coverts white, with large sepia spots. Tail evenly barred white and sepia. about eight sepia bands. Primaries with outer webs black, inner ones medium-brown. The lower half of these inner webs were white, irregularly freckled with light grey-brown. Quills, white. Secondaries greyish-brown, edged and tipped with white: tertaries, as for back. Lesser and median wing-coverts, light brownish-grey, with darker shaft-stripes and irregular whitish edgings. Primary coverts, dull black, inner ones tipped with white. Axillaries, white barred with sepia. Chin, white. Chest, light grey-brown, other underparts whitish, faintly washed with dirty brown. Under tail coverts, white barred with sepia. Sides, as for chest. Bill, slightly recurved, had the terminal two-thirds pale rosy-pink (fading duller after death), outer third black. Iris, black. Legs and feet, very dark greenish-black. Length about 17½ inches: length of bill, 5 inches. The smaller bird, presumably a first year juvenile, was largely similar; but the axillaries were pure white and the back a darker grey and less grey-brown. Length 15 inches: length of bill 4 inches.

### THE LAMMERGEIER IN EASTERN AFRICA.

By Raymond Hook.

Not the least interesting of East African birds is the Lammergeier or Bearded Vulture, *Gypaetus barbatus*. Its original distribution in the old world covered all the great mountain chains, from the Spanish Sierras, the Pyrenees, Alps, Carpathians, Caucasus to the Himalayas and associated ranges; and from Abyssinia along the back-bone of Africa to the Drakenbergs. From this area, it has been exterminated in the Alps and probably in the Drakenbergs.

One of the largest of carnivorous birds, it has a wing spread of nine feet, and is of a dull blackish-brown above, and a buffish salmon below, and has a "beard" of stiff feathers beneath its beak. It is one of the few birds which show the "whites" of its eyes, in this case a brilliant crimson. It is an extraordinarily powerful and graceful flier, more or less the equal of the peregrine, which it much resembles on the wing, in spite of the great difference in size, though it has not the peregrine's mastery of extreme speed. Its long and diamond shaped tail distinguishes it from all similar birds, with the exception of the Egyptian vulture, which is much smaller and differently coloured. The first plumage, in which it leaves the nest, is a dull black all over. It is not known how long it takes to attain the adult plumage.

Their food appears to consist mainly of bones, judging by the dung which may be seen in the nest and its neighbourhood, which resembles that of a hyaena. It breaks them into sizeable pieces by dropping them from a height on to a flat rock, hence its old name, used in the Bible, of ossifrage. It is said to have killed a Greek philosopher by dropping a tortoise on him in this manner. The tongue is specialized and long, and is believed to be used to lick out marrow bones and possibly brains, a source of good food which is usually neglected by other scavengers. They appear to be able to utilize a carcass which has already been dealt with by vultures, to be "the last at the feast" like the hyaena. But in Abyssinia and the Himalayas they are known to gather round slaughter houses for any refuse which may be thrown out.