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ERDE Natural History Society

Bird Notes No. 2.

Dec 1970.

ERDE NATURAL HISTORY SOCIETY

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OCT-DEC 1969

On Oct 6 a male STONECHAT was seen on the wire fence bordering the North Site Gravel Pit, a few yards outside ERDE. The odd stonechat may winter around the Cheshunt pits, but it is always a rare bird.

About 40 REDWING appeared on New Hill on Oct 16, and a WOODCOCK was flushed on New Hill on the early date of Oct 24. Five GADWALL were present on the West Side pit during the last week in October.

A single SISKIN was seen in the North Woods on Nov 6. Siskins were present during the following month, with maxima of 25 on Nov 12 and 27 on Dec 4. REDPOLLS had their best year since records began; about 70 were present from mid-Nov until mid-Feb. GOLDCRESTS were also prominent throughout the winter. A flock of 6 were seen on Nov 6. GOLDFINCHES were common, the mid-winter population probably being about 150. The TEAL, which tended to be found on the West Side river which is now lost to the Establishment, found an undisturbed stretch still within the boundary. 12 were put up on Dec 31, and as many as 25 were seen in early 1970.

JAN-MARCH 1970

Hard weather during the first week of the New Year caused the pits to freeze. This is the best time to catch glimpses of WATER RAILS, a bird which is probably present in ERDE during the winter, but is very secretive and difficult to observe. Breeding on the West Side Pit has been suspected by many observers, but never proved. On Jan 5 a BITTERN was seen on the West Side pit, mobbed by gulls, and a RED-NECKED GREBE was present from Jan 27 to Jan 30. A female GOLDENEYE was seen first on Feb 2, also on the West Side Pit, and this bird remained in the district for at least another month. On Feb 4, a WAXWING was seen in a garden on the ERDE estate.

SISKINS arrived in force on Feb 11, and about 300 were present in the Establishment for the next month. They were last seen (a party of 15) on April 1. This was the biggest influx since 1966. There appears to be some indication that the siskin come in two waves, the first in autumn which is a true migration, independent of food supply, and the second, which is more spasmodic and generally in late winter, due to the wandering of large flocks as food supply fails in northern Europe. If this is the case, then the pattern is akin to the classical movement of Waxwings from Siberia into Europe. Organized counts were arranged which generally recorded about 250 birds, and the roost was reported in a hawthorn thicket on the South Site, about 300 birds being seen to leave in parties of 20 or so shortly before 8 am. Parties of 50 or so CHAFFINCH were present throughout the winter, and these parties contained up to 6 BRAMBLING. A pair of NUTHATCHES were seen on the South Site on Feb 18, and a LESSER SPOTTED WOODPECKER in the North Woods on March 13. REDSHANK began passing through on March 20, when 5 were seen feeding at a puddle in a field just outside the western boundary fence.

APRIL-JUNE 1970

During the first two weeks in April the water meadows to the east of the Establishment contained up to 30 SNIPE, at least one pair of REDSHANKS and three or four pairs of LAPWINGS. The lapwings no doubt attempted breeding, but successful breeding in the Lea Valley is now a rarity. The redshank, too, seldom fares well, but a juvenile seen on the north side pit a month or two later indicates some success in the area.

On April 15 a GREEN WOODPECKER and a COMMON REDSTART were seen on the South Site. Both were new to the ERDE list, the habitat being unsuitable for either species. The redstart nests in both Epping Forest and Broxbourne Woods, and this was obviously a migrant passing through.

Spring was very late, and it was not until April 17 that the CHIFFCHAFF and WILLOW WARBLER were heard and SAND MARTINS and a SWALLOW were seen in their usual haunts. Both the SAND MARTIN and WHITETHROAT suffered a national population crash in 1969. Sand martin numbers remained low in ERDE during 1970, both as a breeding bird and in its pre-migration August gatherings. However, the whitethroat population on New Hill appeared to have largely recovered. LITTLE RING PLOVERS were seen around the pits several times in late April, but it is not known whether they bred successfully. 12 COMMON TERNS were seen over the north side pit on April 29, and two or three pairs stayed throughout the spring, but again we know of no successful nesting. On May 14 a LESSER WHITETHROAT was seen and heard in a hedge bordering the west side pit, and on May 20 one was heard on New Hill.

Of breeding records, pride of place undoubtedly goes to the GREY WAGTAIL which nested either in or just outside ERDE. A female was seen constantly between May 19 and May 22 at the weir by the Fireman's House catching may-flies and small dragonflies and feeding a tail-less fledgling. The male was seen on two occasions, and the presence of other fledglings was suspected but not proved. This is the first recorded nesting of the grey wagtail in Essex since 1962. These birds remain something of a mystery since they were seen only during this period of 4 days. The area was well-watched, and we cannot believe that such an obvious bird could have been overlooked had the nest been inside ERDE territory.

Next in interest to the grey wagtail was the GOLDCREST holding territory in the North Woods between June 15 and 22. It was in an area in which goldcrests were frequent up to the beginning of April, and there is little doubt that a pair remained but were overlooked. The goldcrest is a rare nesting bird in Essex, but there is some evidence of an increase over the past 2 years.

KINGFISHERS nested on the North Site, and a party of 2 adults and 4 juveniles were finally seen soon after leaving the nest on July 1. GREATER SPOTTED WOODPECKERS nested on both North and South Site, and there were two pairs of TURPLE DOVES on the North Site. KESTRELS nested on the South Site; a hen was seen with one young on July 3.

Finally, mention must be made of the spectacular sight on June 1, of a CROWNED CRANE perched some 30 feet up on a dead tree bordering the East Side river. Obviously a wanderer from some wild-life park it was completely oblivious to

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spectators, and obliged with a series of wing-stretchings. It was seen briefly on the two following days before returning, one hopes, from whence it came.

JULY-NOVEMBER 1970

Two GREEN SANDPIPERS were flushed on the North Side Pit on July 10. Sandpipers are the earliest autumn passage migrants, July and August being the most typical months. Two COMMON SANDPIPERS were on the river near Cattlegate Bridge on Aug 5, and one on the north pit on Aug 11.

New Hill was interesting during the last week in August. 1 whinchat and 2 wheatears were seen on the boundary fence on Aug 27, and 4 whinchats and 1 wheatear on Aug 28.

FIELDFARE were first seen on Oct 23, and about 15 were present on New Hill on Oct 28. REDWING were first seen on New Hill on Oct 26 (about 20), and numbers had built up to about 70 by Nov 18.

6 SISKINS were seen on the North Woods on Nov 5, and about 10 on Nov 9, together with about 4 REDPOLL. 4 SISKINS were seen on the South Site on Nov 10. The pattern seems very similar to 1969. However, the large flocks of goldfinches and chaffinches present at this time have not appeared this year.

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15 December 1970