The status of the Cirl Bunting in the UK
Scopoli’s Shearwater: new to Britain
its claws, and was vigorously pecking at the head (particularly, it seemed, the eyes) of the other. After about four minutes, the owner ejected the intruder, and it became clear that all eggs had been removed from the nest. After a period of time in which the nest was deserted, a female Blue Tit (re)appeared with nesting materials and subsequently laid and incubated a clutch of eight eggs. I presume that the fight centred over competition for either a mate or a nest-site.

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Editorial comment Such fights are perhaps not uncommon (though the growing popularity of nestbox cameras has made them more accessible recently), but the egg removal in this case is interesting. Footage of a similar encounter can be viewed on the BTO ringers’ website at http://btoringing.blogspot.com/2009/05/fighting-blue-tits.html

Blackbirds and snails

Jan Dawson’s observation of a Blackbird Turdus merula eating a snail by breaking its shell (Brit. Birds 103: 362) reminded me of an incident at Church Norton, Sussex, some years ago when I watched a male Blackbird pick up a large Garden Snail Helix aspersa and proceed to swallow it whole. The entire procedure took at least eight minutes with the bird opening its bill wide around the snail, jerking its head back and attempting to swallow and then dropping it before repeating this action with the snail disappearing further down each time. I was fascinated because the snail appeared as large as the bird’s head and, if nothing else, swallowing it looked excruciatingly painful. The bird eventually got the snail entirely into its gullet where, presumably, the shell would be crushed but, disturbed by walkers, it flew off still with a huge lump in the throat!

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Jan Dawson’s note prompts me to describe the following observations from my own garden in Norfolk. In early April 2010, the shells of a large number of predated Great Pond Snails Lymnaea stagnalis were noticed smashed on the tilled path adjacent to a small garden pond. I assumed that the likely culprit was a Song Thrush Turdus philomelos, a daily visitor at least to drink here, or even a mammal. This assumption was revised when I observed a male Blackbird returning repeatedly to a floating island of rhizomes to select a snail. Having chosen its prey, the Blackbird proceeded to bash the snail (in the same manner as a ‘classic’ Song Thrush) on the nearby path until broken open and then eat the contents. This foraging behaviour continued into early May, whereafter (what I presumed was) the same Blackbird foraged on invertebrates from the lawn and no further snails were removed. As far as I could determine, only one Blackbird was involved and at no time did I see it take either of the otherwise locally abundant terrestrial snail species, Helix aspersa or Cepaea nemoralis, which remained the exclusive preserve of the local Song Thrushes. Perhaps almost as surprising as a Blackbird eating aquatic snails is that Song Thrushes don’t do so (though of course in the hardest weather the pond is frozen and the snails unavailable).

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White Wagtail brandishing stick in winter territorial dispute

Winter territorial aggression in wagtails is well documented (Zahavi 1977; Watanabe & Maruyama 1977; Davies 1981; Ölschlegel 1985; Ohsako 2001). On 10th January 2010, with Germany lying under blanket snow cover, AMA observed a territorial skirmish between two White Wagtails Motacilla a. alba on a compost heap in the Naturpark Stromberg, c. 40 km north of Stuttgart. The warmth produced by decomposition kept
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3–4 patches of about a square metre in area clear of snow, and the dispute was over one such snow-free patch. One bird had been foraging for invertebrates and a confrontation started immediately upon the arrival of a second bird. Following an aerial (frontal) confrontation with claws, the birds dropped to the ground, one bird on its back, the other standing on its rival’s belly and continuing to fight. The subordinate eventually freed itself and flew off into an adjacent orchard. The victor immediately picked up a stick, about the length and diameter of a cigarette, and, holding it perpendicular in its bill, chased the other bird out of sight. About a minute later, both birds returned to the compost heap, this time without the stick, and fought again briefly. One flew to a compost heap about 40 m away, emitted a two-note call, and then flew away. The other emitted a one-note call (‘tiz’), followed by repeated two-note alarm calls (‘ziLLIT’), and remained on the disputed patch.

We are aware of only three other bird species that have been reported to brandish sticks in territorial disputes. Male Blackbirds Turdus merula have been described carrying sticks, leaves, apple pieces and grass roots in protruded territorial skirmishes with other males. The birds held the items perpendicular in the bill and chased their rivals (Howard 1952; Shanks 1953; Warren 1983).

Balda (2007) described an incident in which a Steller’s Jay Cyanocitta stelleri thrust a 10-cm-long pointed stick in a weapon-like manner at an American Crow Corvus brachyrhynchos during a dispute over a feeding platform. The crow then lunged at the jay, and the jay dropped the stick, which the crow picked up and held in its bill while chasing the jay. A fourth species, a captive Bald Eagle Haliaeetus leucocephalus, was observed beating a Western Gopher Tortoise Gopherus agassizii with a stick held in the bill until the turtle moved out of reach, but it was unclear whether this involved territoriality or predation (von Lawick-Goodall 1970). With respect to the Blackbird, Stephan (1999) interpreted the behaviour as an attempt to intimidate the opponent by extending the apparent size of the bill in a confrontation. This interpretation is plausible for the stick-brandishing wagtail observed here. Two factors known to increase winter territorial aggression – scarcity of food (Ölschlegel 1985) and patchily (rather than uniformly) distributed food resources (Zahavi 1971) – were relevant in this case.

References


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