

# Rhodesian Ornithological Society

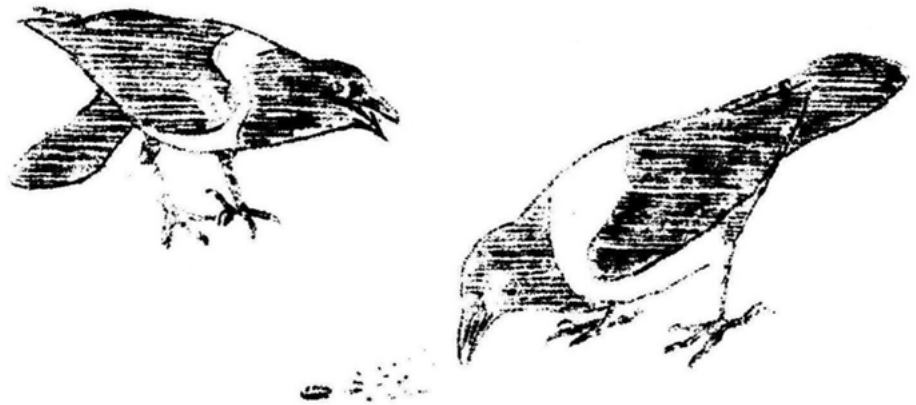
## Bulletin

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### *"ANTING"*

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My lawn in Gwelo is, or rather was during March and April, frequently visited by the local Pied Crows, although there seemed to be nothing to attract them but red ants. (Of late the ants have disappeared; in their place there are plenty of harvester termites, but the latter do not appear to be nearly so attractive).

Which brings me to the point of this note. It occurred to me that the object of their visits might be, not feeding but "anting". The action of anting has been frequently described, although the reason for it is still unknown. In anting, a bird spreads its wings forwards, and rubs the anting agent with its beak on the wing-quills, and sometimes on the underside of the tail feathers as well. So far, hardly anything has appeared on anting by African birds, but it is well known in Europe, America, Australia and India, particularly among members of the Corvidae. Although referred to as "anting", other objects, such as cigarette butts are used, the common factor that they have with ants being that they are slightly irritant. It is interesting, by the way, that it has been suggested that birds which attend grass fires, may do so to bathe in the smoke, rather than to obtain prey, and that this "smoke-bathing" is closely allied to anting.

However, I regret to have to report that so far the natural wariness of the Pied Crow has got the better of me, and that I have not been able to catch them either feeding or anting.

Here, then, is a practically virgin field for study. The systematics of our birds has been fairly thoroughly gone into. We have at least made a start in investigating their nesting and migration. But about their other habits, next to nothing is known. For example, five years ago when I was editing the news sheet for the Witwatersrand Bird Club, I appealed for records of "injury-feigning" (the so-called broken-wing tricks. The information that came to light was all practically new. Injury-feigning had not previously been recorded for such common birds as the Toppie [Dark-capped Bulbul] and Laughing Dove. I would be glad to hear of any records of bird behaviour, anting, smoke-bathing, injury-feigning or anything else, even the call of the African Fish-eagle about which a note by a member appears later in this issue.

*An example of unusual behaviour* comes from a correspondent who writes, "In Bulawayo some months ago I observed on the E.S.C. Power line a dove, which I think was a Laughing Dove, perched and cooing. A male Paradise Widow Bird [Long-tailed Paradise-whydah] alighted on the higher wire, then fluttered over and settled on the dove's back. The dove crouched and spread its wings slightly, but was quite unperturbed. The Widow Bird merely alighted on the dove's back and then flew back to the higher wire. This was repeated twice, but there was no attempt at coition on the part of the Widow Bird. The dove showed no sign of resentment.

He goes on, "I am sure there was no aggressive intent in the Widow Bird's actions. I got the impression that there was a love note in the dove's cooing the crouching and partial spreading of wings by the dove suggested a readiness to copulate.

The affair opens up a wide field of speculation. Is the cooing of doves a love-call? Is such a call understandable by the male of other species? I understand male widow-birds have "harems"; possibly they are particularly susceptible. If the widow-bird had continued, would the dove have accepted? I believe that in captivity crossing of widely different species takes place. Was it the call or the shape, or some emanation that attracted the passing widow-bird?"

Over now to readers for any comment they may care to make. I personally doubt the possibility of coitus even occurring between such widely different birds as doves and widow-birds, but if this is the case, what is the mechanism preventing it? Hybrids are known, even under natural conditions, between different birds of the same family, and are not unknown between for instance, domestic fowls and guinea-fowl, which are fairly widely separated. At the Pan-African Congress last year Dr. Amadon gave an account of a hybrid between a guinea-fowl and a guan, the latter belonging to the South American family of gamebirds, the Cracidae. However, this seems to be about the limit to which interbreeding can take place. R.M.H.

### *Emerald-spotted Wood-dove – D.A. Byrom writes.*

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I found this species nesting in mid-December 1957 in a fir some 30 yards from my house in Gutu, and about 10-12 feet up. When discovered, there were two small featherless chicks on the nest. The latter consists of a platform of sticks, these being somewhat larger than those used by the Cape Turtle-dove, and had some pieces of lichen adhering to it, which could have been attached to the nesting materials originally. The two young left the nest successfully although one was caught and killed a short time after by my pointer.

On the 2.2.58 I heard quite a row coming from another fir about 30-40 feet away from the original nesting tree and on reaching this found another nest of the same species. The adult bird was very agitated and fluttering about, and I thought perhaps the young of this second nest had fallen out, and could not get into the nest again. I climbed the tree and on reaching the nest, discovered that a chick had been caught by a 4 ft. boomslang, which I shot. On examining the chick I found it to be dead; there was no sign of a second.

Apart from being some 5 feet higher, the nest was exactly the same as the previous one. Could anyone tell me whether *Turtur chalcospilos* is second brooded or not, please?"

### *Fish-eagles, coucals and pelicans*

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"I notice that the African Fish-eagle and his call have cropped up again" says G.W. Parnell. "I was down at St. Lucia in Zululand last August, and was amazed at the change since 1948. What used to be a fine open stretch of water has silted near the mouth of the estuary to a mass of reedbeds. But the fish and the birds (which I had been told had almost disappeared) are back. There are many Fish-eagles there and I watched them several times calling when soaring. The bird would turn into the wind, with an upward lift as if it was about to hover, and as the lift ended, throw back its head and call. I saw one pick a grunter from the water under my nose, which was so large that it could not rise, and had to skitter across the surface with it to dry land, before dealing with it. As I had had a blank day, I could willingly have strangled the brute!

I also watched a coucal calling from the top of a bush. It extended its neck, arched it, and tucked its beak down into its breast on each occasion.

The pelicans were there in hundreds, and having the whale of a time as the fish concentrated in the channels. It is amazing the size of fish with which they deal. A native ranger brought in a dead pelican, still warm and we extracted a grunter weighing no less than 7½ pounds from its gullet. The bird had for some reason or other – possibly after being attacked by another pelican – tried to swallow the fish tail-first. The fish had raised its dorsal fin and the spines had caught and stuck, chocking its captor. The European ranger told me that he often has to destroy starving pelicans which have had their pouches torn away – he thinks by sharks."

**WHITE STORKS** Information has now come to hand concerning the stork ring mentioned in *Bulletin* no. 24. The ring was sent by Mrs. Attwell to the National Museum and Mr. Smithers' letter makes amusing reading.

There is a little story behind this which is worth hearing. Some years ago we had a Warsaw ring, and not knowing how to get Russian returns, I wrote to the B.O.U. and they told me it was done through the Russian Embassy in London, so I wrote to them, gave them the information on the ring and asked for a return. Nothing happened in spite of several letters thereafter.

I visited Peter Scott in 1952, and asked him how he got returns on Russian rings, and he also told me to write to the Russian Embassy. I told him I had done this and then he cross-questioned me and found that I had given them all the information on the ring. He said "You are a damn fool, you mustn't tell them anything. Just say you have a ring, Number — — — and if they will give you details of where it was ringed, you will tell them the rest of the story."

Well, now I have had a chance to do this, and have got a return on the ring as follows — "ringed as a juvenile on the nest 19.6.57, Zbietka, distr. Wagrowiec prov. Poznan/52°56'N; 17°28'E".

*The International Committee for Bird Preservation is worried* about the continued decline in numbers of the White Stork, and is organising a census during 1958–59. Information from the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland should be sent to Miss Paterson, who, in addition to being secretary of the ROS, is secretary of the Central African Section of the Committee. No information on the White Stork is too trivial to be needed, but whenever possible, the date, place and number of storks seen should be given. If you live in an area where storks normally occur, you are asked to state whether, in your opinion, their numbers are more or less than in 1957–58. Any other items of interest will of course be welcome. Here is an opportunity to take part in an important international investigation.

*African Green-pigeon. A.B. Kirkwood records this species feeding on grass seeds. His account reads:*

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While in the Fort Rixon area during May, I observed a pair of pigeons feeding in an open bare patch of ground. As this seemed unusual for this species, I kept them under observation for two and a half hours. When they eventually flew off, I examined the feeding area and all I could find was the seeds from the grass. As they were not disturbing the ground, and as there was no grit in the area, I can only assume they were picking up the seed. At intervals while feeding, I saw the cock display and prong to the hen in the same manner as a domestic pigeon."

A sample of the seed has been sent to the Dept. of Agriculture for identification, but no reply has been received as yet.

**Nest Record Cards** The annual report of the Organiser is in the course of preparation, so there is no time to lose if you still have records to send in to him. His address is P.O. Box 8156, Causeway.

Carl Vernon has been transferred to Kasama, and the gain is Northern Rhodesia's. In just over 2 years he has personally contributed 600 cards, and has been the moving spirit behind Mashonaland's effort. Further, in company with Richard Brooke, he has combined ringing with nest-recording by ringing swallows in culverts round Salisbury, and recording nest contents at the same time.

**Back-numbers of the Bulletin.** These are still urgently needed, so remember to send them in when you have a clear-out of all your old papers!