

Notes

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Little Grebe swallowing small mammal

In early March 2003, I made the following observation at the S'Albufera Parc Natural, in Mallorca. I was photographing a Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis* and followed the bird through the camera lens as it disappeared into some reed. There followed some disturbance in the reeds, as though some sort of struggle was

taking place. Eventually, the grebe reappeared and, to my amazement, I could see the hind legs and tail of a small mammal being swallowed head first.

I can find no mention of mammals included in the diet of this or any other species of grebe, and my observation appears to me to be unique.

Robin Fisher

28 Dinerth Road, Colwyn Bay, Conwy LL28 4YN

Cream-coloured Courser showing feeding attachment to desert roads

During a visit to south-central Tunisia in April 2004, I was interested to note an intriguing, persistent association between Cream-coloured Coursers *Cursorius cursor* and the tarmacked roads passing through their desert and steppe habitats. All of the 13 birds seen on 25th-26th April were found on the road or close to the roadside. By contrast, on numerous occasions, I stopped and scanned appropriate habitats away from the road, but never found them. The most compelling evidence for some underlying ecological attachment to roads came on 26th April, in an area of alkaline steppe around the oasis of Chebika, 55 km northwest of Tozeur. Here, we found an adult and two young c. 100 m from the road, then two adults close to a stretch of road on which there were two dead courser chicks, one probably hit that morning. Another pair of adults fed close to the roadside, one of which eventually began feeding on the tarmac until repeatedly flushed by a succession of vehicles, while a third corpse spotted later may well have been that of a Cream-coloured Courser.

In rural Pakistan, this species is often

extremely tame and feeds in the vicinity of villages, where beetles are attracted to the dung of livestock (Roberts 1991). I infer that my observations reflect a recently acquired variation on this opportunistic behaviour and that the birds are finding grit and/or searching for road-killed insects and possibly other items like lizards. Beetles (Scarabaeidae) and species of Orthoptera are important prey items and I found that our radiator grill and engine housing were full of dead insects. Given that the desert roads are relatively traffic-free and other avian road-casualties infrequent, the incidence of several dead Cream-coloured Coursers was noteworthy in itself and may represent an important cause of juvenile-courser mortality.

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Mark Cocker

The Hollies, The Street, Claxton, Norwich, Norfolk NR14 7AA

Exceptional numbers of Oriental Plovers in southern Siberia in 2003

The first record of Oriental Plover *Charadrius veredus* for the Western Palearctic, in Finland in May 2003, stimulated much discussion in the birdwatching press (e.g. Rannila 2003, Papps 2004), and speculation as to what might have

caused an individual to be found so far west of the breeding grounds. My observations in southeast Transbaikalia, Russia, suggest that Oriental Plovers were moving much farther north and northwest of their normal breeding

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range than usual in summer 2003. The Oriental Plover is accidental in Russia, having been reported only in the regions neighbouring Mongolia (Tuva, Buryatia, and Chita; Dement'ev & Gladkov 1951, Kozlova 1961). Before 2003, only one breeding record had been reported in Russia, in the Tuva Republic in 1968 (Golovushkin 1971).

During 3rd-8th June 2003, I visited the Chita region with a group of Dutch birders; this is an area chiefly of hilly steppe near large, brackish lakes (Zun- and Barun-Torey) on the border with Mongolia. Typically, Oriental Plovers are extremely rare there (Goroshko & Kiriliuk 2003) but, during our visit, a total of eight were observed. Furthermore, a pair found on 3rd June showed evidence of breeding behaviour – the male was flying around anxiously, while the female attempted to lead us away from the area – though, unfortunately, we could not locate a nest. Four more territorial males were registered in the following days in the steppe around the lakes, and two males thought to be migrating were seen on the shore of Lake Barun-Torey, with Red-necked Stints *Calidris ruficollis* and Broad-billed Sandpipers *Limicola falcinellus* on 4th June. In Tuva (Ubsunur basin), a nest with eggs was located and two more breeding attempts were reported that year (Ozerskaya 2004).

Spring and early summer in this part of Russia were extremely (and atypically) dry, with many steppe and forest fires. It is possible that conditions on the usual breeding grounds in eastern Mongolia and northern China were similarly harsh, or even worse, which forced birds to explore new breeding sites and precipitated the exceptional numbers on the Russian steppes.

Vladimir Yu. Arkhipov

Institute of Theoretical & Experimental Biophysics, Russian Academy of Sciences, 142290 Pushchino, Moscow Region, Russia



Bjorn Anderson

82. Male Oriental Plover *Charadrius veredus*, near Dalanzadgad, Mongolia, June 2004.

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Footnote: The spelling 'Tuva' is retained in this note, but the name of the republic is now written 'Tyva'.

Ruffs feeding on contents of a Giraffe's stomach

On 19th November 2003, at Etosha, Namibia, I was watching animal activity at a waterhole when I noticed a small party of 12 Ruffs *Philomachus pugnax* feeding close to the carcass of a long-dead Giraffe *Giraffa camelopardalis*, one that I estimated to have been dead for at least ten days. The Ruffs were feeding close to the bones and dry hide of the Giraffe carcass, as if

taking advantage of some invertebrates (beetles or fly larvae?) living among the remains. During some 30-40 minutes' observation, the Ruffs particularly favoured a large brown patch of dead vegetation that lay in close proximity to the Giraffe's belly, and were clearly taking prey items from among this vegetation pile, some 150 cm high in places, rather than catching flies