

Toronto Field Naturalists' Club.



NEWSLETTER

Birds in France & Switzerland

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Great gusts of wind sent the snow whirling in blinding eddies across the platform on which I was standing. There were moments when I turned my back to the blasts in order to catch my breath. The thermometer on the wall registered ten above zero. It was the twentieth of July.

Far below me when the snowy gusts ceased stretched the glistening surface of the glacier; so far below, indeed, that four humans struggling across it seemed like tiny animals wandering in a wilderness of white. Only a fortnight previously, three such as these had lost their lives when they slid into a crevasse. Several of the great cracks were visible from where I stood, and I focussed my binoculars on one of them, starting back involuntarily even on my safe perch, as I found my gaze going down and down into green crystalline depths. I raised my eyes again and let them follow the course of this river of ice and snow as it reached away for miles between stupendous banks of gleaming snowcapped peaks until lost to view in that tumultuous world. Should I turn to look behind me it would be to find myself fascinated by yet another glacier, this one plunging in precipitous leaps down hundreds of feet of mountainside. From its steep face avalanches might roar at any moment. The slender ridge upon which I stood, so narrow that I could, if I wished, see down both sides of it at one time, seemed frighteningly fragile. Did these vast streams of ice not spring from its base and flow away, did they but turn for one moment upon it, this thin wall must be crushed to pieces and all upon it swept to destruction. This was the Jungfraujoch, the saddle between Mts. Eiger and Jungfrau in the heart of the Swiss Alps.

More than 11,000 feet in the air in a world of snow, ice and cold bare rock, surely here I had found a spot where birds could not be. But no. Even as I contemplated the dramatic grandeur of my surroundings I could hear a musical clamor rising from amongst the plunging cliffs. Soon a group of large black birds appeared, riding the whistling currents of snowy air as easily as the gulls that

frequent Lake Ontario in winter. They drew near, and far from avoiding the people gathered on the platform, they swept in close, looking us over with obvious care. The flock broke. Some of the boldest alighted at my feet. Now I could see the delicate coral-hued bill and blood-red legs and feet, and know that I was gazing upon that rare bird, the Alpine Chough. Moved by their evident tameness I shredded bits off my sandwiches and tossed them towards the birds. No hesitation there! A scramble ensued, and in a moment one of the choughs was chasing a fragment of sandwich that went bouncing down the cliff. When last seen it had shot over an edge and disappeared in a sheer drop towards the glacier, with the chough in hot pursuit. Whirling snow prevented me from seeing if the chase was successful or not. Others of the flock clung assiduously to the company on the ridge for as long as we would feed them, then departed, sending their musical calls ringing through the crisp air as they flew.

These choughs are members of the crow family, much more attractive members than our own crows or than the common carrion crows of Europe. They show all the adaptability, however, of their commoner brethren to get along with mankind. It was noticeable that, though these birds were not seen below 7000 feet, they were most numerous in the neighborhood of mountain hotels where scraps from the human larder were easily available. The sight of them on the high and remote Jungfrauoch reminded me that often I have said that bird watching is a hobby that can be carried on almost anywhere one may be. Now I was nearly ready to remove that qualifying "almost", for here in the highest Alps as well as in mid-ocean I had found birds ready to be seen, and ready to respond to man's favour and protection.

Not all the experiences of the bird watcher going to Europe are as dramatic as the meeting with the choughs, though when any bird that shows itself may be one you have never seen in your life almost any encounter is bound to have a special thrill. When, for instance, you survey the wonderful panorama of Paris from the top of the Eiffel Tower and suddenly find your eyes arrested by huge blue pigeons with bright white stripes on their wings, flying above the trees in the park below, you forget the Seine and Notre Dame and the Champs Elysées. You will puzzle over them, noting all their marks, and you will find out that they are wood pigeons. And when you go down to the park you will find a pair building their bulky nest in one of the park trees. "Ordinary" birds, you will be told, "common", but how can any bird be "ordinary" that you have never seen before. How can a bird be "common", winging azure blue above the willows of Paris!

Or again, when you are in bathing in Lac Lemane and you see enormous black-coloured birds soaring over your head, sailing far off in the sky until they are mere dots against the French Alps across the lake, then returning to scan the bathers, and every foot of shore, you wonder what they are. Hawks? Eagles? Vultures? This is a strange land, and you have no experience to suggest quickly what the great black visitors may be. They are ravens you discover, and the guide book says they are common in the Alps and around the Lake of Geneva. It takes a while for your mind to adjust to the fact that now you are in a place where ravens circle above blue water and lose themselves in the sky, black shadows against the distant white shoulder of Mont Blanc.

When any moment or any place a strange new bird may turn up, the instant when it commands attention may not be of the bird watcher's own choosing. Those of you who have succumbed to the fascination of birding know that at most unpropitious moments the bird watcher's eyes and ears, which develop a curious will of their own, may discern some feathered creature and insist that the watcher pay heed to it. So was it this summer in the midst of an international conference, whose meetings, because of the heat, were being held out of doors on the grounds of the Château de Bossey. Intent upon getting the gist of a serious philosophical paper being delivered in French, I suddenly found my eyes recording the crazy gyrations of three birds darting madly through the trees about our meeting place. Back and forth and around they sped. They began to jabber and chortle at each other, and my ears at once refused to hear any French, insisting that I listen to the lingua aviana. Oh, they were quite reckless, those birds, but then nuthatches anywhere have something crazy about their actions, and these were European nuthatches. They became more and more impertinent, their din more and more inescapable. I had to laugh. International conferences and solemn discussions were certainly of no account to these mad creatures. It was like a troupe of vaudeville actors bursting abruptly into a budget debate in Parliament. Indeed, they were so heedless and noisy that everyone finally had to take notice. The reader of the paper had actually to stop his discourse until the upside-down birds decided to take their own frothy debate elsewhere. An international conference interrupted by nuthatches!

If there is something extraordinary about each bird for the observer, fresh come from this continent to Europe, there are also the general conditions of birding to which he becomes accustomed. He will wonder at the outset just how different bird watching in Europe is going to be. I think that with a little experience he will come to the same conclusion that I did; namely, that on the whole, conditions of observation are basically similar. The observer uses the same methods of observation as at home. The birds' favourite habitats are similar to those favoured here. Birds are most active at early morning and late afternoon. Their reaction to human presence is roughly the same.

There are, of course, certain differences. The one which will strike any experienced observer from North America most strongly is that there is a far smaller variety of birds to be seen. This shows up in the length of his day's list. One may tramp all day in Switzerland or France in mid-summer, keeping alert for birds all the time, and see no more than 12 or 15 species. If he is fortunate he may find 20 or 25 species. It would be very difficult to see more than 30 kinds of birds. For my own part, 27 species was the longest list I was able to amass, and I did that but once. In this country at that time of year, in a similar territory, the list would have run from 40 to 60 species. Of course, even in North America in the high mountains a day's list would be small. In general it is true, however, that though there are many birds in Europe there are fewer species than on this continent.

A second difference is to be found in the heavier character of the ground cover in many parts. The presence of hedgerows in the place of fences accounts in part for this difference, but there also seems to be many more matted vines and impenetrable low brush forming the

undergrowth in woods. The existence of this cover makes for much more effective hiding by birds. Here it is usually possible to push into underbrush or even to stand at the edge of thickets and penetrate their depths with one's binoculars. In Europe there are often places where neither course can be taken, and the observer is baffled. Also birds, I found, are far more likely to dive into the dense cover and skulk there unseen. There was far less of the perching on some shaded but observable twig to watch the watcher, that so often gives us a chance here to see a bird. Or once gone, birds seldom came back by some circuitous route to see what was going on, a practice that can be counted on with so many of our birds. European birds, in other words, seem to have developed a greater degree of caution in their relations with men, no doubt the result of centuries of contact in an older, longer-settled land.

In such a situation it was perhaps natural that I should find squeaking less effective than here. Certainly the K-note, upon which I rely so much, did not work with much surety. Of course it may be that my accent was English and those French, Swiss and Dutch birds didn't understand it.

Another difference, very noticeable to anyone from an area like Toronto, was the lack of bird watchers. Though I was in a number of places very favourable to bird watching, and in spots much favoured by tourists and people on vacation, not once did I meet another person looking at birds! How possible would that be in the favourite spots around Toronto? I may say too, that far less curiosity was displayed by people who saw me using binoculars than I am accustomed to in my home neighbourhood. I fully expected there would be moments, such as have occurred not infrequently hereabouts, when awkward questions would be asked as to what I was doing. But they did not come. People with idiosyncrasies are accepted much more readily there than here. Individualism in its fullest expression is not to be found in America but in France.

The other question which is bound to occur to the visiting observer is: how far are the birds going to be different? In one way the answer to this query can be made quite simply. There are a few birds that are identical. The bulk of birds show marked similarities to ones we know. There are a certain number that are thoroughly different.

Of those that are the same, the three "immigrants" that we know so well - starling, house sparrow and rock dove - are the ones the watcher looks for at once and automatically. Then the surprise begins, for though the house sparrows are there in about the same quantity and in the same sort of places; and the rock doves, though more numerous, purer in strain and often situate in wilder places, are approximately what one would expect, where are the starlings? Used to the squealing screaming flocks that have to be bombed out of city trees, or which descend in clouds upon our parks, one is completely nonplussed to go day after day without seeing a single starling! In fact I travelled over a large part of Switzerland and saw two starlings, while in France in more than a month's time I saw but 20 starlings! The greatest number were in Holland, where I saw 200! This bird is reputedly much commoner in Britain and in Scandinavia, but certainly in those parts of Western

Europe where I was it is in mid-summer a rather rare bird. Maybe we could persuade some of our excess population to return to their homeland, but I fear they are too solidly acclimatized.

Of other birds that are identical, two will serve as examples: On Bastille Day I was in the Bois de Boulogne, the finest and largest park of Paris. Birds were numerous, and as I was sorting out the several plumages in a flock of chaffinches I heard a low, sizzling call which caused me to say to myself, "If I were home that would be a brown creeper." I looked around to find the author, and there indeed was the creeper on a tree trunk at my side. The tree creeper of Europe and our creeper are the same bird. So it was with a flock of little birds that dashed through some dark evergreens on the Grutschalp in Switzerland. At home they could be kinglets, and they were just that, golden-crowned kinglets, called in Europe, goldcrests.

Of birds that are similar in looks or habits there are a great number. If they were fewer, difficulties of identification would be much increased, for it is far easier to deal with wholly different birds than with those that are somewhat like those you know but not quite. Still, the similarities often helped. For instance when I heard goldfinches calling in Zauterbrunnen churchyard, they were in fact goldfinches, though they looked very different from ours. In habit, song and call they were much the same. Swifts wheeling over the cities were obviously swifts, though larger and darker. Swallows were unmistakable, if of different plumage. The screaming jay might look very distinctive, but his actions were as blatant and pert as any bluejay's. Crows were crows, and titmice were all patently relatives of our chickadee. So it went down the list.

Most striking of such similarities was to be found in a bird that was common everywhere. I remember one afternoon coming to a park in Geneva. People were numerous, but the lawns were barred to them. Consequently the greens were dotted with birds. Most of these birds were of one type. At a distance I could see them hurrying about their business of feeding, taking various poses, fighting; and as I neared them I could hear them disputing. Long before I could see their colour I said to myself, "Those must be robins. They're exactly like our own birds." But when I got up to them, they were black as coal with yellow beaks; naturally, for they were European blackbirds. However, I was not wrong in my impression, for this black fellow and our own robin are very close relatives, and the European bird might well be called a black robin. In every way except its colour, and probably its song which I did not hear, it is a replica of our bird. The European robin, on the other hand, is a bird scarcely larger than a sparrow, with no resemblance at all to our robin, save that the upper section of its underparts is reddish. It is extraordinary that the early colonists should have used its name for our bird. In size and colouring of the underparts there is a far closer likeness between the European robin and our bluebird. But in my opinion, this bird is one of those most different in looks and habit.

Of the birds that are markedly unlike our own, little need be said. Most of them, such as the storks I saw flying over Amsterdam harbour, or the nutcrackers which delighted my ears with their raucous choruses along Alpine tree lines, are so distinctive that one has only to note their characteristics to be sure of their identity. There is

a group of birds, however, the European warblers (Sylviidae), whose only representatives in North America, thank Heaven, are confined to the outermost reaches of Alaska. They are different from our warblers (Compsothlypidae) which belong to quite another family, and the differences are all in favour of our family. The basic nature of this peculiar family may be summed up in three words - dull, obscure and retiring. Unhappily there are many of them, all dowdily alike. If anyone of the readers of these pages thinks he has trouble with what Petersen calls "confusing fall warblers", let him go to Europe and exercise himself over chiffchaffs, blackcaps, whitethroats, reed, willow, sedge, marsh and garden warblers, not to speak of sundry other undistinguished and undistinguishable members of this group of Nature's wallflowers. Having done that, he will come back full of conviction that the fall black-throated blue female is a chic lady, swanking through the shrubbery in bright, autumnal colours.

To go to a new region where most of the birds are in some way novel, puts a strain upon the observer with the best of aid. To go without a guidebook, or without local help, manifestly enhances the difficulties immeasurable. Yet such seemed to be my fate at the beginning. So far as local birding people were concerned, their vacations and my presence simply didn't coincide. I was thrown back upon guidebooks. But when I left Canada the only book I could find that seemed worthwhile for field use was, A Bird Book for the Pocket by Edmund Sandars (Oxford, 1935). Designed for use in Great Britain, it was by no means adequate for the continent. Its illustrations also left much to be desired. However, it was better than nothing. Fortunately for me, within two days of my arrival in Paris I found another and better book. Glancing into a bookstore window in the Rue St. Honore' I caught sight of a kestrel on a book cover. Looking more closely, I saw the title Quel est Douc, cet Oiseau? by G. Gotz and A. Kosch (F. Nathan, Paris). It was pocket size and bound around with a bright red band on which was printed the remarkable information -

"Tous les oiseaux de France...Pour identifier instantanément tous les oiseaux de nos contrées...avec cet ouvrage il est impossible de se tromper." (All the birds of France...To identify instantaneously all the birds of our regions...With this work it is impossible to be mistaken)

Charmed by such modesty, I went in and examined the book. To my gratification it proved to be a very useful guidebook. The plates are planned somewhat on the Petersen plan, though the colour reproduction is mediocre. Also, the birds are treated not in the scientific manner of Petersen, but in habitat groups, i.e., birds of the garden, of the woods, etc. Since birds refuse to abide by such categories, in practice it became necessary after in using the book to look through several sections to identify some particular bird. But on the other hand the information on song, calls, habits, range, was all conveniently tabulated on each page opposite the appropriate plates. This book was a great improvement upon the Sandars. In Switzerland I discovered still another guide, this one in two small volumes of pocket size. Like most Swiss publications it was issued both in German and French, but in the store in Interlaken where I found it the proprietress, after diligent search, could offer me only a set made up of one volume in German and one in French. I took it.

The title is, of the German edition, Unsere Vögel by C.A.W. Guggisberg and Robert Hainart (Verlag Hallwag, Bern); of the French edition, Oiseaux by C.A.W. Guggisberg (Librairie Payot, Lausanne). Arranged in a similar way to the book for France so far as habitat grouping is concerned, the information is given in short paragraphs rather than in tables. The coloured plates are excellent. I was now well-provided with guidebooks. The only trouble was that sometimes I identified a bird in German, sometimes in French, sometimes in Latin, and occasionally in English. Not until I returned home was I able to find more complete bird books with whose aid I could discover the scientific Latin equivalents for all the common names in French and German, and then through the Latin at last learn the English names. In a few cases no English names exist. I have given this list of books with the idea that others need not set out upon European birding adventures as ill-equipped with guides as I was. Any bookstore with European connections will be able to procure these books. Since my return, Gregory Clark has kindly brought to my attention another useful British guide, which I add here, How to Know British Birds by Norman H. Joy (H.F.G. Witherby, Ltd., London). This has the advantage of being arranged scientifically. It also has reasonably good plates.

Bird watching on this trip to Europe was full of stirring and exciting experiences. I am tremendously glad to have had these experiences. Nonetheless I am now happy to be home with the birds I know so well. However beautiful or thrilling the birds across the sea were, I always was conscious that it was a procession of strangers that was passing before my eyes. I could never live with them. They must always be exotics to me. One can only truly know the birds, like people, with whom one can live long and closely. Only then can one make friends. I am glad to be at home with friends.

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Introducing the Insect. By F.A. Urquhart, with drawings by E.B.S. Logier, Clarke, Irwin & Co., Toronto, 1949. Pp. x, 287. Price \$5.00.

One of the largest fields of natural history, and at the same time one of the least explored, is the insect world. Hitherto it has been largely the preserve of the trained scientist. Only of recent years have books been appearing adequate to reveal the fascination of this so largely unexplored realm of Nature to the layman. Among such works the writings and photographs of Edwin Way Teale take high rank.

Now comes an introductory guide by Dr. Urquhart, which for simple clarity and usefulness is the best of its kind. Many people have shied away from any effort to study insects for fear of being overwhelmed by the sheer complexity of insect life. Dr. Urquhart has evidently thought long about that particular barrier to popular interest in what he calls "the most fascinating group of animals living on our earth". As a result he has rightly laid stress not only upon simplicity and clarity of style and presentation, but has also devised an ingeniously easy key to the identification of

insects. This key is unquestionably the author's most distinctive accomplishment.

Not only is the pathway to the insect world made broad and easy by Dr. Urquhart's ingenuity and style. His work is ably abetted by Mr. Logier's admirably clear and exact black-and-white illustrations, which are supplemented in the case of the butterflies and moths by four excellent colored plates.

Throughout the work the author is concerned to show the reader that the best introduction to the insect world is to be found in the making of a collection of insects. Consequently careful consideration is given to the methods of collecting, of preparing and storing specimens.

At the end of the volume is a list of general reference works which may be consulted after Dr. Urquhart's attractive guide book has introduced you to this rich province of Nature where the possibilities of exploration are almost endless.

This is a teacher's book and a student's book, but above all a book for all those laymen, those field naturalists who desire to open a door into a great part of the world of nature which has hitherto been closed to them.

Richard M. Saunders,

Editor.