

A SCOTTISH CENTURY

by

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FROM RECENT EXPERIENCE I acknowledge Cheshire to be a good county for bird-watching, but English ornithologists will have to give way to hard facts if they feel that they can publish in *Bird Notes* a bag of only 95 species under the heading of "The Big Day." Of course I sympathize with their elation and their dreams of scoring a century, but I would hasten to assure them that a dream realised is just that much better than a goal for the future. Apart from anything else it makes the now famous art of birdmanship, or holding one's own in ornithological conversation, a much simpler process. And as the first step in claiming our record it would perhaps be as well to point out to our Cheshire friends that we both scored a genuine individual century in the day, and are not cooking the results by presenting the innings score of a whole team. That, of course, is just not cricket, at least not the way we play it in Scotland.

It was Andrew Macmillan who was really the driving factor in the organization of our "big day." Previously I had been satisfied with 85 species in a day in East Anglia in June, 1951, a total which had in fact grown to 102 in a week-end. That had, I felt made my previous pride in 60 or 70 species in a day a thing of the past. But the goal of a century within one day was still a strong lure to the hunting instinct, and on planning out a route through East Lothian and Berwickshire it was soon obvious that there were well over 100 "possibles." Many would clearly entail a deal of luck and good weather to encourage the song but it seemed quite a feasible venture without depending on any of those birds which can really be called rarities.

The day we chose was June the 14th and in fact we saw no rarities at all. But we did manage to hunt down almost all the commoner species on our list. An early Song-Thrush set the ball rolling. Half-a-dozen urban and garden species—Starlings and House Sparrows, a Blackbird, Greenfinches, and a Robin singing—headed the list as we drove out of Edinburgh in a wet grey mist soon after six o'clock in the morning. On the road Yellow Buntings flew in front of the car, Rooks and Lapwings and an occasional Pheasant were obvious in the fields and a covey of Partridges hurtled away over the hedge as we passed. By 7.30 we had covered most of Saltoun woods in East Lothian and had listed many borderline species there—a Chiff-chaff, perhaps the only one breeding in the Lothians, Lesser Redpolls, Long-tailed Tits, a Redstart feeding young, a pair of Bullfinches, a Spotted Flycatcher on its nest, a silent Tawny Owl and a most vociferous Tree-Pipit. The weather was far from ideal, still misty and rather cold with no sun to cheer the birds into song. But Woodpigeons flapped noisily out of the

trees, a Wren scuttled into cover and Whitethroats and Willow Warblers sang intermittently from the thick cover of the self-seeded young birch trees. We spared time to ring the young Redstarts in their hole in the elder bush, two broods of nestling Chaffinches by the path, and a young Lapwing by the roadside.

Noting down a Pied Wagtail and Common Sandpiper by the river with Sand Martins hawking flies under the bridge, we pushed on over the Lammermuir Hills towards Duns. A stop by the Whiteadder Water produced a Grey Wagtail and we were lucky to see a Whinchat on top of a snow-post beside the road. The moors on the way over gave us Meadow-Pipits and Skylarks and a bubbling Curlew, while the Berwickshire woods near Duns and at the Hirsel near Coldstream added most of our expected woodland species—a cock Blackcap and several Garden Warblers, a Goldfinch sitting on eggs, Pied Flycatchers in nestboxes and in natural holes, Tree-Creepers and Goldcrests, and Great, Blue and Coal, and Marsh Tits, the last a lucky find at a 1952 nesting-site and still a very uncommon bird in Scotland. Stock Doves, Mistle Thrushes and Tree-Sparrows were added as a matter of course but we missed several borderline species, the Green Woodpecker and the Turtle-Dove for instance. We were fortunate, however, in seeing a Sparrow-Hawk sailing over the trees, and on the loch in the Hirsel estate, Mallard, Teal, a pair of Shoveler and a lone Wigeon as well as the usual Mute Swans, Coot and Moorhens. A cock Reed-Bunting swayed on a reed stem while an invisible Sedge-Warbler chattered in the undergrowth.

After the Hirsel a quick visit to a nearby wood which contains a heronry found the Herons at home but not the Wood-Warblers which can usually be heard singing there. No time to waste, however, with the halfway mark passed and the coast still to visit with its rich variety of new species. To reach the sea we had to pass through foreign soil from Coldstream to Berwick, but with high disdain and a proud sense of satisfaction we managed to avoid seeing any new birds south of the border. From Berwick to St. Abbs then at Andrew's best speed with one or two stops at likely spots where a few gaps in the list of probables were filled in—Linnets, for instance, and a Hedge-Sparrow, species which seemed to have eluded us mysteriously all day, and a Kestrel hovering over a roadside field. And then at St. Abbs a feast of new names on the cliffs—Razorbills, Guillemots, Kittiwakes and Fulmars dotted about like insects on the ledges far below, a few Puffins in company with Shags and Eider-ducks on the water and a Rock-Pipit dropping like a stone from the cliff-top into the rolling sea mist which seemed to lift just in time for our arrival. On the coast road the odd spaces in the list were steadily being filled in—the Crows and Jackdaws which we felt sure we must have seen already but which honesty had made us leave until they were accurately identified; Wheatears, a Cuckoo, and Red Grouse on higher ground; Common and Black-headed Gulls out feeding in the stubble and the Swifts and Swallows overhead. A quick stop to identify a Corn-Bunting on the telegraph

wires, a chance Great Spotted Woodpecker heard below Pease Dean Bridge and then on to Aberlady Bay for the waders and the sea duck. There Sheld-duck and Common Scoter were respectively a certainty and a pleasant surprise, while Turnstones, Bar-tailed Godwit and Knot as well as the commoner breeding waders such as Ringed Plovers, Snipe, and Redshank put the total up to 86, one above our previous record. With three species of breeding terns, Gannets out to sea, the three other commoner species of gulls and Oystercatchers and Dunlin on the mudflats the numbers crept up as the evening wore on until by eight o'clock we had reached a crisis. Aberlady had been fully covered to the point of exhaustion both of us and its species, and with the House-Martins nesting in the village the total stood at 96. We searched in vain for Roseate or Sandwich Terns, both seen there the day before, but finally we had to set out for Edinburgh and our last resort, Duddington loch with its duck and grebes. Tufted Duck and Pochard, Great Crested and Little Grebes were the last four probables on our list and we knew that they all bred on the loch. We chafed at the 30-mile limit through the suburbs as the light began to go and it was with a flurry of expectation that we finally piled out of the car, dashed across the road and scanned the water over the fence of the sanctuary in the evening light. Yes, the Pochard were there on the open water and nobody could have missed the Great Crested Grebes. Their smaller cousins were more elusive until, with the glasses trained eagerly on a Hoodwink in the form of a rounded stone, the neat outlines of a Little Grebe appeared, disappeared and then reappeared to make the total 99. And then it was spotted amongst the Mallard dabbling at the edge of the reed beds, a drake "Tuftie" with his unmistakable white flanks; and we knew we had scored both a duck and a century.

The lists were checked; and the confirmed total and the hour of 9.30 p.m. seemed to call it a day. But it was a pity not to seal the business with a final addition which was reckoned a certainty at dusk. And so we drove south five miles to Dalkeith and within five seconds of stopping saw a Woodcock roding overhead in exactly the spot where it had been seen performing the same fascinating flight a fortnight before. And now we did call it a day with many common species still unrecorded—the Dipper, Golden Plover, Magpie, Ring-Ousel as well as those sought for and missed in certain places—but with 101 on the list, (count them if you like), many of them seen time and time again of course, and with a great sense of satisfaction to the hunters.

And now England—it's up to you !