

## Notes

increasing awareness of Greenfinches *Carduelis chloris* using the sunflower and niger seed feeders – there is no soft fruit in the garden, and no scraps were provided in the area it frequented – and ten days after first appearing it made an unsuccessful attempt to land on the niger feeder. Its progress in learning to take seed from the feeders was, however, rudely interrupted by frequent visits to the garden by a Eurasian Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus*, and the Lesser Whitethroat subsequently disappeared for several days.

In early December it reappeared, and readily adapted to feeding on remnants on the ground under two peanut feeders which are mostly used by House Sparrows *Passer domesticus*. After a week, I first saw it try to cling onto one of the feeders, and over a subsequent two-week period its skill gradually improved until it pecked at the peanuts hard enough to obtain food. It was extremely timid and would only visit a feeder when no other birds were there, feeding on the ground when the feeders were occupied, and venturing no more than a metre from cover. Water provided in this area was readily taken, but niger seed put on the ground was not. In all situations it was at the bottom of the pecking order, and our resident Dunnock *Prunella modularis* had the rare opportunity to dominate.

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The warbler managed to survive a cold snap in December, when the nearby pond was frozen over for several days; temperatures, however, fell no lower than  $-3^{\circ}\text{C}$  and the wind-chill from strong easterly winds was perhaps a more serious test. The winter proved to be colder than those of recent years and another cold spell, at the end of January, brought a light covering of snow, which did not deter the warbler from trying to feed on the ground. Until the end of February, its visits to the garden were unpredictable, and it was often absent for several days. It did not appear to be wholly dependent on peanuts at that time, and after feeding it often flew off strongly out of sight; but from March onwards it was feeding on the peanuts in the garden several times a day on most days. During the last few days of its stay it forsook the peanut feeders and hunted for food in the shrubs and trees.

### Acknowledgments

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### References

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210. Three Red-billed Choughs *Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax* at nest 'cave' in Canary Pine *Pinus canariensis* tree near El Paso, La Palma, Canary Islands, May 1999.

## Notes

**Tree-breeding Red-billed Choughs on La Palma**

In 1998 and 1999, a pair of Red-billed Choughs *Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax* nested in a Canary Pine *Pinus canariensis* tree near El Paso, La Palma, Canary Islands (plates 210 & 211). At the beginning of the 1998 breeding season, the nest was occupied by Common Kestrels *Falco tinnunculus*, but the choughs subsequently drove the kestrels away (fresh Common Kestrel eggshells were found under the tree). The nest-site was essentially a 'cave' excavated in a large heap of pine needles which had lodged in a fork of the tree after being shed. Similar 'heaps' of needles occur commonly in Canary Pines on the island. I can find no evidence in the literature for tree-breeding Red-billed Choughs.

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211. Nest-site of Red-billed Choughs *Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax* in a Canary Pine *Pinus canariensis* tree near El Paso, La Palma, Canary Islands, May 1999.



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**Some observations on the foraging behaviour of Red-billed Choughs on La Palma, Canary Islands**

As a result of detailed studies of Red-billed Choughs *Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax* on La Palma, Canary Islands, I suggest that many published observations of 'unusual' foraging behaviour are, in fact, not exceptional. It seems that harvesting caterpillars in pinewoods, as recorded by T. Piersma and N. Bloksma (*Bird Study* 34: 127-128), is not an activity that occurs in 'plague' years only, while feeding on top of Bell Heather *Erica cinerea* and Western Gorse *Ulex gallii*, reported by P. Smiddy (*Brit. Birds* 79: 251-252), does not indicate food shortage. I observed these behaviours almost daily during the breeding seasons of 1998 and 1999; neither year was an insect plague year nor was there any obvious food shortage. Furthermore, during April to June it was common to see Red-billed Choughs feeding on larvae at carcasses (goats, pigs and dogs in particular), as reported by

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R. Dowson in Scotland (*Brit. Birds* 68: 159-160). Rubbish tips were also very common places to see choughs foraging (cf. Haycock & Bullock, *Brit. Birds* 75: 91-92). All of these represent normal behavioural skills of the Red-billed Choughs on La Palma. Indeed, these birds show a range of foraging behaviours commonly shown by other members of the Corvidae (Western Jackdaw *Corvus monedula*, Carrion Crow *C. corone*, Rook *C. frugilegus* and Magpie *Pica pica*) in Europe and even that of woodpeckers (Picidae) – which do not occur on La Palma; when exploring the tree bark of pine *Pinus* trees (see plates 212 & 213), Red-billed Choughs use their tail in the same way as woodpeckers, pressing it against the bark for support, and bark fragments below many trees indicate the common use of this foraging technique.

## Notes



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**212 & 213.** Red-billed Cough *Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax* feeding on pine *Pinus* tree in 'woodpecker mode', La Palma, Canary Islands, April 1999 (left); and a close-up of the tree's bark once the cough had moved on.

### *Rook attempting to seize House Martin in flight*

On 9th September 2003, at West Bagborough, Somerset, I saw a small flock of about 20 Rooks *Corvus frugilegus* circling above a copse at a height of about 60 m, while a few House Martins *Delichon urbicum* were flying and feeding nearby. Suddenly, one of the Rooks detached itself from the group and flew speedily towards one of the House Martins, approaching obliquely from above. Contact between the two was made, with the Rook evidently attempting

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to grasp the House Martin with its feet; the pair grappled with each other for fully ten seconds before the House Martin managed to free itself, to fly off apparently unharmed.

Rooks will kill small birds or mammals on the ground, especially if they are injured. It must, however, be unusual for a Rook to attempt to seize an apparently healthy small bird in flight.

### *Common Chaffinch collecting silk*

One day in May 2003, at Rostherne Mere NNR, Cheshire, I watched a female Common Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs* alight on the top rail of a five-barred gate on the reserve. The bird then dropped to the second rail, and proceeded to the corner, where there was a spider's web. The Chaffinch began to tug at the web, which repeatedly sprung back, and after several

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attempts the bird abandoned that approach. To my amazement, the Chaffinch then flew through the web, landed, and then collected the silk from its 'shoulders'. This was repeated twice more, from the third and fourth bars of the gate, before the bird flew off, presumably with a lucrative parcel with which to continue nest-building.