

Books For Banders

"SOMETHING OLD AND SOMETHING NEW"

Edited By Mabel Gillespie

We started the year with a survey of Margaret Morse Nice's *Life History of the Song Sparrow*. It is time to get back to the topic of the year and consider more life history studies of birds. There's a British ornithologist, R. M. Lockley, who has made fascinating studies of sea birds. In collaboration with James Fisher he wrote a book with that very title which I heartily recommend. In fact, Mr. Lockley has written prolifically, mostly about birds, though his output includes a biography of Gilbert White and several novels.

The two books of his which are life histories, even though they might be classed as books on behavior (Well, wouldn't life histories inevitably deal with behavior?), are titled simply "Shearwaters" and "Puffins." Recently they have been made available in paper-back editions as offerings of the Natural History Library, Anchor Books, Doubleday & Company, Inc., published in cooperation with the American Museum of Natural History. They retail at \$1.25 each.

Probably less than one tenth of one percent of North American bird banders will ever get a chance to band individual birds of either genus mentioned, but that doesn't mean that the remaining majority can afford to by-pass these books. In the first place they are models of what a life history study should be. Secondly, they deal with most unusual and fascinating observations. Furthermore, Lockley's style of writing is so appealing and persuasive that these books would be enjoyed by anyone, whether or not he is interested in avian study.

Listen to this description: "On dark nights in the spring and summer the shearwaters appeared, coming out from their holes in the ground and joining together in a bedlam of weird screaming. There seemed at first no intelligence in that wild howling - it was the crying of insane spirits wandering without aim or restraint over the rough rocks and the bare pasture.... The Manx shearwater, then, was to me little more than a strange nocturnal noise, as strange and mysterious as the cuckoo's wandering voice was to the earliest naturalists. By day I could see those dried-up skins, and if I chose to go out with a torch at night, I could discern the black and white forms scuttling about the holes and warrens inside which the single egg would be laid and the chick hatched and reared." "By day, however, the shearwaters were at sea, and the oyster-catchers stood on the rocks by the edge of the tide, their carmine legs like stilts, their blood-orange bills thrust in their

scapulars, their vermilion irides hidden in sleep; their demeanor suggesting that they knew nothing of the outrageous skirmishing which the island meadow had witnessed in the night." It is hard to stop quoting. The fascinating descriptions go on and on, approximating sheer poetry at times.

Mr. Lockley started farming in 1920 at the age of seventeen. Seven years later he leased Skokholm Island off the coast of Wales, and fished and raised sheep. And observed the wild life about him, particularly the Manx shearwaters which nested there by thousands. Later he helped to set up the first British Bird Observatory on Skokholm.

When a female shearwater arrived on Skokholm on February second, but the Handbook of British Birds claimed that the breeding period was from early May to the first half of June, and stated that the incubation period was unknown but was probably about a month in duration, Lockley was off on his investigations. He kept close watch on the schedules of a few conveniently located pairs and was able to identify them by means of bands. He also arranged the turf above the burrow so that it could be lifted, enabling him to see what was going on inside. He discovered that the egg is incubated for fifty-two days or thereabouts, and that it takes the fledgling over ten weeks to develop to the age of independent life.

When it came to studying age and migration, Lockley was handicapped by the fact that few shearwaters had been banded. Now hear this, American banders! "It remained therefore to ring shearwaters in the largest possible numbers. This I began to do in 1933. Rings, however, are an expensive item, costing three-farthings each, or six shillings a hundred. It is, I am told, the stamping of the inscription and the cost of keeping records and dealing with the correspondence arising out of recoveries both at home and abroad, that makes the rings so expensive. I wished, but could not afford, to ring thousands of shearwaters. Others fortunately came forward, men and women eager to see our shearwaters and to ring them personally, and it has lately been possible to mark in this way three to four thousand shearwaters every year at Skokholm."

Since reading this amazing paragraph I have made inquiries and find that the British "ringer" still pays for every band he uses. Aren't we thankful to be banders and not ringers! We are in full accord with this statement of the author: "Ringing, ringing, and more ringing - that is the only way in which we shall understand the individual bird and its wonderful life history."

There are pertinent observations of the bird's "acute time sense," and details about the abandonment of the fully grown chick by its parents and its subsequent trek to the sea. Most fascinating are descriptions of banding experiments. Birds were taken to the Faroe Islands and released, and vice versa. Shearwaters were taken to the Bay of Biscay and into the

Mediterranean as far as Venice and released. There were a few returns. Finally Mr. Lockley and his wife went to islands off Portugal and to the Canary Islands, observing shearwaters wherever they went.

Twenty years after Mr. Lockley's first occupancy of Skokholm Island and the start of his study of shearwaters, he is on Skomer Island, South Wales, studying puffins. "No signal has been given, except that of the internal rhythm or physiological clock which informs every bird of the time of day, and month, with the regularity of the most perfect time-keeping piece made by man. No visible message has been flying from general headquarters of the winter puffinries, yet without fail they advance on the land at the immemorial day and hour. No royal decree of a Puffin Grand Council has gone forth, although older naturalists were inclined to give credence to the idea that such gregarious birds must be ruled by a prince or king who issued some telepathic communication directing the seasonal movements."

This I particularly like: "The more we study the higher forms of warm-blooded creatures the more human they reveal themselves to be, and therefore, the less we find ourselves accepting them, fashionable as it may be among research workers today, as automatons. We need to remember that humans though we be, many of our reactions are animal and instinctive. Perhaps if we gave the animal the benefit of the doubt occasionally and permitted it a little simple reasoning we should understand its ways more easily?"

"There is no doubt that the puffin, underground and often far from the daylight, has a nice sense of time, which enables it to come out and enjoy the assembly at a fairly regular hour in the afternoon." In the first mentioned book about shearwaters we note that: "deep down in the winding burrows even strong daylight cannot penetrate, yet the hidden shearwater seems conscious enough of the day. It seems to have an acute time sense."

The titles of chapters are intriguing: "The Mind of a Bird," "The Winter Ocean," "Rafts Inshore," "Flirtage Nauticue," "The Love Birds," "The Social Round," "Midsummer Nights and Days," "Expectation of Life," and others.

Lockley used a tent in which he made detailed notes on the activities of a special pair of puffins. At one time the male "must find some way of relieving his recreated energy, some useful task or some substitute activity as an emotional outlet." Then the bird's actions are described in detail. "So much of his behavior was amusingly human....His face, to the watcher in the tent, had that fatuous appearance which a man's sometimes assumes when he is doing nothing with great importance."

"I tried out a few simple oral tests. Soft whistlings, nose-sniffing, scratching of boots together, they ignored. Increasing my voice to about

normal conversational pitch, I recited poetry. This made puffins within four feet of the tent cock their heads sideways like dogs, listen, and walk a few steps uneasily, some towards me, most of them away. But they were not seriously alarmed at Shakespeare, Robert Louis Stevenson, or W. B. Yeats. In a few minutes they were definitely bored, and paid no further heed to the monotonous recital, which mingled with the gentle song of the sea on the rocks below." This reminds me of the time my husband and I tried out classical music on a starling.

As I flip through the pages of the puffin book, I note passage after passage marked to share with you. It can't be done, not at this sitting. Therefore, I recommend anything that Lockley has written, but particularly "Shearwaters" and "Puffins" to your consideration. They are perfect for summer hammock reading.

- Mabel Gillespie

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GOLDEN SPARROW

By Constance R. Katholi

In response to a recent call for identification of an unusual bird, three of us observed at length a female English Sparrow which was setting up housekeeping in a sparrow apartment in a rural garden in the company of many of the same species. Seemingly no "rare-bird-alert" here, except that the bird is an albino--with an added dash of zooxanthin.

She gives the impression of being an exotic escapee from an aviary, a suntanned blond from a tropical clime. She is more gold than white, a tawny-orange on the head, lightening down the back to a white rump and tail; and on the wings, to white primaries. The underparts are a dull white. The eye is dark, and the bill is pink, which, together with the "rusty" head and "blank" cheek, is strongly suggestive of a Field Sparrow. The legs and feet are a striking orange.

As she hopped in and out of the doorway and along the porch and roof, fluttering back and forth to the ground, flashing her warm color against the dreary winter landscape, she seemed more like a lost parakeet than a member of the mundane species to which she belongs.

