

Bird Cameos from our Local Sanctuaries

Interesting Incidents that Come the Way of the Nature Lover

By ERIC HARDY, F.Z.S.

ONE morning this October I was hurrying into town when I thought I could just squeeze in enough time to pass through St. James' Cemetery, where we have our little Cathedral Bird Sanctuary, the only Cathedral bird sanctuary in the world, and the only one in the heart of city slumland eight miles from the open countryside. The little sanctuary is a regular 'beat' of mine, and yet I must have gone through the cemetery fifty times just before this day without seeing anything unusual. However, no sooner was I in the cemetery than I espied a thrush-like bird perched on the top of a distant tombstone. I moved towards it, but immediately the bird flew off to another tombstone across the pathway, and as it flew, the white feathers of its rump and tail flashed prominently in the light. A wheatear! This typical harbinger of spring and summer on our sandy Ainsdale landscape or the golf courses at Bidston, Leasowe and Hoylake, was visiting the very heart of Liverpool on its migration south to its winter quarters in North Africa.

That is one of the values of our little bird sanctuary in St. James' Cemetery—attracting and feeding the many migrants from lonely countryside that pass over the centre of Liverpool. Here I have watched goldcrests, birds of the big pinewoods of Ainsdale, Wales and Scotland, cole-tits, so numerous in the trees at Knowsley, grey wagtails, so typical of the Hodder and other mountain streams, and large winter flocks of greenfinches, chaffinches and linnets. But the bird sanctuary provides other than a catalogue of rare birds: those fascinating little cameos of birdlife are an ever-occurring pleasure to the bird watcher. One afternoon I stood watching a great tit making its methodical inspection of the holes between the great stones of the wall, for a nesting place. Hole after hole it inspected and apparently found unsuitable, for it passed on. Suddenly it found what must have been its ideal nesting-hole. Unfortunately, however, the great tit was too big for its chosen abode. Yet it persisted with its decision and pushed and kicked, fluttered and scolded harshly in its efforts to get inside the crevice between the great slabs of sandstone. At last it did get inside, but having got in, found it could not get out,

and the fuss it created was amazing! However, I rescued it, and it had the sense to seek another nesting place.

Mr. Parkinson, the keeper of the sanctuary, and I have taken particular pains to get the birds to appreciate the nesting boxes rather than the holes in the wall. Mr. Parkinson patiently hollowed the stump of an old elder, and building a nest-box, fixed it inside and then carefully lined the box with straw and grasses to attract the birds. A few days later the nest-box was empty: a pair of birds had found it and carried all the nest-material out and built a nest of their own with it in the wall!

Much bigger, of course, is the great sea-bird sanctuary on the Ainsdale-Freshfield dunes. Here in September we were sheltering in the watcher's hut from a continuous downpour of rain, within neither sight nor sound of any bird. Suddenly, in the midst of the rain and the dark dank sky above, a skylark rose soaring and singing into the air over the dunes, where it carolled round for a few seconds before sinking as suddenly as it rose. On the same sanctuary last winter I was bird-watching with a local ornithologist, Mr. C. J. Buchan, when we counted twenty oiled sea-duck on the dunes and the tide-line. In one of the Freshfield slacks we came upon a scoter or black duck (a sea-duck visitor from Iceland and the North), swimming around but unable to lift itself into the air owing to oiled wings. So my friend decided to photograph it. As patiently as he stalked the scoter in the slack, it swam steadily away: suddenly it would dive and swim under the water at lightning speed and bob up somewhere else, and this occurred every time we came within six feet of it. However, a few minutes later on the shore we came upon another oiled scoter which merely swam over a pool and waddled up the sand to sit down before us and allow us to pick it up and stroke it! No better example of the different temperaments and trustings we experience with birds of even the same species could be expected.

I suppose the sight of a dashing peregrine chasing the teal duck on the slacks of Freshfield dunes or the buzzard swooping after rabbits or beating up and down the pinewoods for wood-pigeons, appeals as a "bird cameo" to many



watchers, but personally I prefer to see the gulls collect together and mob the big hawks till they chase them off the sanctuary, just as the thrushes will mob the tawny owls that come too early out of the pinewoods. In the summer I have watched the terns and the black-headed gulls of the sanctuary soaring and sweeping backwards and forwards through a haze of dancing gnats, feeding on these aerial insects, though the nature books do not mention such good work; the books also make no mention of the kingfisher feeding likewise on the gnats, a performance I have often watched inland. One autumn afternoon—and it is in autumn that the kingfishers migrate from the inland waters to the coastal salt marshes—a local wildfowler in his punt off

afternoon three years ago I saw a pure white (or albino) house-sparrow rise up from a flock of finches feeding on bread crumbs below a hawthorn tree. One often sees sparrows with odd white feathers in wing or tail—they are frequently in my garden at Wavertree—but pure white or albino sparrows are much rarer. In 1930 I saw two in Smithdown Road Cemetery, and this year there was one at the Walton Sewage Farm. There used to be a few fawn or sandy-coloured song thrushes in Sefton Park, and the other year I saw one in the bird sanctuary in St. James' Cemetery; we have also seen pure white swallows, blackbirds and starlings in our city parks (which are all bird sanctuaries by bye-law) but they are much rarer

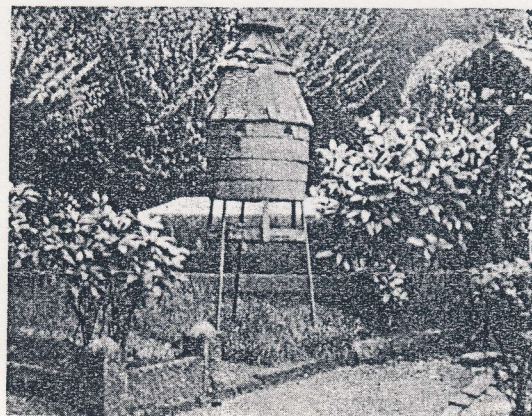


[Photo: Mr. G. Parr.]

Corner of the Bird Sanctuary, St. James's Cemetery. Nesting boxes and drinking fountain. Mr. Parkinson, Keeper, alongside. He feeds the birds each morning.

Formby Point had a kingfisher alight on his gun and another on the bow of his punt. "I never saw a more beautiful sight," he told me a few days later, "and I would not have harmed them for the world." When wildfowlers talk like that, we can really say the spirit of the bird sanctuary is having its good effects, for what is the use of carrying out propaganda to people who are already convinced?

There is, of course, a little bird sanctuary on the island of Princes Park Lake, where the dabchick dive amongst the water lilies and sometimes of a winter's morning you may see odd tufted duck, pochard or, as a friend once noticed, a scaup duck. But the island sanctuary itself is frequented by nothing more than the usual thrushes, blackbirds, robins, wrens, titmice, chaffinches, and hedge-sparrows. I have never seen anything unusual happen there, though one



[Photo: Mr. G. Parr.]

Nesting box, St. James's Cemetery.

than the pied specimens met with every year in the case of the cock blackbird.

Since shooting has been prohibited at Hilbre Island and the Marine Lake at West Kirby, these two may be considered bird sanctuaries. At the former one afternoon this October, despite adverse conditions of wind and my being late for the retreating tide, so that I found birdlife not nearly so concentrated as usual, I counted 1,776 birds of 16 species, namely: 615 oyster-catchers, 449 knot, 296 herring-gulls, 102 redshank, 51 turnstone, 41 black-headed gulls, 32 dunlin, 25 greater black-backed gulls, 22 ringed plovers, 19 common gulls, 19 curlew, 9 cormorants, 4 lesser black-headed gulls, 1 scoter and 1 pipit, while a few days before a friend had seen a stand of 1,000 curlew there. Here on Hilbre you can see the herring-gulls time and time again rise with the cockles in their beaks, then drop them from a height on to the hard sandstone and, swooping down, gobble up the fleshy contents of the thus broken shell their beaks alone could not manage.