

Notes

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Morph ratio of Eleonora's Falcons in Sicily

The Eleonora's Falcon *Falco eleonora* is a long-distance migrant whose breeding range is concentrated in the Mediterranean, with some colonies on the Atlantic coast of Morocco. The species has a light and a dark morph in both juvenile and adult plumages, although the existence of an intermediate morph (as reported in some field guides, e.g. Clark 1999) is questioned (Ristow *et al.* 1998, 2000; Forsman 1999; Conzemius 2000). In this note, we examine the morph ratio at Sicilian breeding colonies.

We surveyed all the colonies located in the Aeolian Islands, north of Sicily (Panarea, Salina, Alicudi and Filicudi), and the Pelagie Islands, south of Sicily, between Malta and Tunisia (Lampedusa Island), making up to 15 visits per breeding season during 1998–2007. On each visit, we recorded the total number of birds and their colour morph whenever possible, using the classes suggested by Ristow *et al.* (1998, 2000). To calculate the ratio of colour morphs, we considered only the maximum number of adult/second-calendar-year (2CY) birds seen simultaneously at each colony on each visit, apart from at sites where known breeding pairs were identified individually. We did not keep a complete record of the colour morph of fledged juveniles, but we did record the homozygous dark morph (DD – see Ristow *et al.* 2000).

On average, we recorded between 20% and 25% dark-morph adult/2CY birds during the ten-year study period at Sicilian colonies, though up to 35% in some colonies (for example at Alicudi and Lampedusa). The proportion of dark morphs varied at the same colony from year to year, in general by 5–10%. In total, the homozygous dark morph accounted for 1.5–2.0% of fledged juveniles seen, with a maximum of 3.0% at Lampedusa in 2007. This plumage type was thus extremely rare.

In comparison with that in other parts of the breeding range, the morph ratio in Sicilian colonies appears closer to that of eastern colonies than western ones. In Cyprus and Crete, dark morphs accounted for 25–30% of the population, while in Sardinia, Morocco and

the Columbretes Islands (Spain) the figure was 13–18% (Ristow *et al.* 1989, 1998). Other studies have reported the following ratios of dark-morph birds: 4.5% for Salé (Morocco) (Walter & Deetjen 1967); 40% in the Balearic Islands (Majol 1977); 3.1% for the Columbretes Islands (Dolz & Dies 1987); 9–15% for San Pietro island (Sardinia) (Spina 1992); and 21% in coastal Tuscany (Giovacchini & Celletti 1997).

During migration studies at the Strait of Messina in April–May, the proportion of dark birds was 33% in 1997 (n=21), 29% in 1998 (n=24) and 33% in 1999 (n=24) (Corso 2001, 2005, in prep.). The birds migrating over Messina surely belong predominantly to the Aeolian colonies and the morph ratio is similar to that recorded in this archipelago.

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Corn Crake pair-bonding and nesting behaviour

The courtship and nesting behaviour of the Corn Crake *Crex crex* is difficult to observe in the wild owing to the shy nature of the species and the nature of its breeding habitat. I have worked closely with a captive population for three years and in that time the Zoological Society of London's Whipsnade Zoo has bred over 250 Corn Crakes for release on the Nene Washes, Cambridgeshire, in partnership with RSPB, Natural England and Pensthorpe Conservation Trust. In the wild, the male calls with its well-known rasping song to defend a small territory and attract a female. In captivity, we mimic the same situation by giving each male his own enclosure, from which he calls. When a female is ready to breed, we introduce her to the male's enclosure. There is no guarantee that the female will accept the male but we have noted two specific calls that the male makes to the female which appear to indicate that a pair bond has been formed successfully (see below). Whenever either of these calls has been heard, the pair has gone on to produce fertile eggs.

Observations in captivity have shown that the male will make a number of nests for the female to choose from. The nests vary in quality from male to male but the better nest makers always seem to pair with females easily. Some males build their nests before a female is introduced, some wait until a female joins them in the enclosure. The standard nest is built by

first making a scrape in the ground and then swirling grass and other vegetation into a cup shape around the scrape, using the feet to scrape and the bill to swirl the grass. BWP states that nest-building is 'probably by the female only' and I am not aware of any subsequent published accounts that make clear that this activity is undertaken solely by the male.

The female has to be interested in the male before she will inspect the nests he has built. To attract the female, the male initially makes a deep, chesty boom followed immediately by a



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121. Nest of captive Corn Crake *Crex crex*, Whipsnade Zoo, Bedfordshire, May 2005.

higher-pitched call. A second call, which is a short sound of medium pitch, appears to be used initially to attract the female to the prepared nests so that she can select a nest for laying. It is then heard continually during the period when the female is laying.

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A procession by a Common Snipe and its chicks

It is not usually easy to see how Common Snipe *Gallinago gallinago* deal with their young, since in Britain they are shy and usually stay in thick cover. On 9th July 1983, I was sitting in the schoolhouse on the island of Grimsay, on the Arctic Circle, looking out of the window during the course of a conference in Iceland. The ground outside was flat with scattered ground

herbage, and a crouched adult Snipe crept across it, just a few metres from the building, followed closely by three well-grown (crouching) chicks, all in line, rather like a strange snake. I have met many other chicks of ground-nesting birds, but do not remember seeing or learning of any of them behaving like this; perhaps it helps the birds to keep in touch in thick vegetation?

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Great Black-backed Gull killing rival and stealing mate

In March 2006, a pair of Great Black-backed Gulls *Larus marinus* began nesting on a small gravel island at Leighton Moss RSPB reserve, Lancashire, and successfully reared three young. The male (sexed on behaviour) bore a metal ring, and what was presumably the same pair nested successfully in 2007 and again reared three young.

In March 2008, the pair returned for a third year and began nest-building. On the morning of 7th April 2008, a third (unringed) Great Black-backed Gull landed on the island and proceeded to attack the ringed gull. For over two hours the two birds fought ferociously, the intruder eventually gaining the upper hand by pounding the head of its rival with its bill and dragging the gull into the water, where it eventually died. Throughout the attack the mate of the ringed bird stood apart from the combatants and made no attempt to intervene. The only injury that the victorious intruder

showed was a slight drooping of one wing, which was not evident the next day. On 8th April, the successful male was observed courtship-feeding the female with a small fish; the two gulls subsequently paired and reared three young.

The dead gull was recovered on 8th April and examined. The head and upper neck were covered in blood and almost completely lacking feathers, the back of the skull was fully exposed and one eye was missing. It had been ringed as a nestling at South Walney, Cumbria, 30 km west of Leighton Moss, on 27th June 1999.

We presume that both of the combatants were males, and that the same three birds were observed throughout. Observers who witnessed the attack initially assumed that the resident pair had killed a marauding intruder, but this was later proven to be the wrong interpretation when the significance of the ring was noted by later observers.

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Red-rumped Swallow nesting in sea cave

On 18th July 2005, I discovered a pair of Red-rumped Swallows *Cecropis daurica* nesting in a sea cave on the southwest coast of Sardinia, Italy. The cave was situated in a southwest-facing inlet, some 300 m long and 100 m wide, the slopes of the inlet being clad predominantly in Mediterranean maquis. The cave was located at the base of the northwest-facing slope of the inlet, and was around 3.5 m wide and 5 m high at the entrance, and 12–13 m long. The nest was sited about 4 m from the entrance, and 1.8 m

above the floor of the cave, which was usually dry at this point. I visited the nest until 23rd July, when it contained at least two chicks; the adults were able to feed the young without leaving the inlet. Two pairs of Barn Swallows *Hirundo rustica* were nesting in an adjacent sea cave.

According to BWP and Turner & Rose (1989), Red-rumped Swallows nest in a variety of situations, including cracks, holes or caves in rock faces or walls, but I can find no published record of this species nesting in sea caves

(although nesting on sea cliffs in Cyprus is described in *BWP*). In much of western Europe, the species seems to choose bridges and buildings (even if occupied) with increasing frequency as a nest-site, in preference to natural rocky environments (Martí & Del Moral 2003).

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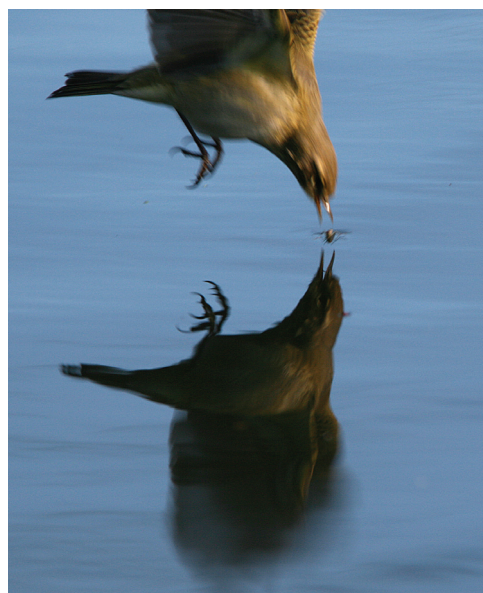
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Common Chiffchaffs and whirligig beetles

In early spring, a favourite feeding spot for newly arrived Common Chiffchaffs *Phylloscopus collybita* is a reasonably sized pond (about 400 m²) on my property in Kent; even during inclement weather, insects flying above the water can be found easily by the birds. Chiffchaffs are regular visitors here and can be observed at close quarters as they dart out from overhanging branches to take insects on the wing. On 24th March 2008, a particularly cold day, I noticed two Chiffchaffs feeding at the level of the water's surface. I assumed initially that the birds were after very low-flying insects but, as plate 122 shows, they were actually picking whirligig beetles (Gyrinidae) out of the water. In subsequent days, as the air temperatures gradually rose and flying insects appeared once more, the Chiffchaffs reverted to more normal behaviour, once again taking insects on the wing.

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122. Common Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita* taking whirligig beetle, Kent, March 2008.

EDITORIAL COMMENT A note describing a Common Chiffchaff taking insects from water in this fashion has been recorded before in *BB* (*Brit. Birds* 51: 309, another observation from Kent, this time during early April snowfall in 1958), but it is interesting to see photographic documentation of the feeding behaviour described here.

Eurasian Jay catching a Blue Tit in mid-air

The note about a Eurasian Jay *Garrulus glandarius* killing an adult Common Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs* and a Greenfinch *Carduelis chloris* (*Brit. Birds* 101: 385) recalled an incident on 15th June 2008 in Lathkill Dale, Peak District. My son and I heard a chorus of alarm calls and noticed a Jay and a family party of Blue

Tits *Cyanistes caeruleus* in a small birch *Betula* tree. One of the young tits flew away from the tree, into the open and was followed closely by the Jay. As the Blue Tit approached the next tree, the Jay caught it in mid-air and flew away carrying the tit in its bill.

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