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MIGRATION OFF THE WEST COAST OF AFRICA IN MARCH 1965

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In view of the report by Hopson et al. (Bull. Nig. Orn. Soc. 2 No. 6 (1965): 49-51) of birds seen on a voyage from Liverpool to Lagos in September, 1964, the following observations made on a similar voyage made during the early part of the northward Palaearctic migration period in March 1965 may be of interest. These observations (from the m.v. Aureol) covered the 10-day period from 13th to 22nd March inclusive. The route approximated to that given by Hopson though Bathurst was bypassed and stops were made at Las Palmas and Monrovia. The approximate latitude position of the ship at noon is included in each day's log.

March 12th Left Liverpool after dusk.

March 13th Noon latitude about 50° N. Lesser Black-backed Gulls Larus fuscus and Herring Gulls L. argentatus followed the ship throughout the day. Kittiwakes Rissa tridactyla, Gannets Sula bassana, Guillemots/Razorbills Uria aalge/Alca torda, Great Skuas Stercorarius skua and Arctic Skuas S. parasiticus were seen at intervals, though none in large numbers. A pipit Anthus sp. appeared at 1000 hrs. and followed the ship in fog for 20 minutes. March 14th - in fog for much of the day.

March 15th Noon latitude about 38° N. Weather still foggy. Occasional Arctic and Pomarine Skuas S. pomarinus.

March 16th Noon latitude about 32° N. Entered clear weather by 0800 hrs. Storm petrels (?Wilson's Petrel Oceanites oceanicus) and Cory's Shearwaters Procellaria diomedea common from dawn onwards; two White-faced Petrels Pelagodroma marina; occasional Arctic and Pomarine Skuas; small groups of Puffins Fratercula arctica at frequent intervals, swimming northwards.

March 17th Docked at Las Palmas at dawn and left at 1400 hrs. Herring Gulls (yellow-legged race) common in the harbour; a few Lesser Black-backed Gulls and Black-headed Gulls Larus ridibundus. Thirty Little Egrets Egretta garzetta were seen sitting on rocks 200 yards off the beach. A solitary Phylloscopus warbler P. trochilus/collybita was seen in a town garden.

March 18th Noon latitude about 22° N. Weather fine; wind NE, fresh. Groups of Grey Phalaropes Phalaropus fulicarius, two to eight per group, were first seen at 0730 and thereafter at five to fifteen minute intervals throughout the day (observations ceased at 1900 hrs). Most birds were swimming and took flight as the ship approached. Several immature Gannets present round the ship throughout the day; one Lesser Black-backed Gull; one Sandwich Tern Sterna sandvicensis; one Great Skua; occasional Pomarine Skuas and storm petrels (two species ?Oceanites

oceanicus and ?Oceanodroma castro). Two White Wagtails Motacilla alba on board at 0940; a lark flying on a NE heading and a flock of 10 more at 1135 hrs (species not identified); a Bluethroat Cyanosylvia svecica on board at 1600 hrs; a Squacco Heron Ardeola ralloides flying on a NE heading at 1612 hrs.

March 19th Noon latitude about 16° N. Weather fine; wind NE, fresh. Small groups of Grey Phalaropes encountered throughout the day, as on the previous day. A Woodchat Shrike Lanius senator, hitherto unnoticed, left the ship at 0810 hrs and flew off NE; a Wryneck Jynx torquilla on board, exhausted, and remained with the ship until 1600 hrs. A Barn Swallow Hirundo rustica appeared at 0820 hrs and flew round the ship for the rest of the day; a pipit flew past on a NE heading at 0920 hrs and a Marsh Harrier Circus aeruginosus passed also on a NE heading at 1150 hrs. A Redstart Phoenicurus phoenicurus was on board at 1605 hrs. Occasional Pomarine Skuas and storm petrels (?oceanicus and ?castro).

March 20th Noon latitude about 10° N. Weather fine, wind S-SE, light. Groups of Grey Phalaropes encountered throughout the day, and a raft of one hundred and fifty birds passed at 1500 hrs. Pomarine Skuas frequent; three Cory's Shearwaters; one Great Shearwater Procellaria gravis; occasional Wilson's Petrels.

March 21st Docked at Freetown at dawn; left at 1400 hrs. Six to eight Grey-headed Gulls Larus cirrhocephalus around the anchorage. Black Terns Chlidonias nigra abundant in the harbour area and in the estuary.

March 22nd Docked at Monrovia at dawn; left at 1035 hrs. Black Terns abundant in the harbour. At sea occasional Cory's Shearwaters; frequent Pomarine Skuas (thirty in the wake of the ship at dusk). Four Grey Phalaropes were seen between 1700 and 1800 hrs.

March 23rd and 24th No observations. Arrived Apapa March 25th.

The Grey Phalarope was encountered more or less continuously along a 1,500 mile line from approximately 23° N. to approximately 5° N, i.e. from the Tropic to the latitude of Cape Palmas. The greatest concentration occurred between 23° N. and 9° N. Alexander (1955) in fact cites West African coastal waters as a major wintering ground of this Arctic breeding species in the Atlantic. These waters are influenced by the Canaries Current which flows down the North-West coast of Africa to feed the Northern Equatorial Current at about the 'point of the bulge', and its subsidiary the Guinea Current which continues East round the bulge.

These coastal currents bring in relatively colder water from higher latitudes and there is also some local upwelling of colder water from the deeper layers of the ocean (Sverdrup, Johnson and

and Fleming, 1946). Both cold water sources carry a relatively high concentration of nutrients with the result that surface waters in this area support a marine fauna richer than that found in the open ocean at comparable latitudes. Food supply restricts the distribution of birds at sea just as effectively as it does on land and, in fact, for much of the year phalaropes are entirely pelagic, relying solely on a planktonic food supply. It is this localised abundance of food which accounts for the concentration of wintering birds described above, at latitudes in which pelagic birds are normally few and far between. Wynne-Edwards summarises information on phalarope wintering grounds (1964).

References

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