

AN AUTUMN BIRD-RINGING TRIP

J. M. B. KING

For the last ten years or so I have visited a small island in the Orkneys (North Ronaldsay, slightly larger than Lundy), in the autumn to trap and ring migrant birds. This island has had very little ringing coverage in the past, but in the last couple of years due to some keen ringers moving into Orkney much more interest has been taken; at the same time it has become very expensive to travel up from Bath, where I live. So when I heard that Lundy no longer had a resident qualified ringer and needed some visiting coverage, it seemed a very good idea to go there instead.

Although I had all the usual information sheets and further details from Tony Taylor and Richard Campey as to equipment available and possible migrants during the period, I could obviously not know exactly what conditions would be like for trapping until I could see for myself. I knew that most things were there, such as rings, nets and poles; but I took my own balances and ringing pliers (which LFS does not have) and also a few of my own mist nets, which was a good thing, as under the conditions prevailing I found I could work with a very large footage of netting set.

To fit in with my work commitments I had to fix my trip for three weeks from 27th September (this is in any case a good period for migration); this meant that I had to drive down to Ilfracombe and go over on the Polar Bear, as there are few sailings from Bristol or nearby this late. My first impression of the island on landing was of a seemingly interminable climb to the top! However, after working in Millcombe valley for a few days I soon got used to these ups and downs. I stayed in the Old Light, and this was fairly convenient: I could visit the heligoland traps at Quarter Wall and the Terraces early on and then decide what to do with the day after that.

Tony Taylor had left a sketch map showing suggested net sites and Richard expanded on these, so I was not starting completely from scratch. At first I thought there was little scope for nets as the wind was fairly strong and easterly and this seemed to make for difficulties in Millcombe, so I did not set many nets there to start with. Later I did well there, and in the light of further experience I think some sites might be workable even in these conditions. In any case the passage of small migrants was light apart from good numbers of Swallows. Over the first few days Richard and I saw a Short-toed Lark, Scarlet Rosefinch and several Lapland Buntings which made up for poor trapping success.

Over the next ten days the passage was interesting though remaining mostly light, with a moderate number of warblers and fair number of Swallows. Ringing went ahead slowly and in this period we caught rather over 100 birds: Richard unfortunately had arranged his holiday to start at this time, and as part of my object was to enable him to process as many birds as possible towards gaining his own ringing permit, the slow trapping rate was doubly annoying. Within a very few days of his departure both the passage of birds and the trapping success took a decided turn for the better. Warblers increased in numbers and Redwings and other thrushes started to arrive along with more Goldcrests and Firecrests. On 14th October the real interest started, with 2 Yellow-browed Warblers caught in the lower gardens along with other warbler species (light SW wind). Next day saw a further improvement with 38 birds ringed (wind NE 3); the day after I had 68, with 12 Chiffchaffs, 18 Blackcaps and 11 Garden Warblers (virtually no wind). On 17th (wind W 3) yielded 44 birds including 17 out of a flock of 40 Siskins, 11 of which went into one 30 foot net at one catch, a glorious sight! This was my last effective day as I left on 18th October.

I found that the lower parts of Millcombe were the best area for nets during the period that I was there, though sites higher up were moderately good from time to time. The heligolands yielded little, partly due to being somewhat overgrown; this has been attended to I believe by judicious pruning later, but we did not wish to hack away without Tony Taylor's approval. We used some nets

during the last ten days at least I ended up working the Millcombe area: there seemed always to be a much better concentration of birds of all types there. It some 30 Swallows and these all within an hour or so. Each day, as mentioned earlier, I set out early for the terraces to assess the situation, and on every day on the terraces for a few days, but only once did they yield anything significant, was of interest that once when I did work some nets on the terraces for a while, I retrapped a Ring Ousel which I had already ringed in Millcombe a short while before. I was lucky in that on only one day was the weather so bad that I was barely able to get out, though there were several days when the wind was too high for setting nets: that one day was remarkable in that I went out in a lull (as I thought!) in the heavy rain and in passing the terrace heligoland trap saw a movement which turned out to be a deluded Swallow: it was the only bird ringed that day, and had to be carried back in a bag inside my anorak through the rain which shortly started to descend again: I cannot say it flew off happily when I released it, but it made for shelter fast!

I found the island fascinating quite apart from my actual trapping and ringing. There were relatively few other visitors during my stay so late in the year but those who were there were convivial and gravitated to the tavern in the evening so that a good social atmosphere was always present: I was even pressed into playing darts, which I have not handled for many years, once for the visitors and once as an honorary islander; I managed to get my fair share of bulls which was remarkable! We did find it necessary to write up the bird log early in the evening so as to avoid any exaggeration of records. Even so some light hearted entries crept into the back page, one entered under protest by its perpetrator —“Is the Great Auk still extinct?”

On those days when trapping was quite impossible I covered most of the rest of the island, obviously bird watching but also admiring and photographing the impressive rock formations and the island in general. I even got over to Rat Island in search of Purple Sandpipers (which were not there!)

The total number of birds which I ringed during the three weeks (included of course in the main ringing totals) was 322 of 22 species; the most notable items in this were 37 Swallows, 21 Garden Warblers, 63 Blackcaps, 26 Chiffchaffs, 2 Yellow-browed Warblers, 11 Firecrests and 17 Siskins.

LUNDY ISLAND, 29th SEPTEMBER—2nd OCTOBER, 1979

R. K. BIRCHER

Six members of the Severn Vale Ringing Group made a short visit to the Island hoping to repeat our exciting stay in September 1970.

We landed at 5.00 p.m. and a Redstart and Pied Flycatcher in Millcombe with an easterly wind blowing raised out hopes of some good birds; but on reaching the ledges on the east side, where we had ringed so successfully in 1970, we sensed a complete lack of migrants.

Sunday dawned overcast, still with a stiff easterly blowing, and netting was just about impossible. A search of the Island around Pondsburry revealed a different pipit among the many Meadows showing almost enough features to make it a Red throated but it was very elusive and denied us a positive identification. Observation was difficult in the strong wind but three Lapland buntings were distinctive with their chestnut wing coverts and rattling call.

During the evening the wind veered south west and a warm sunny morning greeted us. Swallow passage was spectacular all day with hundreds of birds moving south under the shelter of the east facing slopes. Among the Swallows were at least two Swifts, many House martins and the occasional Sand Martin. A Whitethroat and five Chiffchaff were the days warbler total. The sight of some four hundred hirundines in one flock leaving the Island at dusk was a bonus for those fascinated by migration.