

The Little Owl (*Athene noctua*) in Somerset

(WITH MAP).

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ALTHOUGH abundant enough in Holland as well as in France and Spain, the Little Owl has always been a somewhat rare visitor to the British Isles, and some, even of the earlier recorded captures, are open to the suspicion of having been imported birds. There can however be no reasonable doubt that sporadic examples have from time to time found their way unaided to this country, and hence the bird had acquired a claim to be placed on the British list even before the recent successful naturalisation had established it on a firm basis.

An interesting paper on "The Spread of the Little Owl from the chief centres of its introduction" by Messrs. Witherby and Ticehurst, which appeared in the first volume of *British Birds* (1908, p. 335), gives an account of the different attempts made to naturalise the bird in this country, and of the manner in which it has spread from the localities where its introduction has been successfully effected.

Although these birds have been turned loose in several localities at different periods, the only importations which appear to have been thoroughly successful are those by the late Lord Lilford, near Oundle, in Northamptonshire, and of Mr. Meade-Waldo, near Edenbridge, in Kent. At Lilford the first nest was discovered in 1889, from which date the birds rapidly multiplied; but at Mr. Meade-Waldo's park, although

a nest had been discovered ten years prior to the above date, namely in 1879, the birds do not seem to have become at all plentiful until several years later.

From these two principal centres the Little Owl has spread itself over the country, in many parts of which it is now quite abundant. I would refer to the paper already quoted for details of this spread, but here we are concerned only with Somerset, and this county is not mentioned in the list of localities there given, as the bird had apparently at that time not been reported from our boundary.

The first recorded instance of the occurrence of the Little Owl in Somerset was in March, 1878, when one was killed at Clevedon, as reported by the Rev. G. W. Braikenridge (*Zoologist*, 1879, p. 32). This however was a solitary example, and was probably one of those sporadic cases that have from time to time occurred in different parts of the country, or possibly an escape from confinement. At any rate it remained an isolated instance, and had clearly no connexion with the recent influx.

Nothing more was heard of the Little Owl, until 1907, when on January 3rd in that year one was shot at Tickenham, a locality be it observed quite in the north of the county (J. Turner's MS. notes).

It next turned up near Pensford, a place again in the north, in 1908, where Mr. Leyborne Popham informs me that he met with it when he came to reside in that neighbourhood in that year. It may of course have been there previously, but as it does not appear to have bred there that year it was probably a recent arrival.

In 1909 it had spread to the Mendip district, as one was shot on Wrington Warren in October of that year, and is now in the collection of Mr. A. R. Robinson, at Backwell House. Mr. Popham also noted it about his residence at Houndstreet House, near Pensford, throughout 1909, and it probably bred there that season, but this is not quite certain. It however certainly bred in Mr. Popham's park in 1910, which is the first recorded instance of its having nested in the county (*Zoologist*, 1914, p. 150), and it has bred there regularly every year since that date.

In 1911, four years after its first appearance in the north, it turned up in the south, a bird having been killed at Isle Abbots, about four miles to the north of Ilminster, in March of that year (*Proc. Som. Arch. & Nat. Hist. Soc.*, LVIII, i, 89). An eastern extension was also reported in the same year, a female having been shot at East Cranmore, about four miles east of Shepton Mallet, in December (F. H. L. Whish, in *British Birds*, v, 338).

An extension to the west also occurred somewhere about the same time, for either in this year or the next—1912—(the exact date is uncertain) one was shot in the winter time by Farmer Hicks in his orchard at Brean, as reported to me by Mr. F. A. Bruton. Farmer Hicks states that there was another one about at the time he shot that one, which he had stuffed, and it is now in his possession. The second one was afterwards caught in a rabbit-gin.

The year 1913 furnished a second record for the Mendip district, one having been shot near Burrington by Mr. T. P. Rogers in October (*Report, Wells Nat. Hist. & Arch. Soc.*, 1913). The most interesting event that year however was the discovery that a fresh breeding station had been established at Doultling (between Shepton Mallet and East Cranmore), eggs having been obtained from that locality, in May, by Mr. Stanley Lewis (*Zoologist*, 1914, p. 112).

The establishment of this colony in the Shepton Mallet district was further emphasised by a female having been shot at Bodden, near Doultling, by Mr. Elton, in February of the following year—1914 (S. Lewis, *l.c.*). The same year, 1914, witnessed the arrival of the bird at Brean Down, one having been caught in a rabbit-trap there, in the month of February, as related to me by the late Mr. Hawkings' son.

In 1915 an extension to the extreme north of the county was noted, two birds having been trapped at Portbury in April, and presented to the Bristol Museum, as I have been informed by the Director, Mr. H. Bolton. Another example was also obtained on the Mendips, one having been shot near Blagdon in October, as related to me by Mr. D. Carr, in whose possession the bird now is. The bird was also again observed on Brean Down in the course of the year.

The year 1916 was signalised both by a notable further extension of range and by the establishment of new breeding stations. It was reported as nesting at Abbotsleigh by Mr. R. O. de Gex, a pair, occupying a hole in an old oak tree, having been kept under observation by that gentleman for about a month in the spring, but this nest was afterwards harried. It also bred at Portbury, two young birds having been seen in July on the branch of a willow tree, near the flats, by Mr. F. M. Dougall, who also saw the old birds in the neighbourhood. And it nested again in the Shepton Mallet district (between Bodden and Doultling), two young with down still adhering to them having been seen there in the late summer, both by Mr. Stanley Lewis and Mr. Elton. It was on the latter's farm that the bird in Mr. Lewis' possession was shot in February, 1914 (*Zoologist*, 1914, p. 112), and as Mr. Elton frequently sees the birds about his ricks, hunting for mice and beetles, it is clear that they are well established in that neighbourhood. It also bred in an ivy-covered cliff on Brean Down, for though the nest was not actually seen there can be practically no doubt, from the information furnished me by the late Mr. Hawkings and his sons, of its occurrence. Districts from which the bird had not previously been recorded were, East Brent, in the neighbourhood of which place one was shot by a young farmer in January, and having only been winged was captured and kept as a pet, as reported by the Rev. Preb. Wickham; also Hutton, near which village one was seen to emerge from a hole in a tree by Mr. F. A. Bruton in June; and Bleadon where one was seen in an orchard by the same observer. There is also considerable probability that the bird bred near Hutton in the previous year, but the evidence is not quite conclusive. The most interesting point in distribution however in 1916 was the extension of the bird's range as far as Minehead, one having been seen there in the spring by the Rev. A. P. Pott, and another having been shot in the same locality on October 28th, by a resident of the place. The latter bird was sent to Mr. Petherick of Taunton for preservation, at whose shop I had the opportunity of seeing it, and Mr. Petherick was good enough to furnish me with the date of capture. This is the furthest westerly extension yet recorded.

In 1917, up to the time of writing (October) no notable extension of range has been reported, but new records have been established for localities in the neighbourhood of others in which the bird had previously been known, and one new breeding-place has been discovered. Thus one bird was seen on January 10th, near Locking by Mr. Booker, and another below Crook's Peak, near Webbington, on February 14th by the same observer, both localities be it observed at no great distance from Hutton and Bleadon, whence the bird had been reported in the previous year. One was also reported by Mr. C. E. Burnell as having been shot in January, at Downside, about a mile from Shepton Mallet, that is from the neighbourhood of a district in which the bird is well known. It was observed on many occasions in the course of the summer about Bodden, so doubtless it bred there again last season. It was about Brean Down all the summer as usual; and it was also observed again in early autumn in Farmer Hicks' orchard at Brean, from which place it was reported in 1912, but had not been noted during the intervening period.

An interesting occurrence was the fact that one was shot at Isle Abbots in January, which was sent to Mr. Petherick for preservation. It will be remembered that a bird was obtained in this locality, comparatively early in the course of its spread, viz. in 1911, but there have been no records from that district during the intervening six years. The most interesting event of this year, however, has been the establishment of a new breeding station at Chewton Mendip (some six miles to the north of Shepton Mallet), where Mr. B. W. Tucker informs me that Lord Waldegrave's keeper found a nest last season, and reported several birds as being about in the early autumn. The keeper saw one for the first time about a year ago. The bird bred as usual in the grounds of Houndstreet House, where through the kindness of Mr. Leyborne Popham I had the opportunity, on May 31st, of inspecting the nesting-site, which is situated in a hollow in a fine old oak tree standing by itself in the park. The hollow is fairly large, but the entrance hole, which is about 11 feet from the ground, would not quite admit the arm. The hollow contained three young,

hatched a few days, which were covered with greyish down. Mr. Popham informs me that the young fledged as usual, and that he frequently saw them in the evening sitting on the railings and being fed by their parents.

Incidentally I may remark that the nests which have been actually inspected in the county, have been situated in the hollows of old trees, and such are indeed the usual nesting sites; but in some places the bird has been reported as breeding in old quarries and amongst rocks, and the nest at Brean Down, which though not actually inspected almost certainly existed there, must have been placed in a hollow of an ivy-covered cliff. The bird has also been reported as nesting in rabbit-holes, in some places.

I have entered into the spread of this bird through the county with as much detail as possible, as it is but seldom that an opportunity occurs of tracing the progress of a new species, and it is desirable that the facts should be placed on permanent record before many of them become irretrievably lost. At the same time it is of course evident that no collection of data can furnish a thoroughly accurate presentation of the subject. It may frequently have happened that the bird has been in a district before, and it may be long before, a specimen was obtained or seen by a competent observer; and the mere fact that no records are forthcoming from a given district does not of course necessarily prove that the bird has not visited it. But one can only deal with the subject in accordance with the facts available and on the whole it is probable that these present the matter with a fair approach to accuracy. And looking at the details as a whole one fact at least stands out pretty clearly. It is evident that the bird entered the county from the north. It was first observed at Tickenham (1907) quite in the north, and next near Pensford (1908) and again near Pensford and at Wrington Warren in 1909—both northern localities. It was near Pensford that the first nest was discovered in 1910, and the bird having bred there in security ever since that date, this locality has undoubtedly acted as an important centre of dispersion. Comparatively early in its spread however an offshoot was sent to the south, a bird having been obtained at Isle Abbots

in 1911. This southern record is rather a curious one as there are no intermediate links between it and the Shepton Mallet area, in the neighbourhood of which (East Cranmore) a bird was obtained in the same year. But that the bird has established itself at Isle Abbots seems to be proved by the fact that a second example was obtained there in January of the present year (1917). The fact that no intermediate stations have been recorded during the six years that have elapsed since the first specimen was obtained there, suggests the possibility that the Isle Abbots bird may have been a separate introduction from the south or south-east, but this can only be a matter of conjecture. With the exception of the Isle Abbots case, the records concentrate in the north, north-east, and north-west. It was found breeding near Doultling in the Shepton Mallet district in 1913, in which locality it seems to be well established and has probably nested there ever since. Additional records for the Mendip area were furnished in 1913 at Burrington, and in 1915 at Blagdon; whilst further to the north it has become established at Portbury, where it was first observed in 1915 and certainly bred there in 1916, as well as at Abbotsleigh. More to the west it had reached Brean in 1912 and Brean Down in 1914, where it has been noted every year since, and almost certainly bred there in 1916. East Brent, Hutton and Bleadon were additional north-western localities from which it was reported in 1916, and Locking and Webbington in 1917. Up to 1916 indeed, with the exception of the Isle Abbots case already referred to, all the records are included in that part of the county which lies to the north of a line drawn from Burnham in the west, through Wells and Shepton Mallet, to Witham on the east. But in that year a notable extension occurred, and the bird took a great leap forward by turning up at Minehead. As the bird was already established at Brean Down and probably, also in the Hutton district as well, it seems not unlikely that the colony started at Minehead may have been an offshoot from one of these places, in which case the bird may have followed the coast-line to its new quarters; or it may have crossed the intermediate stretch of the channel, a possibility suggested by the fact that no intermediate

stations have been noted ; but this of course is only matter for speculation. As the records stand at present (October, 1917) Minehead in the west and Isle Abbots in the south constitute the extreme limits of the bird's range, and it will be interesting to trace its further progress.

It is evident from the foregoing that the Little Owl is now well established in the county and that it has come to stay, and it is a matter therefore of some interest to enquire whether its advent is for good or ill. That in some parts of the country the bird has proved destructive to young game birds is not to be denied. Thus Mr. Lewis R. W. Loyd (*British Birds*, VI, 66) gives an instance of a nest having been found containing twenty-seven young pheasants, and also a case in which young chickens were taken ; he also once caught a Little Owl in the act of sucking a clutch of Wild Duck's eggs. Mr. George T. Atchison (*l.c.*) also relates a case in which the enormous number of seventy-four young Pheasants was found in a single nest. On the other hand Mr. Meade-Waldo in his unrivalled experience of hundreds of nests of this bird says (*l.c.*, 64-5) that he has never seen the remains of a single game bird in a nest or 'hoard' ; and Mr. Leyborne Popham writing from the north of this county states that in his neighbourhood they do not appear to have developed any excessively predatory habits amongst young game (*Zoologist*, 1914, p. 150).

Of more concern to the bird-lover however is the extent to which it preys upon small birds, which its comparatively diurnal habits enable it the more readily to capture. Mr. Meade-Waldo admits (*l.c.*) that during the time the young are being fed, it kills a great many birds, especially young Thrushes, Blackbirds, Mistle-Thrushes, Sparrows, Chaffinches, Greenfinches and Skylarks. And Mr. G. T. Atchison also states that it is rare to find a nest that does not contain remains of small birds of various kinds—Finches, Tits, Sparrows, Buntings, Larks, etc. Mr. L. R. W. Loyd (*l.c.*) bears testimony to the same effect saying that he knows of many instances of young birds being taken from the nest in broad daylight. Commander Lynes also (*British Birds*, III, 337) describes a nest in an old quarry near Portsmouth from which

the young had flown, which contained a perfect Golgotha of 'remains,' principally those of Starlings, Sparrows and Mice, intermixed with fur and feather castings. And other instances might be quoted.

There is however another side to the account. They undoubtedly destroy large numbers of mice, and are therefore to that extent distinctly beneficial. Mr. Meade-Waldo (*l.c.*) states that they are very large consumers of insects, beetles, earth-worms, lizards and mice, and that from mid-July onwards their food consists almost entirely of insects and voles. Mr. Popham (*l.c.*) has found that the nest in his grounds always contains a plentiful supply of young rats and mice; and Mr. C. H. Wells (*British Birds*, III, 84) found in a nest in Derbyshire twenty or more freshly killed mice.

Evidence derived from the examination of stomach contents and pellets is to the same effect. Mr. H. F. Witherby (*British Birds*, VI, 19) found the stomachs of five shot in December, 1910, crammed with the remains of beetles and earthworms; and he quotes (*l.c.*) a report by Mr. T. A. Coward on an examination of some pellets, which were found to be composed, in by far the larger proportion, of the remains of small mammals, such as voles, rats, mice, and shrews, beetle remains being also numerous. Similar facts are also recorded by Mr. Clemence Acland (*British Birds*, VI, 66) and Dr. Dobie (*l.c.*, x, 271). The birds indeed appear to be particularly fond of beetles, the elytra of which seem to be pretty constantly found in the pellets; and an amusing account is given by Bowdler Sharpe (*Handbook of the Birds of Great Britain*, II, 92) of how two tame ones cleared his kitchen of black beetles.

It should be noted however as an undesirable feature of its introduction that a tendency to the displacement of our native Owls has been observed in certain districts. Thus Mr. Atchison states (*l.c.*) that in Bedfordshire it appears to be turning out the Barn Owl and the Tawny Owl from many of their former nesting haunts; and Mr. Bathurst Hony (*British Birds*, IX, 210) gives an instance of its supplanting the Barn Owl in Wiltshire, a pair of Little Owls having taken possession of a nesting-hole which had been occupied for

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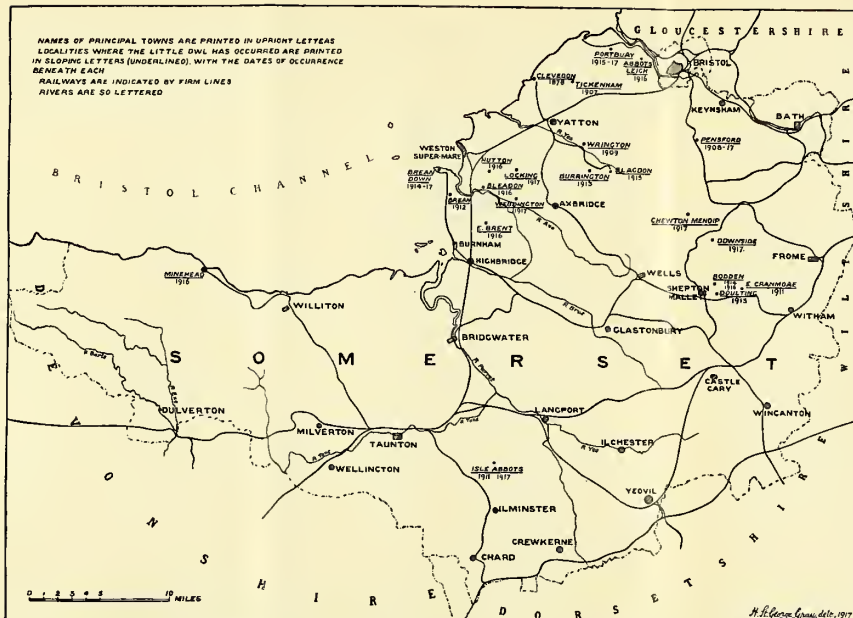
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MAP OF SOMERSET TO ILLUSTRATE THE PAPER ON THE SPREAD OF THE LITTLE OWL,

many years by a pair of the former birds, and he states that he has known of a similar case near Cambridge.

On the whole it may probably be said that the good and the harm which the bird does are somewhat equally balanced. For whilst the large quantities of mice and beetles which it consumes render it a friend to the agriculturist, its depredations amongst small birds cannot be ignored, and render it desirable that it should be looked upon with suspicion, and that its habits should be closely watched. The Starlings and Sparrows which it takes can indeed well be spared, and so far as these birds are concerned the Little Owl may act as a useful check on their all too great numbers; but if as the result of the firm establishment of this stranger in our midst we were to suffer any appreciable diminution in the numbers of our songsters, we should then have cause to regret the welcome hitherto accorded it.

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Since this paper was put into type I have ascertained that a Little Owl was reported by Mr. C. Terry (*British Association Handbook to Bath*, 1888) to have been shot at Batheaston in 1834. This therefore will be the earliest published record.

As showing the rapidity with which the bird is now spreading I may add that even since the records were made up last October the bird has turned up in two new localities in the west. One was shot at West Monkton by a labourer on November 29th, 1917; and another at Cothelstone by Mr. C. L. Hancock on January 8th of the present year.