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VOCAL MIMICRY IN THE RED-BREASTED CHAT *Oenanthe heuglini*

D.P.Ebbutt

Macgregor (1950) in his succinct account of the breeding habits of the Red-breasted Chat *Oenanthe heuglini* at Vom on the Jos Plateau (9° 50' N, 8° 50' E) makes no mention of this bird's habit of mimicking the calls of other species, nor can I find any references to this habit in the literature. However vocal mimicry in other African members of the Turdidae is well documented, for example the Capped Wheatear *O. pileata*, the White-browed Robin-Chat *Cossypha heuglini* and the Red-capped Robin-Chat *C. natalensis*.

Macgregor and Smith both give the breeding season of the Red-breasted Chat on the Plateau as November to March, and from December 1965 to March 1966 I noted one of a pair of these birds mimicking the calls of six species with great accuracy. The species involved were

Green Sandpiper *Tringa ochropus*
 Wood Sandpiper *T. glareola*
 Senegal Wattled Plover *Afribyx senegallus*
 Greenshank *T. nebularia*
 Kestrel *Falco* sp.
 Kite *Milvus migrans*.

All these birds were present in the area. The phenomenon was not restricted to a single pair, for it was noted at least once from another bird three miles away. Mimicry was only recorded when the birds were defending territory, and the calls were made under similar circumstances and were 'complementary' to the birds' normal alarm call which is a harsh 'chack' made with drooping wings and flicking tail (which exaggerates the white rump) from a perch. The bird used the calls of other species only in flight, after it had been disturbed near the nest, and the imitated calls after being repeated several times led into the 'sweet bubbling descending trill' characteristic of the bird's display song.

Van Tyno (1959) and also Welty (1962) state that the significance of vocal mimicry is little understood; however Welty does suggest that 'mimicry appears to represent a type of displacement activity or an outlet for surplus drive'. Neither author rejects the possibility that mimicry may occasionally be useful.

It might be relevant that four of the species mimicked are waders, all with characteristic 'infective' alarm calls (the call of the Kestrel transcribed as 'kee-kee-kee' might also fall into this category). Might it not be possible that the utilisation of 'infective' alarm calls of one species grafted onto the alarm procedure of another - in this case the chat - might serve as an emphatic warning of danger to a mate brooding beneath the ground?

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N O T E S

White Storks at Kaduna and Zaria. Mr M. Skilleter has written as follows :
 "Kaduna racecourse...saw what seemed to be the northward passage of several
 White Storks Ciconia ciconia - I say 'seemed' because they may have been
 immatures which moved locally rather than to Europe. Four arrived on the
 evening of 12th May (1967), two remained on 13th, there were seven on 14th
 and two from 15th to 18th, when they finally left. Four were seen by me
 at Kaduna Airport on 22nd May. The only previous record I have for Kaduna
 is three immatures which summered on the race-course from 21st April until
 17th September 1960."

Six White Storks which stayed at Samaru, Zaria from 15th to about 20th
 June 1967 constitute the first record of the species from the Zaria area.
 There were four adults and two immature birds, and they were seen by a number
 of observers. Mention was made in Bull. Niger. Orn. Soc. 3 (12) : 100 of
 a captive White Stork at Zaria which was thought to have been brought down
 from the species' wintering quarters in the Hadejia area; this was certainly
 the case with another captive adult acquired by a Samaru householder in
 late May.

Editor

An Identity for Palearctic Buzzards in West Africa. In Bull. Niger. Orn.
 Soc. 3 (12) : 95 I reported seeing a buzzard Buteo sp. north of Sokoto in
 January and argued in favour of it being B. rufinus, although it was not
 possible to make a definitive identification. I have subsequently learned
 (G. Morel, pers. comm.) that two Stoppe Buzzards B. (b.) vulpinus were
 collected on 14th February 1967 near Thios, 50 miles east of Dakar, Senegal.
 The specimens were identified in Paris, and are the first record of the
 species in Senegal. The inference is that the Sokoto bird may well have
 been B. b. vulpinus, and so might a buzzard seen by J.S.Ash, I.J.Ferguson-
 Leos and the author near Malamfatori, Lako Chad, in late March. C.H.Fry

Records of the Cuckoo-Falcon near Zaria. On 5th May 1967 I had a good
 view of a pair of Cuckoo-Falcons Aviceda cuculoides in Dunbi Wood, 17 miles
 south of Zaria. What was doubtless the same species had been glimpsed there
 a fortnight previously without being recognised, and one or two Cuckoo-