

Bird-watching in Switzerland

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BIRD-WATCHING IN SWITZERLAND.

By R. S. R. Fitter.

In the lowland districts of northern Switzerland, around Basle, perhaps the most striking thing about the bird life is how little it differs from what we see at home. There are, of course, certain notable absentees. In a week spent in the Basel-land I saw neither a rook nor a lapwing, and it would be hard to spend a week in the English countryside without seeing both every day. The rook is only a winter visitor to Switzerland, but the lapwing breeds sparingly, and is apparently much less addicted to cultivated land.

On the other hand, there are several additions to the avifauna one is accustomed to at home, and one of the most notable is the golden oriole, whose glorious fluty song comes out of many a grove of trees. Just occasionally a reedy accompaniment, together with the repeated call of a buzzard or some other bird, may reveal that the songster is in fact a mimicking starling, but the oriole itself is common enough. The only complaint one can have against it is that it hardly ever shows its glorious black and gold plumage. This time I failed to see it once, and did not even catch a glimpse of an olive-green hen bird. I did however have the good fortune to hear one chase off a sparrowhawk that had evidently come too near its nest. Unfortunately the chase took place in thick tree-tops, so that although I had seen the hawk just before and heard the indignant cries of both birds, I was able to see neither the oriole nor its nest.

Another bird that one is always glad to see when on the Continent is the hoopoe, looking like a large black and white butterfly as it flies low and rather hesitatingly over the fields. This time I saw it only once, when somebody kindly showed us a nest in a dead fruit tree. One parent flew away as we approached, and the other was discovered clinging to the inside of the nest hole.

As in other parts of Europe, what one misses most in Switzerland is the English hedgerow, and with it the typical common hedgerow birds such as whitethroat and yellow hammer, which have to content themselves with various odd bushy places. Instead, you have what looks to English eyes like a vast market-garden area, unhedged and mostly unfenced, with scattered fruit trees as far as the eye can see. These fruit trees, as they grow old, provide nesting places for an abundance of woodpeckers. In one small area south of Basle, the Liementhal, which stretches over the French frontier, we saw or heard five species and were shown the nest-hole of a sixth, the lesser spotted woodpecker. The five were our own common green and great spotted woodpeckers, the wryneck, which is rare and decreasing in southern England, and the grey-headed and middle spotted woodpeckers, neither of which have ever occurred in the British Isles. The grey-headed is like a smallish green woodpecker with a grey head and no red moustache, and has a somewhat similar "yaffling" call-note, but falling away at the end. One that I watched distinguished itself by "drumming" with a very metallic sound on the metal top of a telegraph pole. The middle spotted, as its name suggests, is inter-first half of 1955.

mediate in size and appearance between the great and lesser spotted woodpeckers. It has the large white wing patches of the great spotted, and the red crown of the male lesser spotted and juvenile great spotted. A seventh species of woodpecker also occurred in a wood not very far away, the great black, which has been seen in Britain on a number of occasions, but never under circumstances such as to satisfy the pundits that it got hear under its own steam.

In the alpine parts of Switzerland the bird life differs much more from what we are used to in Britain. Within a few minutes of my hotel in the Engadine, for instance, I saw alpine choughs, a rock-thrush, an ortolan bunting, and once a snow-finch driven down from above by a late snowstorm. The common pipit of the valley was neither the meadow nor the tree-pipit, but the water-pipit, the Continental race of our coastal rock-pipit. In the pinewoods, however, one does become a little more at home, for many of our common garden birds, such as the song-thrush and mistle-thrush, robin and hedge-sparrow, are birds of remote woodlands on the Continent. I found the same thing in Sweden, especially with the song-thrush. There were, of course, also plenty of unfamiliar birds, such as nutcrackers, crested tits, and above the tree-line alpine accentors, which look just like outside hedge-sparrows.

There are not much more than a dozen pairs of golden eagles left in the whole of Switzerland, so that we reckoned ourselves lucky to have such good views of them on this occasion. Once we watched two flying quite low over the hillside and perching in trees, another time one was being mobbed by a crow, and on a third occasion one perched on the summit of a mountain and surveyed the gazing bird-watchers with apparent disdain — I must admit that we were too far away to see the exact expression on its face!

(*Birmingham Post.*)

SWISSAIR'S OPERATIONS IN FIRST HALF OF 1956.

Swissair carried a total of 346,362 passengers on all sectors of the network in the first half of 1956. This was 25 per cent more than the total of 276,116 in the first half of 1955.

The volume of freight carried showed relatively the largest increase, going up by 33 per cent to over 4,813 metric tons from 3,623 tons. Mail carried increased by 14 per cent to 1,715 tons from 1,498 tons in the first half of last year.

Offered capacity rose to 33,889,166 short ton-miles from 29,947,007. The mileage flown totalled 6,269,290, compared with 5,459,988.

The overall load factor on the scheduled services improved to 65.5 per cent from 61.1 per cent.

Operating revenue for the half year came to 67 million Swiss francs (about £5.6 million), an increase of over 10 million francs (£833,000) compared with the