

Tits and Milk Bottles 1939

Title

Tits and Milk Bottles Enquiry 1939-1946

Description and Summary of Results

In 1921 birds described as tits were observed to prise open the waxboard tops of milk bottles on doorsteps in Swaythling, near Southampton, and drink the milk. This was the first known record of a practice which became a widespread habit in many parts of England and some parts of Wales, Scotland, and Ireland, and which included records of at least eleven species of birds. It was unclear how such behaviour spread but the Research Committee of the BTO decided that useful information could be derived from a survey to find out how widespread was the practice.

Questionnaires were filled in by 126 members, giving 141 records of bottle-opening by species of tits, 61 replies were received from other sources, and over 200 further useful replies were obtained following requests in the press or by personal contacts.

In 223 cases the observer was able to state the year in which the habit was first noted, and to state also that it would have been noted if the habit had occurred in previous years. Remaining observers provided evidence of when and where the habit was known, but could not state the first year in which it occurred in their district.

The occurrence of the habit was naturally limited primarily by whether or not milk was distributed in bottles, and it seemed that the records entirely supported the view that the practice was begun by comparatively few individual birds, and that the vast majority then learned it in some way from others. The main species involved were Blue Tit *Cyanistes caeruleus* (246 of 400 specifically identified), Great Tit *Parus major* (142 records) and Coal Tit *Periparus ater* (11 records) and with 1 record of Marsh Tit *Poecile palustris*. Several other species were seen taking milk but it was not clear whether or not they had opened the bottle.

By 1947 there were 89 records from places more than about 25km from any other place where the habit had been recorded previously – 74 from England and Wales, 12 from Scotland and 3 from Ireland. So it seemed likely that the habit had arisen *de novo* on an average at least once per vice-county, and perhaps more than this.

The habit was noted throughout the year, but was more prevalent during the winter months, perhaps because of the increased need for fats by birds during severe weather, but many observers noted that tits were much commoner in winter in urban or semi-urban areas than they were in summer.

Bottles were usually attacked within a few minutes of being left at the door, and there were even several reports of parties of tits following the milkman's cart down the street and removing the tops from bottles still in the cart.

Methods of Data Capture

Following publicity in BTO literature and various press (including national daily and Sunday newspapers, the *British Medical Journal* and *The Lancet*) casual records of the behaviour

were collected. Information on which species were involved, whereabouts, any notes on technique used and any known history of when the behaviour started in the area were asked for.

Purpose of Data Capture

To determine which species, where and the history of the habit of some birds opening milk bottles and feeding from the milk.

Geographic Coverage

All of Britain and Ireland.

Temporal Coverage

Records were specifically asked for during 1939-1946 but records from previously were also noted in many cases.

Other Interested parties

The survey was organised and run by the BTO as a Trust-aided enquiry.

Organiser(s)

James Fisher and Robert A Hinde.

Current Staff Contact

archives@bto.org

Publications

The main report of the survey is:

Fisher, J. & Hinde, R.A. 1949. The opening of milk bottles by birds. *British Birds* 42: 347-357; supplemented by Hinde, R.A. & Fisher, J. 1951. Further observations of the opening of milk bottles by birds. *British Birds* 44: 393-396.

The survey was noticed in the *BTO Annual report* numbers 13, 14 and 15, and *BTO Bulletin* numbers 20 and 24.

Available from NBN?

No.

Computer data -- location

None.

Computer data -- outline contents

N/A.

Computer data -- description of contents

N/A.

Information held in BTO Archives

1 folder containing a map evidently from a display.

The data cards, letters and many tops which had been pecked at are stored in the James Fisher archive held in the library of the Natural History Museum, London (items A6 and C88 of the James Fisher archive).

Notes on Access and Use

Potential users will need to visit and become a temporary reader of the Natural History Museum in South Kensington, London. Contacting in advance of a visit is strongly recommended as the material is in their stack.

Other information**Notes on Survey Design****Specific Issues for Analysis**