

Observations on the diet of fledgling Robins at Little Comberton Worcestershire during 2017

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Introduction

Nestling and adult birds of many groups regularly regurgitate pellets or single items of indigestible food. In the case of a pair of Robins that nested in an outbuilding at Little Comberton, Worcestershire (SO94 30 m O.D.) during 2017 they included beetles, ants and a terrestrial mollusc. Questions are raised regarding how far the adult birds travelled to locate these food items.



01. Nest of Robin *Erithacus rubecula* (L., 1758) in outbuilding, Little Comberton Worcestershire, June 2017.

Discussion

During 2017 a pair of Robins raised four young in a nest built largely of leaves and moss sited amongst boxes on a wooden shelf unit in an outbuilding at Little Comberton village (01). The birds accessed the building *via* the eaves. On 26 February 2018 the nest was removed and the remains of various invertebrates consumed and regurgitated by the chicks were found in it. These were identified as follows:

Coleoptera Staphylinidae. *Xantholinus* sp. 1; Elateridae *Athous vittatus* (F., 1792) 2. Curculionidae *Barynotus obscurus* (F., 1777) 5; *Exomias pellucidus* (Boheman, 1834) 1. **Hymenoptera** Formicidae *Lasius niger* (L., 1758) 2. **Mollusca** Buliminidae *Merdigera obscura* (Müller, 1774) 1.



02. Elytra and abdomen of the weevil *Barynotus obscurus* regurgitated by fledgling Robin, Little Comberton, June 2017.

The large weevil *Barynotus obscurus* (02) is localised and widespread in the region occurring especially in floristically rich grassland in the Severn and Avon valleys. At the nest site it occurs irregularly in small numbers; its recent existence there is confirmed back to about 1970 but undoubtedly much further. The small weevil *Exomias pellucidus* is extant and frequently observed at the nest site.



03. The snail *Merdigera obscura* regurgitated by fledgling Robin, Little Comberton, 2017 probably selected by the parent birds as a mineral source.

Merdigera obscura (03) is a widespread somewhat localised mollusc with a preference for well-drained ground, often with fragmented hard rocks so that it occurs widely on the Cotswold escarpment and its outliers. It could conceivably have been collected locally. It is noted that the shell of *M. obscura* has been partially filled with compacted invertebrate fragments during the digestive process which is not unusual in regurgitated material.

In the experience of the writer wherever *Athous vittatus* occurs it is calcifugous so that on Bredon Hill and the Jurassic escarpment it is diagnostic of the Dyrham Silts and in North Worcestershire of the Triassic Sandstones. On the Carboniferous Limestone of North Wales it pinpoints pockets of glacial till. Adults appear not to be markedly dispersive.



04. Nibbled regurgitated elytra of the click beetle *Athous vittatus* regurgitated by fledgling Robin, Little Comberton, June 2017.

Given that Robins are probably better at locating insects than people it is not inconceivable that most of these invertebrates could have been collected locally by the adult birds.

The issue of *Athous vittatus* is more problematical although one must accept that elaterids can occur in small discrete patches. Where that not to be the case then the adult Robins would have had to travel at least two kilometres to source the nearest known populations of *Athous vittatus*. This matter is discussed at some length by Lack (1953) who understood that Robins often collected food for their nestlings from outside their territory although a journey of two kilometres each way should be regarded as almost impossible. At the same time however there seems little doubt that during 2017 the parent birds were sometimes ranging on a landscape scale to provide their offspring with an adequate supply of food.

Conclusion

The diet of Robin fledglings at Little Comberton during 2017 was varied and there is evidence to suggest that the parent birds were ranging widely in their search for food items, perhaps over more than 0.2 km². These Robins raised their brood in the second of two regional 'drought years'; in 2016 the site received 517 mm of precipitation and in 2017 it received 509 mm. In such conditions parent Robins would become more assiduous in their search for food.

The dietary range in this case conforms taxonomically with that given by Witherby, Jourdain, Ticehurst & Tucker (1952) except for gastropod molluscs which are not cited by those authors. The consumption of shelled molluscs by nestling passerine birds may assist skeletal development and there is a parallel reported by Whitehead (1988) in the case of nestling Starlings which were offered five species of shelled mollusc.

References

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