

# Notes

## Probable filicide by a Kittiwake

On 17th June 2021, we witnessed an adult Kittiwake *Rissa tridactyla* expel a chick from its nesting ledge. The chick fell to its death. We made the observation during our annual monitoring of this species on Lundy. A scan of the colony at 12.13 hrs detected unusual movement in a two-chick nest. One chick, which we designated as the beta chick given its smaller size, was unusually positioned outside the nest away from the alpha chick and the adult, which both remained in the nest. We estimate that the beta chick was about 1–2 days old. The site was such that the floor of the ledge extended well behind the nest to a slightly overhanging back wall, and the chick was scrabbling against this back wall. At 12.25 hrs, in a rapid sequence of movements lasting only seconds, the beta chick turned and moved back in the direction of the nest. As it approached, it came between the adult and a side wall and was then grasped in the adult's beak and expelled in an upward arc, falling into the sea below. No interactions between the alpha and beta were observed.

On both 14th and 15th June, one chick and one egg had been recorded in this nest. On 16th and 17th June (prior to the event), two chicks were recorded. The nest is on a ledge of its own, thus no interloper chicks could have walked into it. Only two neighbouring nests are in the vicinity, on ledges above and to the side. Of these, two eggs were recorded on 14th June and later two chicks on 18th June, after the event detailed here. Thus, there is no indication that the two chicks in the nest were anything other than siblings.

Our initial hypothesis was that the alpha chick must have forced the beta into a vulnerable position. This would fit with current knowledge of siblicide in this

species (Braun & Hunt 1983; Dickins 2021). However, our sampling over 16th and 17th June had revealed no pecking or dominant behaviour in this nest. Braun & Hunt wrote that ejections were typically preceded by severe harassment from the older sibling and that, where chicks attempted re-entry, they were admitted only for short periods. Similar adult behaviour has been seen previously on Lundy in the 1980s, when an unrelated chick had fallen into its nest following a sibling aggression in the nest above (D. W. Dickins pers. comm.).

We hypothesise two possibilities for the adult ejection of the chick:

As Kittiwakes do not recognise their young chicks, it is possible that the beta chick's prolonged absence for at least 12 minutes was sufficient for the adult to treat it as an interloper. This is made more likely as the beta chick was not in the nest cup.

The temperature of the chick on attempting to re-enter the nest had lowered such that the adult did not recognise it as a live chick. Chicks do not reach optimum body temperature until ten days old and require adult thermoregulation until that point (Maunder & Threlfall 1972).

This observation suggests a proxy role for adults in siblicide, such that chick aggression is focused on ejection from the nest which in turn leads to further dangers for beta chicks.

### References

- Braun, M., & Hunt, L. 1983. Brood reduction in Black-legged Kittiwakes. *The Auk* 100: 469–476.
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- Maunder, J. E., & Threlfall, W. 1972. The breeding biology of the Black-legged Kittiwake in Newfoundland. *The Auk* 89: 789–816.

Amanda-River Mead, Kirsty Neller, Warren Horrod-Wilson and Thomas E. Dickins,  
Faculty of Science and Technology, Middlesex University, London NW4 4BT

## Song Thrush attempting to feed and brood Spotted Flycatcher nestlings

On 21st July 2021, I visited Dene Park, Tonbridge, Kent, to see if I could find a Purple Emperor *Apatura iris*. As I waited in hot sunshine, I was pleased to see a Spotted Flycatcher *Muscicapa striata* fly out from the trees and perch. Over the short period that I watched, a second bird appeared and both were observed actively catching flies and repeatedly returning to the top of a dead tree a short distance away. Their behaviour suggested that they were feeding young in a nest. Through my binoculars, I could indeed make out a nest at about 3.5 m high in a tangle of honeysuckle *Lonicera* on top of a rotted and broken off pine tree. I could also just make out the heads of two or three well-feathered young birds. The adults made repeated feeding sorties and returning to feed their young.

After watching at a distance for some 20 minutes or so, I decided to continue with my butterfly quest but at that moment the birds suddenly became alarmed, flying rapidly back and forth to the nest, and clicking their bills. Thinking a predator was about to take the young, I returned and saw a Song Thrush *Turdus philomelos* perched on the edge of the nest with a large invertebrate in its beak, clearly trying to feed the young flycatchers. The thrush was not having any success with its feeding attempt and, after a short while, it settled on the nest and began to brood the young. The adult flycatchers made repeated attempts to remove the thrush by flying in close and giving alarm calls, but the thrush remained settled. This situation continued for 20 minutes or so, with the flycatchers, with beaks full of insects, eventually perching nearby and watching their occupied nest.

*Martin Garwood, Tonbridge, Kent*



Martin Garwood

**472.** Song Thrush *Turdus philomelos* with prey item at Spotted Flycatcher *Muscicapa striata* nest; Tonbridge, Kent, July 2021.



Martin Garwood

**473.** Song Thrush brooding Spotted Flycatcher nestlings, with one of the adult flycatchers attempting to return to the nest; Tonbridge, Kent, July 2021.

A cyclist passing along a nearby path disturbed the Song Thrush and it left, flying just a short distance away from the nest. I was not able to return to the park to see whether the young, which appeared closed to fledging, had fledged successfully.

## Blue and Great Tits feeding Great Spotted Woodpecker nestlings

On 29th May 2020, my partner, Pauline Hogg, found a Great Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos major* nest at Fairburn Ings RSPB, Yorkshire. We visited the following day and waited by the tree, which was situated by

a busy public footpath. Within minutes, a Blue Tit *Cyanistes caeruleus* quickly came and went from the nest hole and I suggested that it was an old woodpecker nest that was now inhabited by Blue Tits. Pauline assured me



Phil Palmer

**474.** Blue Tit *Cyanistes caeruleus* feeding a Great Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos major* chick; Fairburn Ings RSPB, Yorkshire, May 2020.



Phil Palmer

**475.** Great Tit *Paus major* feeding a Great Spotted Woodpecker chick; Fairburn Ings RSPB, Yorkshire, May 2020.

that a young woodpecker had been peering out of the hole the previous day and so we waited to see what was happening.

After a few minutes, a Great Spotted Woodpecker came to the treetop but was wary of coming down to the nest. While we stood back and kept still, a Blue Tit returned and fed one of at least two large woodpecker chicks that appeared at the nest-hole entrance. The woodpecker chicks were almost at the fledging stage and frequently stuck their heads out of the hole while calling to encourage parents to bring food. A second adult woodpecker joined the first and the pair moved around in the canopy of the tree a little agitated by the presence of pedestrians but, when they had passed, they both climbed down to feed a woodpecker chick.

We monitored the nest for about five hours that day and a further nine hours the following day. During this time, the young woodpeckers were regularly fed by (in order of frequency of visits to the nest) two Blue Tits, a Great Tit *Parus major* and both parent woodpeckers (the male much more frequently than the female).

A Blue Tit would visit about every 15 minutes, and the Great Tit and the male woodpecker about once per hour. The female woodpecker would come to the tree canopy but went to the nest hole only about every two

hours, and then only if the male was in the tree at the same time. On the second day, the woodpeckers seemed to want the chicks to fledge and would come to the hole with food only to climb away without feeding them. The chicks would watch them and beg but, because the tits continued to bring food, I suspect that they did not feel the need to leave that day.

The adult woodpeckers brought mainly large grubs and flying insects as food; the Blue Tits brought green caterpillars; and the Great Tit brought prey larger than the Blue Tits' caterpillars, which appeared to be moths. As the woodpecker chicks would thrust their heads out rapidly to grab food from the tits, it was clear that both Blue and Great Tits were very nervous about the final approach and passed the food as quickly as possible to avoid contact with the woodpecker chicks' bills. On at least one occasion, a green caterpillar was dropped by the tit as it took avoiding action before the woodpecker had grabbed it.

There were two old woodpecker holes in the same tree, and other birders speculated that the tits had nested in one hole only to find that the woodpeckers had eaten their young, so parental instinct forced them to continue bringing food – but there is no hard evidence for this. I was unable to revisit the nest for another week and, by that time, all the birds had fledged.

*Phil Palmer and Pauline Hogg, 43 Grove Coach Road, Retford, Nottinghamshire DN22 7HB*