XXI.—*Ornithological and Oological Notes from the River Somme valley at its Mouth and near Peronne.* By Major W. Maitland Congreve, M.C., R.A., M.B.O.U.

The River Somme for many miles from its mouth is canalized, but owing to the fact that it runs through a wide flat-bottomed valley it is unable to drain the surrounding meadows, which are normally very marshy and intersected by reed and rush-grown irrigation ditches.

In many places in the valley there are large sheets of deep water, surrounded by swamps and osier plantations. The sides of the valley are fairly-well wooded, and the numerous villages are surrounded by fine old orchards of apple and pear. The higher ground above the valley is undulating and open, and highly cultivated with corn, sugar-beet, lucerne, etc. There are few hedges except in the neighbourhood of villages, but there is a fair amount of cover for birds in the numerous small, and in places very large, woods which owing to the war have not been kept free of undergrowth in the usual methodical French way.

The above is a rough description of the district in which the writer worked from March to early June of 1917. During June and part of July he soldiered in the neighbourhood of Peronne. There the River Somme is a fairly fast clear stream, normally several hundreds of yards wide and much choked, except in the main channel, by dense reed-beds interspersed by sluggish channels overgrown by water-loving weeds. The surrounding country is open and undulating. There are numerous small woods, but villages, orchards, and cultivation are non-existent owing to the depredations of the Hun in the great retreat following the Battle of the Somme.

The writer of these lines had only odd hours in which to take notes of birds and nests, and did not waste any time on species which did not interest him oologically, except that he made an occasional entry in his note-book about the

arrival or departure of migrants. Consequently, these notes will be very incomplete, and will rely for their interest on the fact that they were taken in a theatre of war under unusual conditions. Only binomial names are used as the birds were only identified by sight, and not collected.

Except where Peronne is specifically mentioned, these notes will refer to the river-mouth district only.

Corvus corone. Carrion Crow.

Common, and nesting in all the woods and spinneys. First nest with eggs found on 20 April. The eggs were slightly incubated. On that date numerous nests were being built, and the weather was anything but spring-like.

Corvus cornix. Hooded Crow.

Numerous near the mouth of the river as late as 19 April. Two pairs were found nesting near Etaples by Major L. B. Windle, R.A., and the following are notes extracted from a letter from him:—"Nests were found about April 24, and the second about May 8. The first had two eggs which I left to get the whole lot, and on returning two days later found all had been taken by somebody else. The second had three eggs and the bird was sitting. Both nests were in fir-trees, in the small bits of green stuff close to the top, and in small groves of trees which are dotted about in the sand-hills. I could not find more than these two pairs, though I searched all over the area round here within about two miles, nor did I see any of the common black crows nesting anywhere about."

Corvus monedula. Jackdaw.

Common in church towers, as at Abbeville. Not met with in the country except when feeding, as there were few, if any, suitable nesting-sites.

Corvus frugilegus. Rook.

Not so common as they are in England. Only two "rookeries" met with, viz., near Abbeville and a small one near Peronne.

Pica pica. Magpie.

Extremely common, and their nests are quite a feature of the landscape.

Garrulus glandarius. Continental Jay.

Common, nesting in all the woods and spinneys. A nest of six considerably incubated eggs in the top of an ivy-grown pollarded willow on 20 May, and another with five considerably incubated eggs on 10 June in an oak-tree.

Sturnus vulgaris. Starling.

Not very common. Nesting in typical situations, especially old Woodpeckers' holes.

Oriolus oriolus. Golden Oriole.

A pair of males first seen at Saigneville on 10 May.

A fairly common species and easy to locate owing to its curious distance-carrying note. Every wood of any size at all had at least one pair nesting in it, and they were found occasionally in quite open spinneys.

In the Peronne district they were even more common than farther north, and they were easier to locate owing to the woods being smaller.

One nest, found near Peronne in June, was suspended at the end of a thin beech bough some twenty feet from the ground, in a small wood seamed with old German trenches and dug-outs. It was a puzzle to discover where the fine sheep's-wool came from out of which the nest was constructed, for there are no civilians or, consequently, sheep for many square miles of that district. The mystery was solved by discovering several old sheep's-wool mattresses lying about 300 yards from the nest, at the entrance of a "dug-out." These mattresses had doubtlessly been looted from some Frenchman's home during the Hun occupation.

Another nest in the same district was in a Silver Birch, and was made entirely of paper and one or two big chicken's feathers. Unfortunately there were two large young birds in the nest, so it could not be cut down. The paper would have been of interest, as it was probably "made in Germany."

The district was left shortly afterwards, so the nest could not be again visited for further examination.

The time for fresh eggs of this species appears to be during the first week of June.

Chloris chloris. Greenfinch.

Not uncommon, but no nest was found.

Coccothraustes coccothraustes. Hawfinch.

Only one seen, and that was near St. Valéry on 10 May and presumably breeding in the wood in which it was seen.

Carduelis carduelis. Continental Goldfinch.

Not uncommon in the orchards round the villages of Saigneville, Boismont, St. Valéry, etc. They are prized as cage-birds, as at home, for two pairs nesting in some pear-trees beside a farm-house were being most carefully preserved by the owners of the land.

Passer domesticus. Sparrow.

Common.

Passer montanus. Tree-Sparrow.

Common, and breeding in the holes of apple and other trees. In the neighbourhood of Albert they positively swarmed last winter, and were far commoner than *P. domesticus*.

Fringilla cœlebs. Chaffinch.

A common breeding species.

Acanthis cannabina. Linnet.

Fairly common, and breeding in gorse patches. The gorse appeared to have been completely killed by the hard frost of last January–February and never showed the least sign of flower or even green.

Emberiza calandra. Corn-Bunting.

Common in both districts, but most so in the neighbourhood of the sea.

Emberiza citrinella. Yellow Bunting.

Common everywhere, and breeding in banks and gorse patches.

Emberiza cirlus. Cirl Bunting.

Common, especially in the neighbourhood of villages, and breeding in grassy banks bordering lanes. Eggs were first found on 6 May. In all, four nests were found round Saigneville and St. Valéry. The typical clutch appears to be three.

Emberiza schœniclus. Reed-Bunting.

Not uncommon, and breeding in suitable situations in marsh-land.

Alauda arvensis. Sky-Lark.

A common breeding species.

Galerida cristata. Crested Lark.

Common, particularly on the sea-coast and round the outskirts of Abbeville; also everywhere in the Peronne district.

They appear to have numerous broods, and nests were found as follows :—

14 May. Nest with large young; nest of four fresh eggs. Both the above on the side of the old Abbeville fortification ditch.

23 May. Nest with one fresh egg in same situation as above.

6 June. Nest with four fresh eggs. Same place as above.

16 June. Nest of five moderately incubated eggs at Roisel (Peronne district).

Motacilla alba. White Wagtail.

A pair here and there. A pair built under the roof of an open shed in Saigneville village and should have had eggs by about 14 May, but the nest was destroyed by somebody or other. A nest of six eggs slightly incubated on 14 May. This nest was near the top of an old wall forming part of

the ancient fortifications of the town of Abbeville. The parent-birds were not very light-coloured, and it is possible that Pied and White Wagtails overlap and interbreed in this district, as undoubted "Pieds" were seen now and again in May as also were seen unduly dark-looking "White" Wagtails.

Motacilla lugubris. Pied Wagtail.

Common in the early spring. Not proved by the writer to be actually breeding, though undoubted specimens of this species were seen now and again in May, but there never happened to be time or opportunity for investigation.

Motacilla raii. Yellow Wagtail.

A few seen among Blue-headed Yellow Wagtails on 28 April near St. Valéry. It is probable that a few pairs remain to breed, as undoubted males were seen at the end of May among the lucerne crops near the mouth of the river.

Motacilla flava. Blue-headed Yellow Wagtail.

Very common on the meadows and lucerne fields near the mouth of the river. This Wagtail was first noted on 27 April, and a colony of about ten pairs had taken up their residence in a marshy, coarse grass- and rush-covered flat near St. Valéry by 28 April.

The first two nests were found on 10 May, well concealed under tufts of coarse grass, and they contained respectively one egg and three sucked eggs. A nest with six fresh eggs was found on 15 May, and three more nests with sucked eggs. A day or two later a friend, who used to go about with the writer, caught a Cuckoo red-handed beside another nest of this species with newly-broken and partly-sucked eggs. The Cuckoo was shot, and subsequently another Cuckoo was found dead, evidently shot, on the same patch of ground. Other eggs found sucked were those of the Reed-Bunting and Partridge. It seems impossible to believe that a soft-billed bird like a Cuckoo can suck Partridge eggs, but there was no doubt about the Wagtails'.

No Harrier or other egg-sucking bird or beast was ever seen in that neighbourhood. By 22 May the colony was practically non-existent, but one more nest, containing young, was found at the end of May by the same friend.

Anthus trivialis. Tree-Pipit.

First noted on 29 April. Common and breeding in typical situations. Several nests were found, the average date for fresh eggs being 20 May.

Anthus pratensis. Meadow-Pipit.

Common, especially near the sea-coast.

Certhia sp.? The Tree-Creeper.

Tree-Creepers were fairly common among the willows in the river-valley. The remains of an old nest, containing very strongly-marked egg-shells, was found in a pollarded willow. It appeared to date from a previous year. Unfortunately no new nest was found, though a good deal of time was spent trying to do so. *

Sitta cæsia. Nuthatch.

Scarce. Two pairs were met with in the orchards at Saigneville and one nesting-hole was located, but no eggs were laid, although the parent-birds were in the immediate vicinity on many occasions.

Regulus regulus. Goldcrest.

Some birds of this species lived in some fir-trees near St. Valéry during April, but seemed to disappear later. The district is a bad one for Goldcrests, as fir-trees are very scarce and a yew-tree was never met with.

Parus major. Continental Great Tit.

Common, and breeding in suitable situations in the orchards round Saigneville and other villages in the district.

* Since this note was written I took a nest on 18 April, 1918, near Ypres containing six eggs. The male bird, shot for the purpose of identification, proves to be a typical example of *C. b. brachydactyla*, which is probably the prevailing form in northern France.

Parus palustris. Marsh-Tit.

Not uncommon. A nest with eight fresh eggs on 8 May. It was about six inches down from the crown of a rotten pollarded willow and some six feet from the ground. The nest was very substantial and did not resemble that of a Willow-Tit, though it would, perhaps, have been more satisfactory if identification could have been made even more certain by obtaining a bird.

Parus cæruleus. Continental Blue Tit.

Common and breeding in suitable holes in the orchards.

Ægithalus caudatus. Long-tailed Tit.

Fairly common up till the end of April, when they disappeared. One nest was found suspended in broom in the Forêt de Crécy on 3 May with one egg. The nest was unfortunately subsequently deserted owing to rough treatment by one of the writer's men.

Lanius collurio. Red-backed Shrike.

First noted on 3 May. A not uncommon breeding species in the hedges bordering railway-lines round Abbeville.

Sylvia communis. Whitethroat.

No note was made of the arrival of this species, but it is fairly common and a few nests were found.

Sylvia curruca. Lesser Whitethroat.

First noted on 29 April. A fairly common breeding species.

Sylvia simplex. Garden-Warbler.

First noted on 29 April. Common.

Sylvia atricapilla. Blackcap.

First noted on 14 April. Common.

Acrocephalus scirpaceus. Reed-Warbler.

A very common breeding species in both districts. First noted on 14 May.

Acrocephalus palustris. Marsh-Warbler.

Common in both districts. The first pair was noted on 20 May. In all, nine nests were found at different times. The most common situations in the river-mouth district were in reed-filled ditches and spinneys. Four nests were suspended on an average two feet from the ground in dead reeds up which bindweed was growing, and in one case privet as well. Another nest was in willow-herb. Several pairs nested on the high ground well above the valley, and nowhere near water, in a very well-grown patch of rye bordering the writer's camp. One nest was located in this patch by standing on a box and thus getting the necessary height to look down on the rye, which was quite two feet six inches high. The old birds would periodically pop out, carrying long pieces of dead stalk. They would dodge along near the top of the rye and then dive in near the nest, which by careful marking was eventually found. It was suspended in a mustard plant about one foot from the ground. This nest was most clumsily made of dead rye-grass reduced to the consistency of ordinary straw. The nest was subsequently beaten down to the ground by a tremendous hail-storm, but a parent-bird nevertheless valiantly continued to sit on three eggs (possibly a fourth was destroyed) although the nest was actually on the ground.

In the Peronne district a colony of perhaps ten pairs was found breeding in dense high nettles growing in a marshy hollow in which willows and alders also grew. The nests found were suspended on three nettle stalks at from eighteen inches to two feet from the ground.

The dates on which eggs were found were as follows :—

River-mouth District:

June 9. (5) fresh.
11. (5) considerably incubated.
16. (5) incubation slight.
16. (4) ditto.
20. (3) ditto.
21. (4) considerably incubated.

Peronne District:

June 23. (5) very much incubated.
24. (4) incubation slight.
26. (4) ditto.

With regard to their song, I noticed that those that lived in the rye-grass mimicked Partridge and Quail, which were common in the immediate neighbourhood. This was, of course, in addition to many other successful efforts at mimicry.

Acrocephalus arundinaceus. Great Reed-Warbler.

First noted on 14 May in a reed-bed near St. Valéry. A nest containing five fresh eggs found on 11 June. This is a very common species in the reed-beds at Peronne.

Acrocephalus schœnobænus. Sedge-Warbler.

First noted on 29 April. Not a very common breeding species, and only one nest met with.

Hypolais icterina. Icterine Warbler.

Although most carefully sought for, this species was not identified on the Somme, but is common in river valleys north of Abbeville.

Phylloscopus trochilus. Willow-Warbler.

First heard on 14 April. A fairly common breeding species.

Phylloscopus collybita. Chiffchaff.

First heard on 8 April. A fairly common breeding species.

Turdus viscivorus. Mistle-Thrush.

Not common. A pair here and there nesting in village orchards.

Turdus musicus. Continental Song-Thrush.

Not common, and extremely shy and retiring. They appear to breed much later than those at home. Nests with five and four eggs respectively were found in the Forêt de

Crécy on 8 May and 20 May. In each case the nest was about seven feet from the ground against the trunk of a tree. The eggs were fresh. A nest containing five fresh eggs was found on 21 May in a hawthorn hedge near St. Valéry.

Turdus iliacus. Redwing.
Last seen on 3 May.

Turdus pilaris. Fieldfare.
Last seen on 29 April.

Turdus merula. Blackbird.
Common, but not nearly so much so as at home.

Turdus torquatus. Ring-Ouzel.
Two observed on migration on 29 April.

Phœnicurus phœnicurus. Redstart.
First noted on 8 April. A common breeding species, and a pair in nearly every orchard.

Erithacus rubecula. Continental Robin.
Fairly common. The first nest was found on 4 May and contained three young and three unfertile eggs. Subsequently nests with six, six, and seven fresh eggs were found on 10 May and 12 May. All these nests were in lane-side banks in Saigneville. A friend of the writer's found two other nests with six and seven eggs respectively near St. Valéry late in May. Seven is apparently a not uncommon clutch and appears to be larger than is usual with the British Robin.

Luscinia megarhyncha. Nightingale.
First heard on 6 May. Common in suitable woods and spinneys.

Saxicola rubicola. Stonechat.
A pair here and there, but not common. A nest with five considerably incubated eggs found on 8 May in a tuft of grass by the roadside at Neuville near St. Valéry.

Saxicola rubetra. Whinchat.

First noted on 9 May. A pair here and there, and commonest on the low-lying cultivated ground near the river-mouth, where they probably nested in the lucerne.

Œnanthe œnanthe. Wheatear.

Common near the sea, where they were probably breeding in the shingle-banks.

Accentor modularis. Hedge-Sparrow.

Not uncommon round the villages.

Troglodytes troglodytes. Wren.

A common nesting species.

Muscicapa grisola. Spotted Flycatcher.

First noted on 4 May. A common nesting species.

Hirundo rustica. Swallow.

Common. The sites selected for nesting in the Peronne district were often quite remarkable owing to the absence of buildings. The birds often used the circular Nissen huts put up for the troops, and were extraordinarily tame and confiding. A wooden porch put up outside the ruined single room occupied by the writer at Roisel was used directly it was put up. Another pair made valiant efforts to build their nest under the hood of one of the Battery lorries. The lorry went out regularly, but the old birds carried on building operations on its return and only gave up after two or three days.

Again, there was the curious case of a pair that managed to stick their nest against a vertical wall of a windowless room used by the officers of a Brigade H.Q. as a mess. The nest had no sort of underneath support.

Delichon urbica. Martin.
Riparia riparia. Sand-Martin.

Both these species were moderately common, and found nesting in suitable situations.

Dryobates major. Spotted Woodpecker.

Fairly common. The only breeding-hole which the writer thought was a certainty was appropriated by a pair of large tree-mice, or perhaps rats. The species was quite unknown to the writer.

Picus viridis. Green Woodpecker.

Common. Their breeding-holes were usually in most inaccessible positions well up the bare trunks of large beech-trees.

Iynx torquilla. Wryneck.

Not observed till late in July, and that was in northern Belgium.

Cuculus canorus. Cuckoo.

Fairly common. A pinkish type of egg found in a Reed-Warbler's nest near Saigneville on 9 June (fresh). The Cuckoo had completely broken and practically destroyed one of the Reed-Warbler's eggs, and, of the remaining three, one was badly holed.

The egg-sucking propensities of a certain Cuckoo are remarked on under the heading of the Blue-headed Yellow Wagtail.

Micropus apus. Swift.

Common.

Alcedo ispida. Kingfisher.

Occasionally seen.

Flammea flammea. Barn-Owl.

Common, and constantly flushed from old willows.

Carine noctua. Little Owl.

Very common. Nests with five and three fresh eggs respectively found near St. Valéry on 19 May. In one case an old bird sat so closely that it allowed the writer to place his hand underneath it without making the least attempt to move away or retaliate. The nests found were in old apple-trees.

Circus pygargus. Montagu's Harrier.

Not observed until 8 June, when several were seen quartering in the extensive fields of corn in the neighbourhood of the Forêt de Crécy. One was seen towards the end of June in the Peronne district.

Buteo buteo. Buzzard.

Often noticed in the Forêt de Crécy. Several could at any time be seen on the wing at once, and they doubtless breed there, but no nest was found.

Accipiter nisus. Sparrow-Hawk.

Not uncommon.

Falco tinnunculus. Kestrel.

Very common, and nesting in old Crows' nests.

Anas boschas. Wild Duck.

Common and breeding in the swamps.

Mareca penelope. Wigeon.

A pair seen on a pool near the mouth of the river on 9 May, but they were not seen after that date.

Spatula clypeata. Shoveler.

Three seen on a pool near the mouth of the river on 9 May, but not seen after that date.

Nyroca ferina. Pochard.

One seen on a pool near the mouth of the river on 9 May, but not seen after that date.

Ardea cinerea. Heron.

Occasionally seen near the river-mouth.

Ciconia ciconia. White Stork.

Five or six first seen on 7 June on the grassy flats near the river-mouth. Subsequently, a friend informs the writer, they became much more common, and he saw them constantly round St. Valéry.

Gallinago gallinago. Snipe.

An odd one seen now and again, but there was no drumming.

Limosa sp.? Godwit.

A flock of about twenty near the mouth of the river in summer plumage and last seen on 9 May.

Vanellus vanellus. Lapwing.

Large flocks in the early spring, but none remained to breed.

Podiceps fluviatilis. Little Grebe.

Met with near Peronne, and a nest containing four fresh eggs was found in the river swamp on 15 June.

Gallinula chloropus. Moorhen.

Not very common. Breeds.

Fulica atra. Coot.

Common in the early spring, but did not appear to remain for breeding purposes.

Columba palumbus. Ring-Dove.

A fairly common breeding species.

Streptopelia turtur. Turtle-Dove.

A common breeding species. First noted on 6 May.

Perdix perdix. Partridge.

Very common.

Coturnix coturnix. Quail.

Extremely common in both the river-mouth and Peronne districts, especially the latter.

Round Peronne the thousands of acres of uncut grass must have meant a most successful undisturbed breeding-season.

In conclusion, the writer wishes to state that he fully realizes how incomplete this list is. Species such as Hobby, Bittern, the Rails, Goshawk, and Honey-Buzzard were carefully watched for with no success, and the Gulls and Waders which were common near the sea during the early spring were not sought for and identified owing to lack of time and inclination.