

FIRST BREEDING RECORD OF BLANDFORD'S WARBLER
SYLVIA LEUCOMELANEA

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Breeding of Blandford's warbler *Sylvia leucomelanea* Hemprich & Ehrenberg was discovered in the Rift Valley 10 km south of the southern end of the Dead Sea, Israel, in April 1972. This is both the first record of the breeding of this species anywhere (Mackworth-Praed, 1955) and of its occurrence in Israel. Blandford's warbler is known from Midian, Arabia, and further south and also occurs in East Africa on the western side of the Red Sea down to Somalia (Meinertzhagen, 1954).

It is a relatively common species in the 'Arava and may be encountered in any stand of large *Acacia* trees. It is not found along the Dead Sea, probably owing to the scarcity of good *Acacia* stands there.

Its breeding, hitherto undescribed, is in early summer. Much song is heard in spring but occasionally also in autumn. The song is a melodious short burst of typical sylvian quality. Adults feeding young were collected in July 1971 (Mus. Tel Aviv University, Nos. Av. 8088 and Av. 8089), although a nest was not found until April 1972. This was in an *Acacia tortilis* tree, about 2.5 m above the ground, in the lower branches of the canopy. A second nest was found in May 1972 in a similar site. The nest is a typical cup-shaped warbler nest and the spotted eggs are also typically sylvian. There were three eggs in the first nest and two in the other. (The latter nest and eggs (shell fragments) are in the Tel Aviv University Zoological Museum, No. Av. 8271.) In 1973 the warblers were found in the area but did not breed, possibly as a consequence of the lack of rain. Babblers, *Turdoides squamiceps*, also did not breed that year in the same area. The occurrence of a resident population of Blandford's warbler over three years suggests that it was there before but was overlooked.

It is easy to overlook *S. leucomelanea* during migration when thousands of small warblers, many of them also with a black head and white underparts, are to be seen everywhere. Movements and song of *S. leucomelanea* are similar to those of other *Sylvia* species, and we agree with Meinertzhagen who commented that the bird looks like a small *S. hortensis*. An interesting difference from other species of this genus is its habit of flicking its jet black tail downwards, somewhat resembling the colour and

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movement of the blackstart. This convergence in colour and, to some extent, in movement of the tail is possibly related to the greater efficiency of the black colour as a signal in the desert habitat, as manifested by its widespread occurrence among a number of different species, including the house bunting, *Emberiza striolata*, and the desert wheatear, *Oenanthe deserti*.

The addition of Blandford's warbler to the avifauna of the Rift Valley in Israel adds to the number of bird species which are common to the arid regions of East Africa and the Rift Valley. These include birds such as the lappet-faced vulture, *Aegypius tracheliotus*; the sooty falcon, *Falco concolor*; the fan-tailed raven, *Corvus rhipidurus* and Tristram's grackle, *Onychognatus tristrami*. It has been customary to consider these species common to East Africa and the Rift Valley as a tropical element penetrating to the north along the Rift Valley.

S. leucomelanea was placed in the genus *Sylvia* by Meinertzhagen (1949). Its behaviour, nest and eggs justify his view. This is the only species of the genus which breeds in East Africa, while all the other species are of northern palearctic distribution. *S. leucomelanea* is thus probably an example of a species which penetrated to East Africa along the Rift Valley from the north.

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