

HINDE'S PIED BABBLER IN THE EMBU DISTRICT

By

E. J. BLENCOWE

From June 1955 till November 1957, I was stationed at Embu, where I found Hinde's Babbler *Turdoides Hindei* (Sharpe), a common bird. Since little is recorded of this species the following notes may be of interest. Although both the Northern Pied Babbler *Turdoides hypoleuca* (Cabanis), and Hinde's were common in the district, their distribution seemed to differ, Hinde's having a more restricted range. On no occasion did I record seeing these birds over an altitude of about 5,000 ft. or under 4,000 ft. They particularly seemed to like the fringes of cultivation where there were scattered trees, plenty of cover, and yet fairly open. On the other hand the Northern could be found anywhere from the forest edge at 6,000 ft. down to the semi-arid country near the Tana River at 3,000 ft. On no occasion did I see mixed parties of Hinde's and Northern. Although the two birds are quite easy to distinguish from each other I found the bright red eye of Hinde's a very important field characteristic (a point not made in Praed and Grant's "African Handbook of Birds"), the Northern has a whitish eye. Although the calls of the two birds are very similar and the variety great, I found I was able to distinguish each by its calls, that of Hinde's being less strident.

On September 7, 1957, I found a nest of Hinde's at Kiritiri. The choice of habitat and the formation of the nest was typical of the Northern. The nest was built near the top of a bush, 4½ ft. from the ground. The bush was at the edge of a small clump of trees into which the birds hastily retreated when alarmed. The cup of the nest was made from coarse grass and lined with finer grass. Two eggs were laid. I did not collect the eggs so was unable to compare them side by side with the eggs of the Northern, but I thought they were very much the same shade of blue. Eventually two chicks hatched out. The half-grown nestlings were slate grey in colour and had bright yellow gapes.

Although I did not find it possible to tell the male from the female in the field I thought by the difference in behaviour that there were two birds feeding the young. For the two hours I was watching, the parents were accompanied by two or three other birds. I could hear the party turning over leaves under the bushes, calling to each other softly as they hunted for food. While I was watching from the hide, nearly all the foraging for food was done on the ground under the bushes near the nesting site. The food brought to the young was a dark glutinous mass that might have been animal or vegetable matter and quite indescribable. Although I did take some photographs they were not very successful due to poor lighting conditions.

(Received 25th April, 1960)