

SOME PERIPATETIC BIRDS: TREETREEPEERS, PARTRIDGES, WOODPECKERS

It is a truism to say that the study of ornithology has made great advances in the last fifty years, and that important problems affecting the classification of certain species and their distribution have been brought much closer to solution. Classical scholars, however, still tend to rely on the identifications of ancient Greek bird-names made by a few standard works such as D'Arcy Thompson's *A Glossary of Greek Birds*² (1936) or O. Keller's *Die antike Tierwelt* (1909), apparently unaware that much of the ornithological information given there is now badly out of date, if not sheerly inaccurate. This brief paper aims proterptically to take four bird-names out of the Peripatetic corpus on natural history: κέρθιος, κυνπολόγος, πέρδιξ, and πιπώ: and to produce more precise identifications in the light of modern ornithological studies.

(1) κέρθιος and κυνπολόγος. The author of certain portions of book 8, and of the whole of book 9, of the *History of Animals* is now generally assumed not to have been Aristotle himself, but one or more scientists of the following century working in the Peripatetic tradition. The quality of many of the observations in these spurious sections, however, remains very high. *HA* 8.593^a 12 ff. describes the κυνπολόγος as being in size as small as a finch (ἀκανθυλλίς), in appearance ash-coloured and speckled, with a feeble call (φωνεῖ δὲ μικρόν), and belonging to the group of 'woodpeckers' (δρυοκόπος). Later on, *HA* 9.616^b 28 ff. describes the κέρθιος as a small bird which is bold in behaviour, lives about trees, eats 'wood-worms' (θρίπες), finds its food easily, and has a clear call (τὴν φωνὴν ἔχει λαμπράν). Modern authorities¹ generally agree that both passages refer to the same bird, the common treecreeper (*Certhia familiaris*), and at first sight this appears an attractive identification. The common treecreeper does occur in Greece, its description closely tallies with that of the two passages in *HA*, and although it is now known to belong to a different family from the true woodpeckers, its behaviour and habitat have a great deal in common with them. Nevertheless, closer attention to the Greek text reveals one important difference between the κέρθιος and the κυνπολόγος which classical scholars have overlooked. The former has a feeble voice, the latter has a ringing, clear one. Although the author (or authors) of the two passages in *HA* almost certainly did not realize it, we may well here be dealing with two different species of treecreeper, closely similar in all aspects of appearance and behaviour, but in the field most easily distinguished by their very different voices. These are the common treecreeper, whose call is a 'thin, high-pitched tsee or tsit',² and the short-toed treecreeper (*Certhia brachydactyla*) whose call is distinguished from the common treecreeper's by its 'much stronger, more piping call-note'.³ It is a reasonable inference that the κυνπολόγος is the common,

¹ e.g. C. J. Sundevall, *Die Thierarten des Aristoteles* (Stockholm, 1863), p.121; H. Aubert and F. Wimmer, *Aristoteles: Tierkunde* (Leipzig, 1868), ad loc.; Thompson, *Glossary*, s.vv., and in the Oxford translation, ad loc.

² R. Peterson, G. Mountfort, P. A. D. Hollom, *A Field Guide to the Birds of Britain and Europe*³ (London, 1974), p.281.

³ H. F. Witherby and others, *The Handbook of British Birds*, i (London, 1940), 235.

and the κέρθιος the short-toed, treecreeper.¹

(2) πέριδιξ is normally and correctly translated partridge, but the researcher who seeks in modern classical textbooks² for more precise identification of the various species identifiable from the ancient Greek descriptions will go away sadly confused and misled. Aristotle, *HA* 4.536^b 13 f., is a key passage here; the voice of certain creatures in the same γένος may vary, says Aristotle, according to the locality; e.g. with partridges, οἱ μὲν κακκαβίζουσιν, οἱ δὲ τριζουσιν.³ This acute observation has been more accurately appreciated by modern ornithologists than by classical scholars.⁴ The bird that calls 'kakkabi' is the chukar partridge (*Alectoris [graeca] chukar*), and the bird that calls 'tri-tri-tri' is the rock partridge (*Alectoris graeca*). Even when viewed at close range, these two birds are difficult to distinguish visually, and the safest diagnostic is the difference in their calls, which Aristotle accurately reproduces.⁵

More interestingly, however, recent research has shown⁶ that in the East Mediterranean today these two birds do not occur together in the same locality, but are geographically separated by a kind of *cordon sanitaire* which extends southwards through Thrace and across the Aegean Sea. To the west of this *cordon* (the Ionian Islands, mainland Greece, Euboea) the rock partridge lives, to the east of it (the Aegean islands except for Euboea; Asia Minor) the chukar. Whether the two birds belong to separate species, or are conspecific sub-species only, is still a matter of dispute,⁷ but there is no evidence of hybridization.

In the ancient world, the distribution patterns of the chukar and the rock partridge may well have differed somewhat from those existing today, but there is no positive evidence of large-scale changes. The chukar was doubtless as common in Aristotle's time near Assos in Lesbos as it is today,⁸ and the rock partridge as frequent in Macedonia and Attica;⁹ the argument for Aristotle's familiarity with both birds could not be more complete, although to Aristotle clearly the chukar and the rock partridge were the same bird, with a curious difference in call-note according to locality. But it is worth while in this connection to remember an observation of Theophrastus (fr. 181 Wimmer, cited by Athenaeus, 9.390 ab)¹⁰ to the effect that the partridge which calls 'kakkabi' is to be found in Attica to the east of the deme Corydallus, but the partridge which calls 'tittybi' occurs to the west of that deme. If 'tittybi' here is intended to be only a phonetic variant of Aristotle's 'tri-tri-tri',¹¹ it follows that in the

¹ On the present status of the two tree-creeper in Greece, see especially A. Kanellis and others, *Catalogus Faunae Graeciae: pars II, Aves* (Thessaloniki, 1969), pp.136 f.

² e.g. Sundevall, *Thierarten*, pp.139 ff.; Aubert and Wimmer, ad loc.; Thompson *Glossary*, s.v., and his translation of Aristotle's *HA*, ad loc.; Keller, *Die antike Tierwelt*, ii.156 ff.; Gossen in *RE* s.v. *Rebbuhn*, 348 ff.

³ Cf. also [Aristotle], *HA* 9.614^a 21 ff.; and Athenaeus, 9.390a ff.

⁴ Cf. especially G. G. Watson, *Ibis* 104 (1962), 353 ff., and *Evolution*, 16 (1962) 11 ff. O. Reiser, *Materialien zu einer Ornithologie balcanica: III, Griechenland und die griechische Inseln* (Vienna, 1905), pp.406 ff., is also very useful.

⁵ This discussion ignores the common

partridge (*Perdix perdix*), because today it is an exceptionally rare bird in Greece (Kanellis, pp.55 f.), and even before the modern decimation of such game birds by savagely excessive hunting the evidence suggests that it was never a well-established species.

⁶ Watson, loc.citt.

⁷ Watson, loc.citt.

⁸ H. Löhrl, *Vogelwelt*, 86 (1965), 106.

⁹ O. Steinfatt, *Journal für Ornithologie*, 96 (1955), 101.

¹⁰ Cf. also Aelian, *NA* 3.35; Antigonus *Car. Mir.* 6.

¹¹ Dr. K. Borthwick reminds me that there is a similar variation between Babrius 131.7 and Lucian, *Tim.* 21 in their attempts to reproduce phonetically the call of hirundines; Babrius uses τῖττυβίξω, Lucian τριζέω.

fourth century B.C. the chukar's range extended farther west into the mainland of Attica, and the rock partridge's was correspondingly more limited than it is today.¹

(3) $\pi\pi\omega$. The author of *HA* 8.593^a5 ff., in his section on 'woodpeckers', identifies two kinds of $\pi\pi\omega$: a larger and a lesser, similar in appearance but differing in size and strength of voice. Modern scholarship² too readily identifies these two birds as the commonest of the European barred woodpeckers, the greater spotted woodpecker (*Dendrocopus major*) and the lesser spotted (*D. minor*), without first inquiring into the distribution of these two species throughout Greece. The lesser-spotted woodpecker will give us no trouble here; though not an abundant bird in modern Greece, it is the only small European barred woodpecker clearly distinguishable by size alone ($5\frac{3}{4}$ "") from the other related species. The Peripatetic 'lesser' $\pi\pi\omega$ can be no other bird than this. But the 'larger' $\pi\pi\omega$ is not so easy. There are in Greece today four very similar species of 'larger' barred woodpecker, all roughly of the same size: the greater spotted (9"), middle spotted (*Dendrocopus medius*, $8\frac{1}{2}$ ""), white-backed (*D. leucotos*, 10"), and the Syrian (*D. syriacus*, 9") woodpeckers. By an ancient observer, without the benefit of binoculars and modern taxonomy, these four species would be easily confused and probably considered as variant plumages of a single type of bird. But it is reasonable to ask which of these four species is most likely to have been seen by the Peripatetic author of *HA* 8.593^a5 ff. Hardly the greater spotted woodpecker, which has always (since observations have been made) been rare throughout Greece; nor the white-backed, for the same reason. The Syrian and middle spotted woodpeckers are very much the common large barred woodpeckers in Greece today, and accordingly it seems most probable that the 'Larger' $\pi\pi\omega$ is a fusion of these two species. If the author of *HA* 8.593^a5 ff. had been Aristotle himself, and not a scholar from a succeeding generation, the identity of the 'larger' $\pi\pi\omega$ could have been even more precise. Some of the fieldwork for *HA* appears to have been done in and around Lesbos, and it is the middle spotted woodpecker that is particularly common on that island, at least today.³

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¹ Because of these patterns of distribution, however, it is fairly safe to identify the partridges on the Caravanserai frescoes at Knossos (Pendlebury, *Handbook to the Palace of Minos* (London, 1954), pl. xii and p.68) as chukar partridges. This is perhaps of only minor significance, but Dr. E. K. Borthwick draws my attention to a further point equally consequential upon the patterns of distribution of chukar and rock partridge, yet of considerably greater importance to the literary historian. It concerns the controversy about the birthplace and original nationality of the poet Alcman. Recent opinion (e.g. D. L. Page, *Alcman, The Partheneion* (Oxford, 1951), pp.167 ff.; M. Treu, in *RE Supp.* XI (1968), 23 ff.; F. J. Cuartero, *Bol. Inst. Est. Helenicos*,

Barcelona, 6 (1972), 3 ff.; M. Balasch, *Emerita*, 41 (1973), 309 ff.) inclines to the view that Alcman was a Lydian from Sardis, not a native Spartan. Dr. Borthwick acutely observes that Alcman's use of the word $\kappa\alpha\kappa\kappa\alpha\beta\acute{\iota}\delta\epsilon\varsigma$ (fr. 39 Page) to denote 'partridges' may henceforth be adduced as a supplementary piece of evidence for the view that the poet grew up in the chukar belt (of which Lydia forms a part), and not in that of the rock partridge (which would include the mainland of the Peloponnese).

² e.g. Sundevall, 128; Aubert and Wimmer, ad loc.; Keller, ii.50 ff.; Thompson, *Glossary*, s.v., and translation of Aristode, ad loc.; Steier in *RE* s.v. *Specht*, 1546 ff.

³ Löhrl, p.107; cf. Reiser, pp.302 ff.