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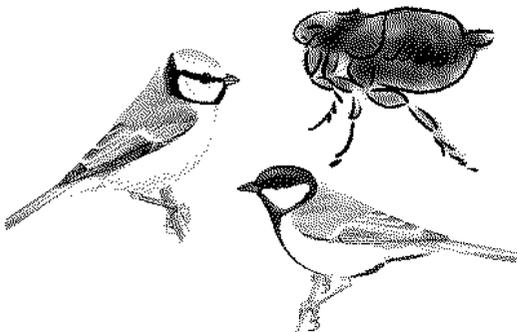
News

December 1995

Rather than duplicate a lot of information, I thought I'd produce a little newsletter this year, just to catch up on what I've been doing etc.

I've now been in Switzerland for just over a year, and have been mostly enjoying it. It's different from anywhere else I've lived.

The language is strange (stranger than I had hoped - Swiss German is very different from the *Hochdeutsch* that I learnt at school), but I manage to get by, even if I've not managed to pick up much of the local *Bärndutch*. There are other differences too - I managed to get into trouble last January for doing my laundry on a Sunday, and it's very strange to live in a country where a litre of orange juice is cheaper than a litre of milk. There are many pluses 'though - A good standard of living - trains that run on time - efficient heating and insulation.

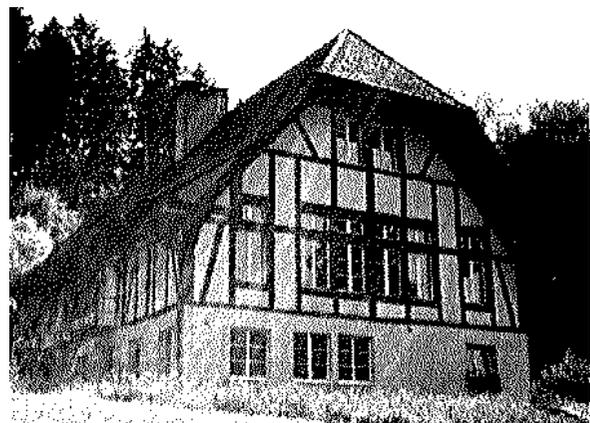


My work has been going pretty well, 'though again, it's very different from anything that I've done before. I'm now looking at interactions between the flea *Ceratophyllus gallinae* and its hosts, particularly the blue-tit and great-tit. This meant that I spent all of April, May and June doing daily nest-box rounds and handling birds. It's the first time that I've worked with vertebrates, and I found it rather stressful - particularly taking blood from small chicks to check for blood parasites and anaemia. It's also very rewarding 'though, and I took a great pride in my blue-tits which successfully fledged, and shed the odd tear over those which didn't.

Since the end of the field season, I've put in many hours taking apart frozen blue-tit nests and counting the flea larvae and adults that they contain. This is a real chore, and the third most boring thing I've ever done, but I hope when it's finished I shall have some good data. Unfortunately, it will be a few more months before it is finished!

The other major part of my work has been teaching a practical course on animal behaviour during the winter semester. This has been quite fun, 'though finding animals which will behave in an interesting way during the winter is a recurring problem! Luckily I've been able to teach the course in English, which doesn't seem to be a problem for the students, who seem to enjoy the course. I'm also teaching statistics as part of this course, which I don't think they enjoy quite so much, but *I've* certainly been learning quite a lot!

The place where I work is a converted barn in the middle of the wood where my tit nestboxes are hung, and is just about perfect. It's full of character, but also well-equipped. Best of all 'though, the other people working there are all both nice and good scientists - a rare combination - which leads to an excellent working atmosphere.



Apart from work I've done a few other things over the last year, 'though not quite as many as I would have liked!

I'm slowly visiting the rest of Switzerland in an effort to get to know the country a little better. Mostly I've been visiting the major towns, but I hope to branch out into mountain-walking etc. before too long. In the meantime, I'm exploring the area where I live at the weekends, and am constantly surprised by the number of *Wanderweg* (footpaths) in the area. It's a pity that I'm not very keen on skiing, at least the down-hill sort (I can never see the point in repeatedly going up to the top of a mountain and down again; I'd much rather go somewhere), but I intend to have a go at *langlaufen* this winter, if there is enough snow.

I'm living in a very nice ground-floor flat in a quiet area of Bern known as Rossfeld. It's a small flat by Swiss standards, but still seems quite luxurious to me! Most of my neighbours are over 60 and female, which has its advantages and disadvantages. I have been inundated with offers of odd pieces of furniture, rugs, kitchen utensils and the like, but I get occasional complaints about the noise I make (me, noisy?), and they are hopelessly set in their ways...

I've been back to England a few times over the last year, and will be back there again at Christmas. The longest visit was three weeks in late June and early July, during which I managed to get around and see quite a few people - including an enjoyable few days in Scotland. While I was in Islip, visiting my parents, we had the "Islip rout" - a fair to celebrate the 350th anniversary of the battle of Islip bridge, which wasn't really very exciting - still, I got a good commemorative tea-towel! Far more enjoyable was the Silwood ball, which I attended for the second time while in England, thanks to the loan of a dinner jacket by Robert Esnouf, a friend from school days. My most recent visit was for the wedding of Karsten Schönrogge and Christiana Leitz, friends from my days at Silwood Park, who got married on the 4th November - close enough to bonfire night to have a good display of fireworks laid on !

In return, I've had a few visitors here in Switzerland. Karsten visited very briefly before Christmas last year, and Steve Mott and Julie Beale (friends from college days) visited for not much longer in May (unfortunately in the middle of the field season, so I couldn't be as hospitable as I would have liked). Robert and Iris stayed for a fun week in late July and early August, and managed to catch the festivities and fireworks on 1st August (Swiss National Day). I

always enjoy having visitors, so please do drop in if you ever find yourself near Bern!

Since I've been in Switzerland, I've spent almost all my available holiday time going over to England and rushing around visiting people, so I've not had what I would call a real holiday in the last year. This is a pity, since Switzerland should be an ideal base from which to explore the rest of Europe - I really must go to Italy this coming year now that it's only just next door!

Recently I've started learning to dance (don't laugh!). O.K., so I'm not very good at it yet, but I'm improving as the weeks go by. It's a Tango and Samba course run by the University of Bern, so people will have to watch out at next year's Silwood ball!

So, what of the future? I have many plans for the coming year, and I hope that this time I will complete most of them. Firstly, I intend to get all the papers from my thesis finally submitted, after all it's now ten years since I started my D. Phil.! I'm also hoping to get back to Australia next Autumn, primarily to attend the next Behavioral Ecology conference in Canberra, but I hope that I'll be able to catch up with a few friends and see some more of the lucky country as well. In August there is an Evolutionary Biology conference in Budapest, so I hope to renew my acquaintance with Hungary. I would like to make it over to America again, to visit Naomi Pierce (my D.Phil supervisor) and her lab - there are still many interesting things I would like to do with lycaenid butterflies and ants! I'm not sure where the time will come from for such a visit 'though!

At the moment I am in the middle of the animal behaviour practical course, and that will continue until the beginning of March. This spring I shall doubtless be very busy with the great-tits again, 'though I will also be starting laboratory work very soon, rearing fleas under different conditions to look at life-history trade-offs, so I guess that I'll be pretty busy all round until the summer.

In the meantime, I hope to have a good break at Christmas to revive my somewhat flagging energy for the coming year. I hope that you will also have a fun festive season, and with any luck I'll see you again in 1996!

David