DOT-DASH CODE OF BIRD'S LIFE

By DOUGLAS ORGILL

THE strip of film was about nine inches long and an inch-and-a-half wide.

In three parallel lines, it was covered with dots and dashes of differing length, something like an irregular Morse code.

"That," said Mr. Noble Rollin, represents a day in the life of a bluetit."

I probably looked as bewildered as I felt.

"It does seem rather complicated," said Mr. Rollin. "But the principle is simple enough." He took me outside into the two acres of grounds belonging to the Bird Research Station of which he is in charge at the little Northumbrian village of Glanton.

Wired up

BEFORE us lay the green and russet hump of Glanton Pike, beyond which the Wooler hills stretched blue into the distance.

And in front of the house, the valley dipped down from the village street of Glanton to where the smoke from Whittingham chimneys rose into the morning sunlight.

Among the trees and shrubs of the Station Mr. Rollin showed me a box from which wires ran into a research room inside the house.

Each box—Mr. Rollin, who designed them, calls them receptor heads—is fitted with food, drink, and resting perches.

Every time a bird rests on a perch, an electrical contact is made, and for as long as the bird stays there a line is photographed on to a camera connected to the box.

Dots and dashes

AND the strip of film, measured against a time-scale, gives a complete pattern of the bird's day in terms of food, drink, and rest—the dots showing when it has simply hopped on and off a perch, the longer dashes when it has been there for some time.

Not for Mr. Rollin the casual spotting of the amateur with field-glasses and notebook. For although he uses these things he allies them to modern technical equipment to obtain his results.

I asked him how he induced wild birds to use the boxes.

"They gradually come to find them useful," he replied. "Then each generation trains the next to use them."

We walked around the cages at the end of the Station. There were multi-coloured, gorgeous pheasants from the plains of India, American wood-ducks, a red-backed parakeet from Australia, a tawny owl, and a rare red-headed bunting.

They are all used for breeding and observation purposes, since Mr. Rollin relates the work he does on wild birds with studies of tame birds.

Then, with a flash of colour, a common chaffinch planed down on to a tree. Mr. Rollin ignored the exotic pheasants, the bright-plumaged ducks, the rare bunting.

"There goes the most valuable bird on the Station," he said.

"I caught that cock chaffinch four years ago in the winter flock of 1947, and put a red ring on his leg to identify him. Since then he's been back each year—and always with the same mate.

"I know more about that bird than I do about any of my neighbours in the village."

All charted

THE songs, courtship routine, feeding, and resting of this pair of chaffinches have been entered on detailed charts, showing the intensity of each activity at various times of the day.

For Mr. Rollin is a bird watcher with a difference. He is not primarily interested in "spotting" rare visitants to the Station. He had enough bird adventure when, some years ago, he spent lonely months exploring the Hudson Bay wilderness of Canada.

His research today is into the daily lives of the birds. No domestic detail is too insignificant to escape him. He knew just when and where the yellow-billed blackbird we saw feeding on the grass had met its last mate, and how that mate had died of a broken back, having been blown against a tree in a high wind.

THIS jay, with a reputation for cheekiness, was photographed at Glanton Bird Research Station.

Winter leader

HE knew which was the leader of the winter flock of chaffinches which twittered and scuffled in the branches, and where the willow warblers slept at night.

The life of the birds is apparently so aimless and haphazard that any detailed survey of it seems impossible. But, under Mr. Rollin's patience with binoculars and ingenuity with equipment, those apparently aimless songs, fights, courtships, roosting places begin to assume a pattern, and even to be, within limits, predictable.

Inevitably, I asked Mr. Rollin: "What good does it all do?"

He smiled. "I'm not the least bit interested in whether what I put out has any practical or economic value," he said.

"I work because I want to know more about my subject."

I felt a little ashamed of the question as we walked back down the path, listening to the blackbird's song. For that is why all pure scientists have worked, from the first man who struck flints and found fire.

TODAY'S CROSSWORD

Across: 1, Girl invited into the garden (4). 10, Roughly circular? (5). 11, Scorch and rase (4). 12, Scandinavian Senor (5). 14, Time-tables of chess duel (9). 16, It's sport to start mushrooms (5). 22, Pointed figure (4). 23, May cause a slump (5). 24, The dance to wind up with? (4).

Down: 1, Can be eaten if there's room! (4). 2, A sketchy affair (6). 3, River in rural surroundings (4). 4, Mournful ridge (5). 5, Grade