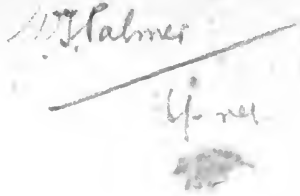
BIRD BIOGRAPHIES

OLIVER G. PIKE F.Z.S.



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WITH A LOOK OF PERFECT CONTENTMENT THE LINNET SETTLED UPON HER NEST.

BIRD BIOGRAPHIES

AND OTHER BIRD SKETCHES

BY

OLIVER G. PIKE, F.Z.S., F.R.P.S.

Fellow of the Institute of Lecturers

WITH PHOTOGRAPHS BY THE AUTHOR
AND BY ARTHUR BROOK
ALL FROM WILD NATURE

LONDON
JARROLD & SONS, 10 & 11, WARWICK LANE, E.C.

TO

MY DEAR WIFE

I LOVINGLY DEDICATE

THIS BOOK

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LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

CHAPTER I

THE BUZZARD

THE BUZZARD'S HOME

TWELVE years ago last March, I first looked upon the wild hills of Wales, and saw the Buzzard in its home. The grey dawn of a cold morning was giving place to the more cheerful light of sunrise. The outlines of the mountains were sharp and clear against the sky, covered as it was with quickly drifting clouds, which as they passed the east were changed to red, and then to a deeper crimson, and again to gold as the sun came up between two great hills. I could not, if I tried, forget that first meeting with the hills, and now although twelve years have passed I love them more than

ever. Each year since I have visited the Buzzard's home, sometimes many times in the course of a year, and have seen and studied this magnificent bird at all seasons, and under all conditions, and my pleasure has been greater, because through all these years not a single specimen has been collected to help in my research, and not a single egg has been taken from the scores of nests that I have visited, and no birds have been disturbed, or forsaken their homes through my photographic work. I went to the Buzzard's home knowing absolutely nothing about the bird, and the observations which I have recorded in this life-story of the bird have been gathered at first-hand from Nature.

It was early in the morning when I landed in the Buzzard's home, and the only two birds which greeted me were a Missel Thrush and a Twite, which were both singing to the rising sun. Later on in the day we took a trap and drove for

six miles away into the heart of the hills, away from stations and villages, and before we reached our little inn—an altogether charming place where my happiest days in Birdland have been spent—we saw high up over the great crags six Buzzards soaring.

Before we trace the life history of the Buzzard, let us have a look at its home. There is no place in the British Islands where we have such splendid opportunities of seeing the bird as in a certain spot in Wales. This is owing to the protection accorded the birds by one or two land-owners, and the efforts that these gentlemen have made to save from extinction one of our noblest birds of prey deserves the heartiest thanks of all bird-lovers. I dread to think what would have happened to the Welsh Buzzard if these few men had not protected it, or if the same treatment had been given to it as it receives on some of the neighbouring

estates. But now, thanks to their protection, the Buzzard is firmly established in this part of Wales.

Sometimes when I have been looking out over the great wild moors, bleak hills, vast forests, and boiling rivers, I have thought what a fitting place the Buzzard has chosen for its home. Some of the haunts can be described with one word—solitude. A solitude so silent and impressive that one seems almost awed. I remember a view from a nest high up on a giant crag. It was stupendous, and of marvellous grandeur. Over a thousand feet below me, the river winding like a silver thread, made its way over boulders and between rocks. Snowy white waterfalls and smaller mountain streams, as they came down from the heights, and the wind as it played through the grass, were the only sounds that greeted me. The higher portions of the hills were dark and bare, but lower down patches

LOOKING AROUND.

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of russet brown showed where last season's dead bracken lay. Small winding streaks seemed to be all over the hills, and these were the well-trodden pathways of mountain sheep. Now and again, the loud "mew" of a Buzzard was heard above the music of the waters, and the harsh *krraak*, *krraak* of the Raven, both wild cries, and so much in harmony with their surroundings. In this vast open view before me, not a tree or bush could be seen, but as we travelled on, following a mountain stream until it became a river, trees became numerous, and large forests covered the hill-sides, but we still saw or heard the cries of Buzzards as we went near to the spots which they had chosen for their nests. All kinds of scenery we passed through, from the peat-covered hills, rugged and bare, and broken up by the action of water into a hundred deep ditches passing and recrossing each other, in a puzzling maze, to the lower meadows

with their trees and hedges; but in all these spots we came across the "little Eagle of the hills," and in a walk of twenty-five miles we saw in one day thirty different Buzzards, and found them nesting in places varying from a bare ledge only one hundred feet from the summit of a mountain over two thousand feet in height, to the branches of a weather-beaten oak, within two miles of a busy town. Over this great tract of country the Buzzards roam, as safe from molestation as if they were in captivity, that is, as far as they themselves are concerned, but their nests are often robbed, and a few years ago a certain collector did his utmost—or so it seemed—to destroy the Buzzards by taking every egg he came across, but thanks to the action taken by a few bird-lovers, he was turned out of the Principality and forbidden by several landowners to again set foot upon their property. Although a few nests are still

robbed each season, the birds hold their own well, and the incident just recorded is the only serious attack that has been made upon the birds during the past twelve years.

In this land of vast moors, forests, and rugged cliffs, the Buzzard is secure, and I hope the day is very far distant when it will be banished from the hills it loves so well.

THE COURTING OF THE BUZZARD.

The swollen rivers, fed as they are by a thousand small streams coming down from the hills, are the result of the last of the winter snows. The big patch on the east side of a large crag had disappeared, and the Buzzards knew that the winter was dead. During the past few weeks they had had rather a rough time, owing to the severe weather. Right through the autumn, and well into November, the young had remained with

their parents, and during the winter in the same locality as their parents, and now with the approach of warmer weather, and above all the ever lengthening sunlight, the birds were beginning to pair. At the end of February twenty birds gathered together; several families were here, and they circled round and round over the summit of a high cliff. For about twenty minutes they did this, then one and another settled on the rocks. But up they all went again, this time higher until they were mere specks, and it was a wonderful flight this. As the birds flew out from the rocks, they sailed out with outspread wings, and uttered their loud musical "mew," then up into the sky they went, with hardly a visible movement of their wings. Some went in one direction, a few in the other; some sailed out over the valley, but all climbed the air, and seemed to get nearer to one another as they reached the highest point.

With a powerful field-glass we could see them better, and it was a very beautiful exercise they went through. Round and round, in and out, crossing and recrossing, the birds travelled, and half an hour later all slowly came down again, their cries getting louder as they reached the rocks. For several days they went through these exercises; sometimes we saw as many as twenty birds together, while other parties consisted of only six, but when the sun was warm they went up, climbing the air with outspread wings many times throughout the day.

Before the second week of March was over the flocks had broken up, and the birds went off in pairs. It was not an uncommon thing to see a pair of birds detach themselves from a flock when they were soaring, and go off into the distance. Perhaps these were old birds, for they pair for life—at least that is as far as we can judge. I have known one pair which

it is easy to distinguish, owing to the male being very dark and the female remarkably light, to have nested for seven years in one valley. These pairs which leave the flocks go straight to their old nesting haunts, and set to work to repair the old nests. The remaining, and probably younger, birds keep together for a few days, but eventually all have paired off, and, as far as we can observe, all their courting is done on the wing, and there are no desperate fights, as so often happens with some of our smaller birds when the males are courting the females. Some of these younger birds are forced to go farther afield for breeding quarters, for the old Buzzards, although they have allowed their young to remain near them all through the winter, will not put up with any opposition in their own immediate neighbourhood. Unfortunately most of these younger birds wander great distances, and it often happens that they

go to an unprotected locality and they are quickly shot or trapped—and there are few birds so easy to trap as a Buzzard. In one of the most beautiful parts of central Wales the Buzzard was a few years ago to be found in fair numbers, but a new keeper coming to that part trapped and shot in a few seasons over a dozen pairs of birds. That keeper has now been removed, and another has taken his place, and as his ground is especially suitable for nesting purposes, I hope that some of these younger birds which leave the protected area, will now go over to this spot, where they are to be protected.

Without any sparring or fighting the courting of these birds is done, and I think they choose their mates during the time when they flock together. However, this is a thing that must be left to conjecture; but before March is well advanced, all the birds have paired, and are setting

to work to either repair the old nests, or build new ones.

THE BUILDING OF THE NESTS.

A perfect Buzzard's nest is a very finely constructed thing, but there are few nests which vary so much in construction. Some are very large, well made and lined, while others consist of a few sticks and pieces of wool placed in an untidy manner on a ledge. Each pair of birds usually make two nests in the same dingle or wood; on one or two occasions I have found three.

As soon as a pair of birds leave the flock, they at once commence repairing the old nests or building new ones. If the weather has been warm, at the end of February and early in March they begin to carry sticks to the ledge or tree which has been selected. Then if another spell of cold weather sets in, the nest building is neglected; but at the end of

STANDING BY HER EGGS.

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March, and beginning of April, no matter how bad the weather, all the birds are busy with their nests. And a very busy time this is for the Buzzards, for a nest of such dimensions needs a lot of building, and not only do they repair the nest which is to be used, but the other one as well. I have known a pair of Buzzards to spend nearly the whole of March in building a nest on a ledge which had not been occupied for several years, and they went so far as to completely line it, and it was one of the best Buzzard's nests that I have ever seen; and then for no reason that I could discover the birds left it, and went right across the valley and made another nest over there, in which the eggs were laid.

Those birds which build their nests on the crags of some of the higher mountains, have to fly in some cases four or five miles to a spot where they can collect sticks, but my experience has

been that these birds which build in the more bleak parts do not use so many sticks for their nests as those which build in well-wooded parts. I remember one nest which was in rather a remarkable place. We were climbing one of the highest mountains of central Wales, and were within about one hundred feet of the summit, when a Buzzard flew from a ledge of a rock. I thought by her loud cries that she had a nest, and on walking to the ledge, which could easily be looked on to from the level ground, I saw the eggs. There was hardly any attempt at nest building, just one or two pieces of heather, but there was a fair amount of sheep's wool. This was not placed in a very tidy position, but just lying about on the ledge in a loose condition around the eggs. There were two eggs in the nest, and these were both addled, and we found out afterwards that the keeper of this moor

had seen the bird sitting on the eggs in this nest just eight weeks previously! When we found the nest it was the second week in June, so the bird must have been sitting on those eggs since April, and although she had been on for so long, very little material could have been added during incubation, for it was one of the very poorest Buzzard's nests I have seen.

As a contrast to this, I know a nest in a wood which is such an enormous structure that it is quite a landmark when the trees are bare of leaves. This nest has been there for ten years to my knowledge, but being in such a prominent position has often been robbed. When I climbed up to it, I found it to be about three feet in depth, and about the same distance across. It is rather difficult to give exact measurements of such a nest, for some of the small branches used stick out considerably farther than the

measurements given; however, the size mentioned above gives a fairly correct idea of the more solid part of the nest.

The typical nest of the Welsh Buzzard is constructed, on the outside, of stout sticks, smaller twigs on these, often pieces of ivy intertwined with them, and coarse grasses; while the inside is lined with patches of sheep's wool and coarse mountain grass. The whole structure is rather flat, and measures about two feet four inches across.

In some of the well-wooded parts I have sometimes found a nest somewhat similar to those made in the wilder parts—that is, very few if any sticks, and a few pieces of dried grass tufts and sheep's wool as a lining. The only theory that I can bring forward to account for these nests is, that they are made by young birds which have not had any previous experience of nest building. It is those nests that have been repaired each year,

AFTER HIS FIRST FLIGHT THE BUZZARD LANDED UPON A ROCK.

and which have not suffered much by the winter storms, which grow to such a size, and these incomplete nests are found on ledges where nests have not been found previously.

The favourite position for the nest seems to be a ledge on a cliff, especially if there is a tree growing from this rock. The nest is seldom in a place difficult to get to ; I have only found three that it was not possible to get at easily, and one of these was the most wonderful Buzzard's nest that I have seen—but more about this later. Large trees in sloping woods on steep hill-sides are also favourite spots, but out of the scores of nests that I have seen, the majority have been on ledges supported by a bush or tree. The nests in this case have been built right up against the side of the rock, and the trunk of the tree or branches of the bush have afforded good protection to the nest. On one occasion

my friend Brook found a Buzzard's nest on the ground amongst heather, in just the kind of situation that the Merlin would choose. In this instance there was very little attempt at nest construction, just a few pieces of heather and grasses and sheep's wool. Unfortunately the eggs were taken by a Crow or egg-thief; this was a great pity, as full preparation had been made to photograph the bird feeding the young as soon as they left the shells, and the peculiar situation in which the nest was built made it an almost ideal place for photography. On several occasions our plans for photography have been frustrated by the unprincipled egg-thief. At the commencement of this book I mentioned that a certain collector made a desperate attack on the Welsh nests. Unfortunately, although he has been banished from Wales, his efforts to damage the birds have not ceased, for only a short

time ago we found two collectors who intended to make a descent on certain Buzzards' nests with marked maps which had been supplied to them by this man!

THE LAYING OF THE EGGS.

After the nest is completed, a whole week will sometimes elapse before the first egg is laid. In the majority of cases, I might say in almost every case that has come under my notice, the Buzzard will commence to sit immediately after the first egg is deposited in the nest. Three, four, or five days later the second egg is laid, and the third egg follows usually two days after the second. Incubation takes thirty days. Although I have seen a very large number of Buzzards' nests in Wales, I have never yet seen a nest containing a clutch of four eggs. I believe the Devonshire Buzzards often lay four eggs, but the usual number to be found in the Welsh

Buzzard's nest is two. The majority of those I have seen have not been handsomely marked, but I remember one clutch of three which were the very finest eggs I have ever looked upon.

Just at the time when the first egg is laid, the birds place in the nest a few green leaves. Sometimes these are ivy leaves, at other times the leaves of the mountain ash, but all through the time of incubation fresh green leaves are placed in the nest. I have often wondered why the birds did this; perhaps it is so that the eggs shall have a certain amount of dampness around them; but I rather believe it is for decorative purposes, for there is no doubt that the Buzzard, like the Kite, likes to have its nest smart. Five years ago, I found a nest on a ledge of a cliff, where unfortunately it was impossible to climb with a camera, which was decorated in a most wonderful manner. Long before we

SETTLED UPON HER EGGS.

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reached the ledge on which the nest was built we noticed a large mass of white, and when we got nearer, I was surprised to find that this was a quantity of flowers of the mountain ash. The whole of the nest, and also the ledge each side, was simply covered with blossoms, and the birds certainly must have spent a lot of time in plucking them and placing them in position.

If we should go near the nest when it contains eggs, the birds will rise up in the air almost immediately above their home and give out their loud cry, *pee-o-ou*, *pee-o-ou*, and owing to this habit they have led many a collector to their nest. The loud cry can be heard for a great distance, and immediately the male bird sees any one approaching he will fly above the nest calling, and in a very few minutes his mate joins him. I have known some birds which become very bold when we go near their nest, and

one repeatedly swooped down at my head when standing on the cliff above its home. I think this must have been the same bird which attacked a friend of mine in a previous year. As he stood by the nest, the large bird rose high above him, then came down like a great feathered dart right at him, not "putting on the brake" until about a yard from his head. He tried to drive it away by waving his stick, but time after time the bird attacked him in this manner. I only know one pair which behave so violently and it is rather alarming to stand near their nest.

THE YOUNG.

I mentioned previously that several days elapse between the laying of the first and second egg, and as the bird sits as soon as the first egg is laid, the result is that one young bird arrives in the nest some days before its companions. During

YOUNG BUZZARD AND ITS DEAD COMPANION.

the first fortnight one of the old birds will remain at the nest to look after the young, and if disturbed it will behave in the same manner as when it had eggs —that is, it circles over its home calling loudly. The instant the young bird hears this cry of alarm, no matter how young it is, it will squat low in the nest, and as long as the old birds cry it will remain almost motionless; but when the cries cease, if we successfully hide ourselves near the nest, we notice what an energetic little creature it is. It stands up in the nest, usually upon a piece of food that has been placed there, and with its powerful beak commences to pull pieces off. I once watched one of these baby Buzzards for several hours, and one incident amused me very much. The youngster had a rabbit in the nest, and it had hold of a rather tough piece of skin and it made the most strenuous efforts to pull this off; for many minutes

it tugged at it, pushing the body, to which it was attached, away with its two feet, and eventually the skin broke, and the baby went tumbling head over tail across the nest, but it had succeeded in obtaining what it wanted, for when it gained its feet it swallowed the fought-for morsel with several satisfied gulps!

During the first few nesting seasons that I spent in the Buzzard's home, I found that in nearly every nest only one young bird survived. This puzzled me very much, for in these nests I had previously seen two young, but by careful watching I found out what actually took place. I believe that when the young disappear in this way, it only takes place in localities where the parents have difficulty in finding sufficient food for their young. When the first youngster leaves the shell it grows quickly, as all young birds do just after coming from the egg, and when the second bird arrives, the

YOUNG BUZZARDS READY TO ENTER THE WORLD.

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first is very much stronger than its weaker brother. When the parents bring food to the nest at long intervals, this strong, healthy youngster runs forward to meet them, and the weaker bird is driven away with pushes and pecks, and in some cases prevented from taking food, and the stronger bird obtains most of it. Then, again, when the parents are away for any length of time, the first bird begins sparring at its companion, and if it should draw blood, then it at once commences to eat it. The weaker goes to the wall, and the stronger survives.

I have mentioned this theory of mine before, and several well-known naturalists have stated in print that it is nothing more or less than a "fairy tale." Well, I suppose that these writers have never spent more than a day at a time in the Buzzard's haunt, and I know that in the case of one of the men, his only experience with the Buzzard in a wild state

has been when he has made a hurried week-end visit to the haunt to take all the clutches of eggs that he could find! Hardly a fit person to criticise! The fact remains that the young *do* disappear, and in over seventy-five per cent. of the nests only one young is reared. In support of my statement, I and a friend have actually witnessed the performance take place. We have seen the young sparring, and the two stronger birds in the nest making a meal of their weaker companion, and we watched until the only thing to tell that a tragedy had taken place, was a few bones left in the nest. It often happens that one of the young of the Golden Eagle disappears, also with the Kite and several other birds of prey, and it will be found that in nearly every case this missing bird has been devoured by its nest companions.

The young Buzzard has plenty of

variety in its food. Rabbits, moles, rats, mice, beetles, and frogs are brought to it. I have spent many days altogether at the Buzzard's nest, well concealed from view so that the birds should not see me. At one nest, after waiting nine hours, I thought that perhaps the best time to photograph the birds would be in the early morning, as I had not had much success during the day. I noticed that enough food had been placed in the nest to last the one youngster some hours, and this had been brought in the early morning. So I tramped the four miles back to my little inn, had a good meal, and at ten o'clock at night was once more back in my hiding place. I remained there all through the night, and quite early in the morning, before it was light enough to expose a plate, the hen Buzzard left the nest, where she had been brooding over her baby all night, flew out over the moor, and

soon returned with a fine fat frog. This was pulled to pieces and handed to the young bird, and when it had swallowed the whole of this rather substantial breakfast, it closed its eyes and settled down for some hours, and the mother, instead of remaining at the nest, settled on a rock just above my head behind me, where it was quite impossible for me to take a photograph of her, and remained there, calling at intervals, until nine o'clock in the morning! Hungry and tired, I crept out of my hiding place, completely beaten by the bird! That morning I had to return home, otherwise I should not have given up.

The young remain in the nest for not less than five weeks, and even when strong enough to fly, seem reluctant to leave. The parents try to attract them from the nest with food, and do their utmost to induce them to fly. At first

HIS FIRST RABBIT.

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they are very wary at leaving the nest, and are very clumsy fliers at their first few attempts, but with loud calls the parents induce them to follow to the open moors, where they are often led to food. For many more weeks the parents look after them, warning them of the approach of enemies and showing them how to capture moles and young rabbits. The birds remain together until the autumn, and are occasionally driven away by their parents to fresh fields and moors where they have to shift for themselves, but in most cases they remain in the locality during the winter.

In the winter months the Buzzard is a scavenger of the hills, and if a sheep or any other creature should die, one bird and then another will soon discover the carcass, for "where the carcass is, there will the Eagles be gathered together," and it is surprising how quickly the news travels on the hills. One bird in

soaring over will spot the creature; another Buzzard a mile or more away sees this bird swooping down and follows; another observes this, and so from all points of the compass the birds come up. On the wing the Buzzard is a magnificent bird, and next to the Kite is one of the most expert exponents of flying to be seen, and he is a welcome addition to those wild and romantic hills over which he roams.

CHAPTER II

THE KINGFISHER AND ITS HOME

RIGHT up in the corner of a beautiful lake there was a little creek. The water came in here through a thick bed of reeds; straggling bushes stood up high over the water; one small tree had fallen down and some of the branches were submerged, while others, dead and leafless, were entwined with strings of honeysuckle. Each side of the small creek there was a low bank, overgrown with grasses and nettles. Wild Ducks were splashing in the water, making it muddy all around them. A Little Grebe was every few minutes giving out its loud rattling cry, and out on the lake the harsher notes of the

Great-crested Grebe were often heard. Coots and Moorhens were calling, Thrushes were singing loudly in the coppice behind. High up in the sky a Lark was trying to outrival the birds in the trees, for all around the birds seemed to know that the sunshine and the warmth were the promise of a beautiful springtime to come down upon the earth. The tall brown reed-stalks, relics of the summer that had gone, were bending to the west wind, and sparkling ripples seemed to be running across the water to join the green meadows over beyond.

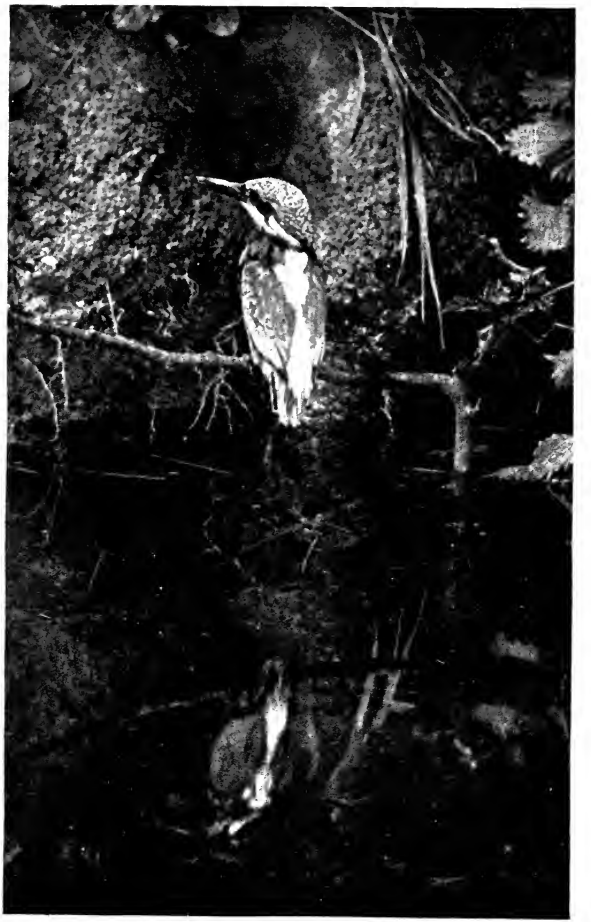
Pee-e-e, pu, pee-e! The loud notes startled me, and there coming down the creek I saw a flash of colour as brilliant as the sun itself; another followed, and the next moment on a branch not far from me two Kingfishers were sitting. *Pee-e-e* one bird called again, and almost immediately flew down to the bank and entered a small hole. While she was

down there her mate kept guard; he preened his wonderful plumage, and I thought that I had never seen such a blaze of glorious green and blue as that which covered his little body.

The hen was busy on the bank, she was building her nest. For this she required no material; she just pecked at the bank with her long beak, and as the earth fell down to the bottom of the hole she was boring she scratched it out behind her with her feet, and a little stream of fine earth was tumbling down. For a long time she worked at this; sometimes her mate would help, and once she flew out from the hole, settled on a branch, opened her beak wide and made a low plaintive note. He understood, and a very few minutes passed before the loud musical but shrill note *pee-e-e* told her that he had returned. She flew straight to him, and it was pretty to see him hand her a fish. For

a moment or two they chattered on the branch, and they might have remained there longer if an inquisitive Blackbird with his loud cry of alarm had not told them to fly. All the birds know the Blackbird's cry, and few wait to actually see the danger; they are off as soon as they hear the call.

At the end of a week the hole was finished, and it was impossible to see what went on inside; but while the hen was sitting I often went into the hiding place built near, and I saw some wonderfully pretty incidents in the life of these birds. Sometimes I had to wait two hours before I saw or heard a sign of either of the Kingfishers. On one of my waits, after nearly two hours had gone by, the hen came out of the hole, settled on a small branch outside, waited there for a very short time and popped back. But when she heard her mate arriving she often came out,



OUTSIDE HER NESTING HOLE.

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and I liked to watch them then. His loud call could be heard long before he reached the branches above the nest, and with him he always brought a nice fish. She flew straight to him, opened her beak, and fluttered her wings while he very beautifully handed her the food. With one or two big gulps this disappeared, she shook all her feathers, and went back to her duties in that dark, damp hole. Once or twice when he was away a long time, she came out and caught fish for herself; no doubt she got tired of waiting, for at times it seemed to me that he must have almost forgotten that he had a hungry mate waiting for a meal.

A favourite place for the male bird to go to was a small boathouse on the lake. Thousands of small fish congregated there, and the bird would sit on the edge of the boat and watch them. He caught more than he could eat, for

sometimes he captured a fish too large to swallow. When a large one like this was taken, he would carry it to the edge of the boat, and holding the fish by its tail, would bring the fish's head down with loud thuds on to his wood perch. When the fish was stunned he tossed it in the air, caught it again head first and made great efforts to swallow it; but the fish was too large to go down, and after two or three attempts he tossed it into the boat, and again looked down into the water. I liked to see him when he caught a fish which he could just manage to swallow. It looked as if he would choke, but by opening and shutting his beak, and giving a few violent gulps, the fish at last disappeared down his throat. Such an occasion required a lengthy nap. All his feathers were ruffled, and he looked as if he was passing through the throes of violent indigestion; but this

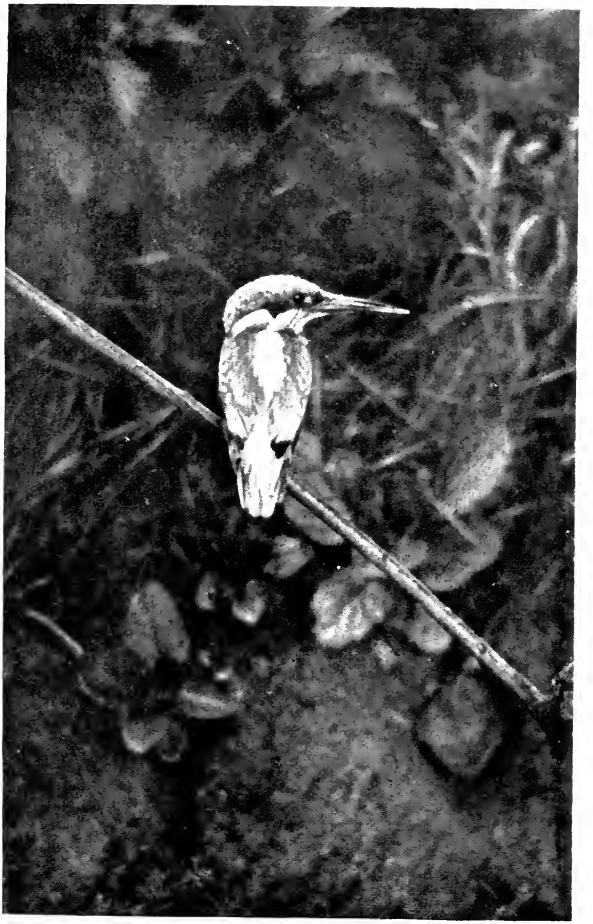
THE KINGFISHER CAPTURED A LARGE FISH TO TAKE TO ITS YOUNG.

seemed to pass off, and his long beak was placed round on to his back, his bright eyes were closed, and he slept while the fish digested! I think it must have been at such times that he forgot that his mate was hungry. For twenty minutes he would remain a ball of brilliant ruffled feathers, sometimes longer, and, strange to say, as soon as he woke, and had preened his plumage, he was ready for another large fish! Sometimes when I went into the boathouse to take the boat out, I found three or four fishes lying in the boat which he had left there, showing that he had been busy.

When evening came the hen would leave her nest for a spell, and he went inside, but she did not like to leave her eggs for long. When she returned he settled on a sheltered branch over the creek. While the Thrushes were singing their best songs, and the noisy Starlings were fighting for the best

perches for the night, and the small brown Wren in the ivy-covered tree was telling all his little world with his big song, that he intended to make that his home for the spring, the Kingfisher, huddled up like a ball on a perch, waited for the morning.

When the sun rose he worked really hard, and brought to his sitting mate several fish, but each time he returned he found her sitting outside the hole. To his surprise she flew away instead of going inside, and called to him to follow, and she took him, not to the boathouse, where the fish were a fair size, but to a little stream, where the fish were very small. Very quickly she caught one, and flew back to the nest with this in her beak. Soon she was back, another was caught, and I think he understood, for about an hour later he was helping her to carry these small fish to the young birds in the hole.



WATCHING AND WAITING.

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If we could have penetrated the darkness and seen the birds feeding their young, we should have noticed how the parent birds held the fish. Instead of putting the fish down the babies' throats in a haphazard manner, we should have seen how the bird worked the little fish about in its beak until it was holding it in such a position that it was able to place the fish head first down the young bird's throat. If the parents had attempted to give the fish to a young bird tail first, it would have choked it, or stuck in its throat, and so the parents always hand the fish to their babies head first. It is easy to tell, by the size of the fish taken into the hole, how the young are progressing. The first week very small fish are captured, the second week fish about two inches long are taken in, and the third week fish three inches in length are given to the baby Kingfishers. In the early

morning the two parents work hard, and capture fish at intervals of five or six minutes; but as the middle of the day approaches they slacken in their work, and the male bird will sit for a long time on a branch over the nest. This day, the third of June, I have been watching them take food to the young, and I noticed, as I have done on previous occasions, that between ten-thirty and twelve o'clock the birds do not bring many fish to their young. The male bird, looking resplendent in his glorious plumage, sat on the branch near the nest; his feathers were ruffled, and he was huddled up on the branch looking as if he was thoroughly tired. The hen was sitting near him, with a fish in her beak, but she did not seem in any hurry to take this to the young, and eventually she flew away without taking it to them. By the time another hour had gone by both birds were busy again,

WAITING FOR A FISH.

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and it was surprising what a number of large fish the hungry young devoured. The entrance hole was small, just large enough to admit the bird comfortably, and when one entered it was only inside about twelve seconds, and always came out tail first! No doubt the space occupied by the nest was filled with the quickly growing young, and when they saw their parent arriving with a fish there was a scuffle to get it, for a great noise went on each time one of the birds entered. There was evidently no room in the hole for the bird to turn, and so it had to back out; it certainly looked very curious to see the birds leaving like this. When the young were small they came out beak first, showing that they had room to turn round.

About a month after they had left their shells, the five young came out into the sunlight, and what a contrast it must have all been to the damp, dark

hole in which they had been reared! Their wings were weak at first, and they were just able to flutter to a branch near, and on that they clung; one tumbled into the water, but it was able to get out, and it joined its brothers above. What excitement there was! The parents called loudly, flew round and about them, and tried to attract them to the thicker bushes lower down. But the baby birds sat there unconcerned, looking around them at the wonderful place they had come into. Every time the parents came near them, six big beaks were opened wide, and a whole chorus of cries accompanied this performance. For three or four days the parents fed them, then they attracted them out to the small stream that ran out of the lake, for here the small fish were found. Their first attempts at capturing fish were not very successful, but after they had watched their parents

HER PLUMAGE RUFFLED BY THE WIND.

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dive so successfully, they were able to capture fish for themselves.

All through the summer they kept on the lake. I saw them last one calm autumn evening. The trees were golden, and the water too, for the sun seemed to have caught up the colour of the yellow corn, and as it sank down it threw back to the earth all of this glory. Swallows were skimming over the silent surface of the lake; Wild Ducks and half a dozen Grebes swimming around made ripple wavelets which made the water a deeper gold. There was no music in the air, for the birds do not give out their notes to a summer that is dying, no matter how beautiful those last days may be, but all around there was a great stillness; so silent was it all, that one could hear the snap of a Swallow's beak as it captured its prey. The harsh *quack-quack* of the Mallards and the deeper *kuurk-kuurk* of

the Tufted Ducks seemed out of place in such a scene of peace: The glory of the spring had gone, summer had passed, and now Nature was just showing what she could do, and the picture she had painted in tints of golden red was wonderfully fair. From the reeds near me, right away to the distant bank, the sinking sun made a path of gold, sparkling with tiny ripples; it was out into this dazzling water-lane that I saw the Kingfishers go. Just a flash, and then another of blue more brilliant than the April sky, and another flash of green that rivalled the green of a bright May morning, and the birds were gone. The next time I went down to the lake I loved so well I found that my birds had been driven away by their parents, to seek fresh hunting-grounds; but all through the winter the two old birds fished in their favourite haunts, and the colour of their gay plumage, as

they flew in the winter sun, seemed like a little touch of the colours of spring, which had remained behind to brighten the dull winter days.

CHAPTER III

THE BIRDS OF A NORTHERN LOCH

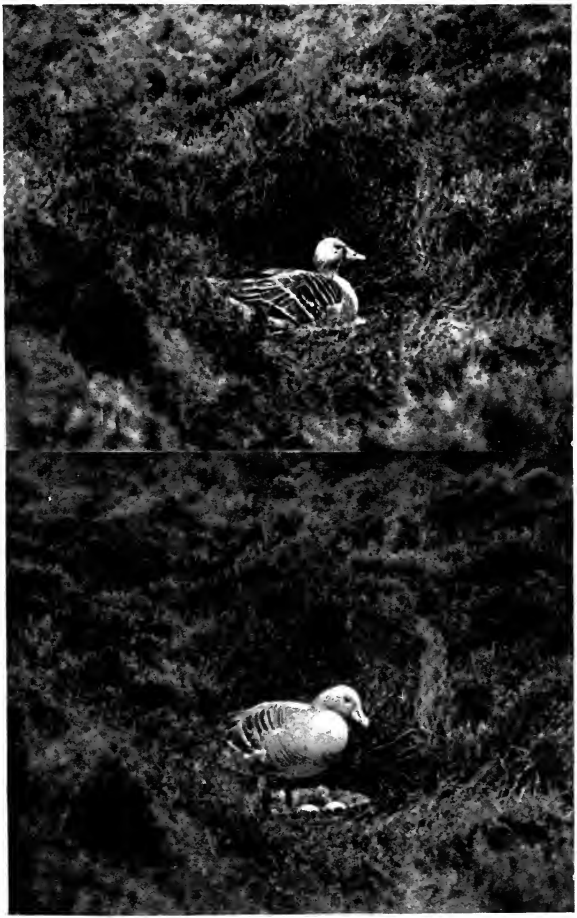
THE exact whereabouts of the loch may remain a secret. Some naturalists and a few fishermen who go there for the excellent trout fishing may recognize it from my description, but the egg-collector, who in most cases does not care a straw for the welfare of the birds, is not wanted there, and if he was to go, would, as has happened before, receive short shift from the sturdy keepers.

It is a large loch on a lonely and wild island, away out in the direction of the setting sun, beyond the rugged western mountains of Scotland. I said it was a large loch, but when the visitor sees it

for the first time he will exclaim, Is this all? For there before him is a small piece of water, with high heather banks all round it; for about two hundred yards you can see water, and beyond that just the black heather-walls. You step into the small rowing-boat, and when you have gone a short distance you see that the loch branches out in many water passages that were hidden from your view when you started in the boat. Presently you come to a big open tract of water, with dozens of islands upon it, some rock-covered and bare, others one mass of tall heather, yet others a brilliant emerald green with the young grass all over their surface. Some are covered with brambles and beautiful ferns, and the water between all these islets is a blue that keeps company with the sky above. But what a bleak wild place it all is! Not a bush or tree in sight, nothing taller than the heather, and

what strikes you most is the utter loneliness and silence of the big moors all around. You realize what this silence is best when you are tucked away in a shelter waiting for a bird to come to the camera. I remember one day I was waiting to photograph the Grey-lag Goose; there was no wind, and the silence was intense. It would have been a relief to have heard a bird's song, or the tramping of a horse on the distant road, but all through that day hardly a sound greeted me, except those strange noises that one hears in those silent spots, sounds that one cannot account for. At intervals I heard a noise close to me just like a single clap of the hands, and other weird and unaccountable noises one occasionally hears. In some parts the natives put them down to "the little folk"—the fairies, and I have known some that hardly like to talk about them, for surely if there are ghosts on this

GREY-LAG GOOSE AT REST.



LOOKING AT HER EGGS.

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earth, some of those weird, wild, and altogether lonely haunts would be ideal hunting-grounds for them!

But as we pass through the arms of water we begin to realize what a large loch this is. After leaving one large open space of water, and going through a narrow channel, we come to yet another, and here are many more islands, and from some of these flocks of Gulls rise. The Common Gull nests here, but, unlike its name, it is anything but a common nesting species. Lesser Black-backed Gulls, and that fine bird the Greater Black-backed Gull, also build their nests on these islands. There are over three hundred and fifty islands on the loch, and yet it is hardly possible to see more than a dozen from any one spot, and this gives one a good idea of how the water twists and turns about. The whole of the island on which we find this loch is one mass of similar lochs, but not so large, and

one of the greatest mistakes that a visitor can make is to try to take a short cut across the moor. A fisherman was out on one of the lochs, and not having good sport he intimated to his gillie that he would get out of the boat and go across to the hotel which he could see a few hundred yards away. To his surprise, he learnt from the gillie that he would have to walk seventeen miles to reach the hotel in that direction! To really appreciate this wonderful island, we should climb to the top of the hill on the southern side, from the summit of which a view of the whole island is obtained. The panorama before you is remarkable; it is just one mass of water and land all mixed up together in one inextricable maze.

Such a wild and little known region is a fine hunting-ground for the bird photographer, for here some of the rarest birds are found. On one heather-

covered island we found three nests of the Grey-lag Goose, and at one of these we built a hiding place for myself and the camera. Fortunately there is plenty of heather, and there are few things that make a better hiding place than this. The following day I went inside my small heather tent, and I did not have to wait more than two hours before I saw the Goose stalking slowly through the heather towards her nest. Knowing what a shy bird the Wild Goose is, I did not attempt to take a photograph until she had settled down and was thoroughly at her ease. Even then I had to be very careful not to make a sound, for I know by experience how the slightest sound will scare her. When I had secured a good series of bioscope pictures of her I had some lunch, and a very slight rustle of the paper in which this was wrapped had the effect of scaring my bird away. I waited another

two hours but she did not return, and although I spent another day in trying to get some more photographs of her, I was not able to do so.

I built a hiding place near one of the other nests, a shelter that harmonized exactly with the surroundings, and I tried to get pictures here, but was not successful. I could not understand the Geese at this nest. They both returned almost to the nest, but the hen just sat on the ground, picked up small pieces of grass and placed these around her breast, just as if she was on her nest, and there she sat for four solid hours, while her mate stood by her side. A few days later I tried this nest again, and when I reached it with the keeper we found that it contained three fine young Goslings, and the fourth was just leaving its shell. I thought that here was a great chance to secure photographs, for she would surely soon return to her

THE GREY-LAG GOOSE STANDING OVER HER EGGS.

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young. Very soon after the keeper left I saw a movement by the nest, and the next moment realized what had happened. A Hooded Crow, one of the worst thieves in the whole of Bird-land, had swooped down and carried one of the Goslings away. I waited for its return, and sure enough in a few minutes it came down again. I shouted at it and tried to drive it away, but I was too late and another Gosling had been carried away! For some time I did not see it again, and I thought that my shouting had frightened it away; but such was not the case, for presently I heard a loud cry from the Geese, and above me there was a great fluttering of wings, and although the two large birds were trying to drive the robber away, he was too smart for them, and he swooped down and in a flash had carried away the third Gosling. It was disappointing to me, for I knew I should not have another opportunity to photo-

graph the Goose, for all the other nests had hatched out.

The Hooded Crow is a far worse robber than the Carrion Crow, and he is about as bad a thief as one would wish to meet with. The pair of Hooded Crows on this loch were doing a great amount of harm to the other birds, and the keeper would have shot them before, but I wanted to photograph them at the nest. This was built on the ground amongst tall heather, and it contained four young. I waited a whole day with my bioscope, but the bird only came back to the nest three times, and as it only waited a moment each time it did not give me an opportunity to get a series of pictures. The moment I began to turn the handle of the camera it was startled by the very slight noise and flew away. The Hooded Crow is the only bird that has ever been startled by the noise of my bioscope. Most birds will quickly jump

up and leave if they hear even a slight click, but they are not afraid of the smooth muffled noise made by the bioscope.

The same day that these Hooded Crows took the Goslings, we saw another remarkable incident which proves how desperate these robber birds are. There were three Crows harassing the Gulls. They made many attempts to get the eggs, but all the time the Gulls were trying to drive them away. One Gull, a Herring Gull, sat tight on its nest; the robbers endeavoured hard to get her eggs, but each time they came near her she pecked at them with her big beak. However, the Crows were determined to get a meal, and two of the birds attacked the Gull, one each side, and they caught hold of her wings and actually pulled her from the nest! Holding her wings so that she could not fly, making her practically helpless, the two birds dragged

her away, and the third Crow broke open the three large eggs, and the birds secured their meal.

The Herring Gull itself is no mean robber, and I knew a case where one tried to take a Duckling. It kept swooping down towards the baby birds, and each time the mother Duck jumped at it and tried to drive it away. At last, however, it succeeded in taking one of the young birds and carried it away in its beak; but before it had gone many yards a Hooded Crow, which had been watching the performance, swooped down upon the Gull and tried to make it drop its captive. The Gull flew on as fast as possible, but the angry Crow followed faster, and catching it up, made a grab at the Gull's tail and succeeded in pulling out a feather! This had the effect of making the Gull drop the Duckling, and the Crow went back and picked it up.

Two days after the Crow stole the

THE DIVERS' HAUNT.

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Goslings it paid the penalty; the keeper stalked up to the nest, and when he was near it one of the Crows flew over and was immediately shot. This proved to be the male. The following day the keeper went to the Crow's nest again, and found that the female had in one short day found another mate; she had mated up with a Carrion Crow this time, and she and her new mate were both shot near the nest. Wild Nature seems to be one long story of one creature robbing another, for it was discovered that the young Crows had disappeared from the nest, and no doubt a rat had taken them during the Crows' absence. Anyway, I was glad to learn of the death of the Crows, for they were doing a vast amount of harm amongst the rare birds of that loch.

Not very far from the island on which I photographed the Goose, we found the two large eggs of the Black-throated Diver. As a rule not much attempt is made at

nest building by this bird, just a depression by the water's edge suffices, but the birds belonging to these eggs had made quite a substantial nest. It was on a sloping bank about eighteen inches above the water, and there was a well-worn passage from the nest to the water. On the land the Black-throated Diver has difficulty in getting about, and for that reason always lays its eggs close to the water's edge. The eggs were large, about three inches in length, and were a dull olive-brown colour, and much smothered with mud. The Diver usually builds its nest on quite small islands, but this was on one of the largest of the numerous islands. The keeper and I built a very good hiding place about thirty-five feet from the nest, and covered this over with slabs of grass, and with the exception of the small space left for the lens it harmonized exactly with the surroundings. Far out on the loch we could see the two

THE BLACK-THROATED DIVER IN THE WATER AND CROUCHING ON HER NEST.

Divers watching us, but after I got inside and the keeper went away I could see the hen bird swimming towards me. She came right up to my shelter, and for nearly two hours swam about just outside. She was a little suspicious at the different aspect of the ground where I was hiding. A tragedy nearly happened at this nest, and again it was the Hooded Crow. The Diver made a dash towards her nest, and gave out a loud call, and at the same moment I saw the Crow swooping down towards the eggs. I did not hesitate a moment, but gave a shout that I thought would surely drive away the Diver for the rest of the day, but I thought it better to do this than lose the two precious eggs. The Crow heard me, and at the same moment some Gulls swooped down at the robber, the Diver called again, and in the general confusion the Crow was driven away, and the Diver, fortunately, was not alarmed at my shout. For a little while

longer she swam about, then heading towards the nest, left the water and reached her eggs. I at once began to get living records of her every movement with my bioscope, and when she had been on her eggs for nearly an hour I made a slight noise and she left. By turning my camera round I was able to get some pictures of her swimming on the water, but she soon returned to her eggs, and I secured many more pictures of her with both cameras.

The Black-throated Diver is a marvellous swimmer. What interested me most was the clever way she was able to submerge herself. This was quite different to ordinary diving. When the bird dives it puts its head down and the body follows, but I noticed that when it left its nest, it kept very low while travelling along the land, entered the water with as little of its head and body showing as possible, and as soon as it was clear of the land it just floated on the water with

its long neck stretched out flat on the surface. While in this position it quickly sank under the surface, and hardly left a ripple behind. It was a clever way of disappearing, and I thought showed remarkable cuteness, for from a short distance it would have been almost impossible for any one to have seen the bird after it reached the water.

Before the birds nest, the males are seen flying rapidly over the land and water, high up, and they repeatedly call *kop-op-op-op-op*, *kop-op-op-op-op*. This is a very loud call, and can be heard for a great distance. The hens down on the water answer with *ker-o-war*, *ker-o-war*, a harsh cry something like the call of the Great-crested Grebe. When the males hear the answer, they swoop down in a rapid glide to the water. On this large loch there were only two pairs of Black-throated Divers, and we felt very pleased when, after a long search, we found the

nest. Serious bird-photography is quite one of the best sports. Perhaps the chief charm of most sports is the glorious uncertainty of it, and the bird-photographer has as many ups and downs as any one. Sometimes you will work hard for days and have nothing but disappointments, but when you have a day like that I spent in the Divers' haunt, you feel well repaid for all your trouble. Most of the time I was on this loch, a fortnight in all, a gale was blowing from the west, and it made work difficult, but on one occasion it was blowing with such force that it was difficult to stand up against it. There was one day, however, that I saw it at its best, and a Scottish loch seen under the best conditions is a scene worth remembering. It is so unlike the landscapes of the south, and I remember thinking, as I rested on one of the heather-covered islands, what a contrast it all was to the

meadows and woods of old England. One missed the songs of numerous birds, but what I missed more than anything was the trees. Some years ago I spent nearly five weeks on one of these bleak islands ; when I travelled south again, and stood under the shade of the green trees, they seemed the most beautiful things I had ever looked upon. Some of the natives of these islands live their whole lives without even knowing what a tree is like, for the tallest thing that grows is the rough heather. Over some of the grassy islands numerous Gulls were soaring, and their white wings seemed a beautiful contrast to the blue above and below. Even the hills had caught up the prevailing blue, and their rugged rocks and grey slopes were half hidden in the haze. Over all there is that great silence, broken occasionally by the wild cries of the birds. Those birds which frequent such secluded spots seem

to have notes which go well with the wild surroundings. There is the wail of the Red-throated Diver, which sounds like the groan of a man in pain; the far-reaching *kop-op-op-op-op* of the larger Black-throated Diver, and the harsh answering cry, *ker-o-war*; the deep sounding call of the Wild Geese, *kur-kur-kur-konk*, *ker-konk*, and the loud whistle of their wings as they fly past. Now and then the *pee-pee-pee* of the Sandpiper as it flies from one rock to another, and the rude calls of the Gulls, with the short, sharp bark of the Greater Black-backed Gull. Out towards the mountains one heard the croak of the Raven, *krrrak*, *krrrak*, and from over the black moors came the cry of the Whimbrel. Again and again those rough notes broke the silence, but one could often listen for an hour without hearing a single sound to disturb the calm. I rowed back to the end of the loch, fastened the boat to a

RED-THROATED DIVER LEAVING HER NEST.

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large stone, and began to tramp the six miles back to the hotel, and on my way I heard some notes that made me stop and listen. It was a Lark singing up in the sky, and that beautiful song, coming after those wild cries which I had been hearing, sounded the sweetest bird music I had ever heard, and was like a link with home, where throughout the whole of the springtime day and half the night the woods are filled with happy songs.

CHAPTER IV

THE VILLAGE THRUSH

THE tall poplars had no leaves upon them when the Thrush first began his spring song. Winter hardly seemed to have gone when the first bright and sunny day of spring arrived, and the sudden warmth made the birds sing. I do not know how many years past the Thrush had sung from his high perch over that beautiful little village, but we were all glad to hear his first notes again. Last winter his favourite tree was cut down, but he took up his position on a higher branch on a neighbouring tree. There was no mistaking this Thrush when he began for he had a wonderful

song. Birds are like human singers, their songs vary to a very great degree, and you will usually find that birds which live near the sea, or on the hills, where the air is pure, have far finer and stronger songs than those of the woods and meadows far inland. This Thrush must have loved his village, for right through the spring and summer he sang throughout the whole day.

The village, a real old English village, stood amongst beautiful surroundings, and the Thrush as he sang looked down upon a maze of green meadows, three lakes, and woodland. Imagine you are standing on a bank dividing two of the lakes. The one on the right is bordered part of the way round by a thick mass of trees; elms on the far outside, then big elders and may bushes, and nearest the water's edge drooping willows, sloping down to the reeds which grow for several yards out into the water. This reed

fringe is not a straight line, but curves in and out, and hardly the same thickness or length for many yards. Away in the farther corner there is a break in the green where a tributary feeds the lake. In the middle of the springtime we see delicious shades of green here, no two trees alike, and the tall waving reed-border changes every moment as the wind-ripples play over it. High up over the bank beyond the small stream a little red-roofed cottage is half hidden amongst the shades of green, and the white lock-gates show up almost too distinctly. In the meadow above the cottage, the Manor House, so neat and trim, surrounded with its cushion-like hedges, stands, very little of the red house visible for the trees. The distance is clear in the evening light, and the Chiltern Hills, for the chief part thickly wooded, seem to be covered with even more tints of green than we see around the lake.

THE VILLAGE THRUSH.

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The larger lake on our left is also very beautiful, but stands out clearer than the other, for its margins are not overgrown with reeds and bushes. Just a few there are, with the willow branches dipping in the water, but for the most part it is surrounded with large grey boulders. Right away in the corner there are some reeds, just where another small stream feeds it, and round here you see a number of birds. It was on this bank that one evening, without moving from the spot where I was standing, I counted forty-nine Great-crested Grebes. Just over the reeds we see here and there a chimney, a red roof or gleaming glass showing between the elms, and you just hear the faint noise of trickling water as it flows over the weir. The whole of this sweet English scene is intensely beautified by the setting sun, for water always looks at its best when the sun is low, shedding a wide

pathway of tiny ripples right from shore to shore; and over to the right of this golden path there is the old church on the hill, surrounded with little cottages and tall elms. You can imagine the attractions such a spot has for birds, and as all are strictly protected numerous species nest there, and it is over this scene that the Village Thrush sang. We called him the Village Thrush because he seemed to belong to it, and each spring, as surely as we expected the bursting leaves and the blossom, we expected to hear his song. There was no mistaking it; there was not a Thrush for a dozen miles round who could equal him for variety of notes or loudness and purity of song. I was listening to him early one April morning; the rising sun was shining into my room, and it was impossible to sleep with that bird not far from my open window. I counted twelve changes in his song, and many of

THE THRUSH BROODING OVER HER YOUNG.

the notes he repeated five times. It is interesting to listen to a good singer like this. It will be noticed that sometimes he will strike a new variety of notes, and immediately afterwards he stops. Perhaps he is trying to remember these notes to repeat them, but it is not often that they are repeated. If he is specially pleased with a bar of his song, he will repeat it several times. Most of his bars were sung three times, but there was one glorious combination of notes that he often repeated five times. He began to sing from that high perch at the beginning of April, and for over three months he kept it up, giving out such music to that little English village, that if it had been in a town thousands would have flocked to hear him, yet here no one took much notice of him. He was just part of the old village, and we listened to his song as we did to the clanging of the lock gates, the rush of water as the locks

emptied to allow a barge to pass on, or to the deep tone of the church clock, as it struck out the sixteen hours through which he sang to us.

Far underneath him, cosily hidden in a small bush, his mate was sitting upon their eggs. There were five of them, a deeper blue than the sky, but when he fed the sitting bird no one could tell, or whether he took his turn at sitting was also a mystery, for through almost every available minute of daylight he seemed to be singing. However, five baby Thrushes duly appeared, and then he did help to feed them. While I was in hiding near the nest, and watching the birds busily feeding their young, I noticed how he would often, after giving them food, mount on to a high branch and sing. The hen did most of the feeding, and I watched them for some days, but as they grew he became more busy. On one occasion he brought a long kind of

CLAMOURING FOR MORE FOOD.

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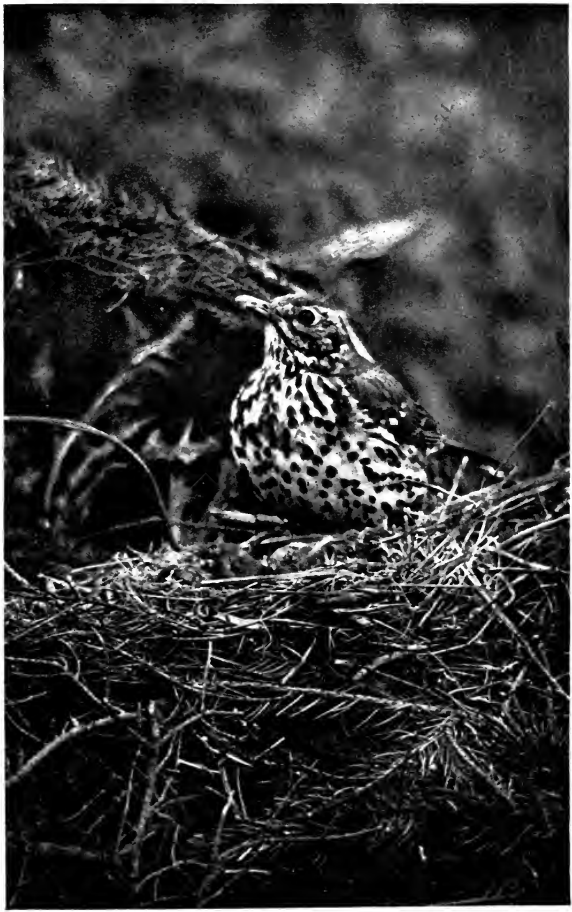
beetle; he was holding the creature in the middle of its body, and he tried to place it in one of the wide-open beaks. As the beetle refused to bend, it lodged across the beak, and would not go down. He pushed and pushed, then tried another beak, it would not go down that—and so he went all round the nest. What was he to do? He stood there looking quite disappointed that this fine large beakful could not be swallowed. All the time the five young birds were clamouring for it, and again he attempted to put it down, but as each attempt was a failure he suddenly thought of a new way. As the beetle was wriggling all this time he could not leave go of it; so placing his head on one side, he was able to force it head-first down a baby Thrush's beak, and to prevent it wriggling back he pushed it well down! I thought the youngster would choke, but not so, for with a few big gulps the beetle

completely disappeared, and having succeeded the Thrush flew away for more food. It was all so interesting that I took a bioscope record of the whole scene, so that others might also look upon it.

The five young were reared, they left the nest, and a few days later another nest was begun. When this was finished four more eggs were laid, and during the days while the hen sat, her mate again sang all the day from his high perch. And so he kept on until the end of June, and at that time, when the hedges were a mass of white and pink with wild roses, his song ceased. Just now and then in July we heard a few bars of his notes, but although his song was finished he was still with us, and he and his mate had reared nearly a dozen young Thrushes. But all of these did not remain long in the world. A weasel had three, and a month later all seemed to have left the haunts of their parents, leaving them in sole charge.



ALL HER BABIES ASLEEP.

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Some of us are already looking forward to hearing his song again, for it is the best time of the year, when the seasons are young, that he sings. There are few spots that I love quite as much as my little English village amongst the trees, green meadows and lakes, and I love it best when my Thrush sends out his loud notes over his small world, and tells me that spring has come.

CHAPTER V

THE EGGS ON TOP OF THE HILL

THE Lapwings had many adventures before they decided to build their nest right on top of the hill. The first one was made down on the marsh, and soon after the eggs were laid they were taken by a labourer, and no doubt were heartily enjoyed for his breakfast on the following morning. A second attempt was made, and two eggs were laid in a slight hollow in the four-acre field at the foot of the hill, but the field being ploughed they were destroyed. Then the birds decided to go to the top of the hill. There was some rough grass up there, and on a small mound the hen made another nest. It was a poor

attempt at nest building; just a few grasses were placed in a hollow, and the four eggs were laid. But the sitting bird added to her home, and often while covering the eggs she would pick up a piece of grass and place it under her breast.

On a slightly higher mound near by the male bird made a nest for himself, but it was even a worse nest than that made by his mate. He often rested there, and while sitting down he turned round and round, and a nice cup-shaped hollow was made, and he added a few pieces of dry grass. When he had had sufficient food he would go there, and if any one approached he would be the first to see them, and, giving out a loud cry, would rise straight from where he was sitting. As soon as his mate heard that alarm cry, she would slip off her eggs, and, crouching low, would run for twenty yards or more, and with a loud answering cry fly up and join her mate.

When the eggs were first laid the birds would quickly fly away, but as incubation proceeded they became more bold and flew round the head of any person who went too near their home. With loud cries they attempted to drive the enemy away, and both birds made a great commotion over a piece of rough ground where the nest was not situated.

One evening the Lapwings had a great adventure. They did not fear the sheep which roamed over the hills, for they never trod on the eggs or disturbed the birds in any way, but it was different with the lambs. It was about six o'clock, just at that time when the lambs feel that they must play. It so happened that one sheep and a solitary lamb were at the top of the hill, and all the others seemed to be lower down the hill or even in the valley. The lamb wanted a game, and she saw the Lapwing on the ground. For a short

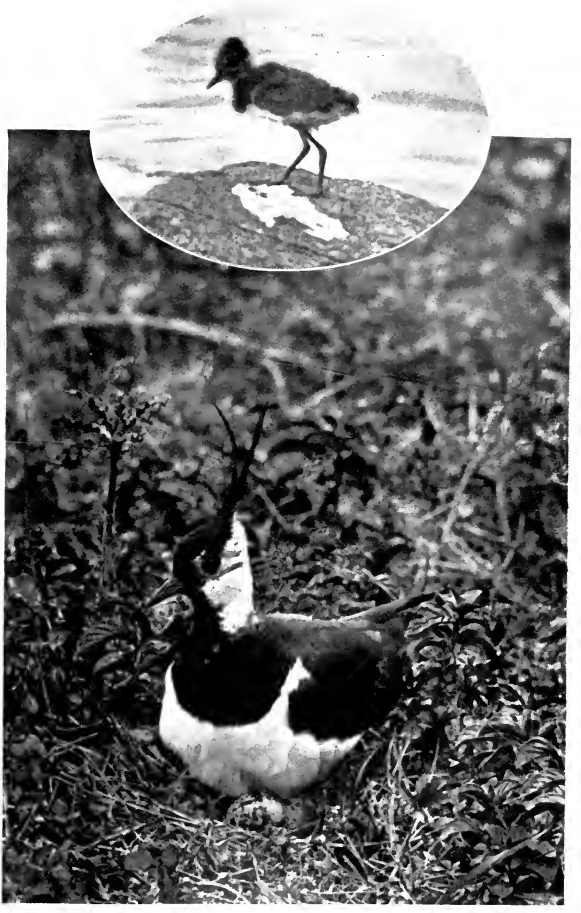
THE LAPWING AND HER EGGS.

while she stood looking at this strange thing, then she slowly walked round it. Becoming bolder she actually ran at the bird, and lowering her small head tried to butt it, as she loved to butt her companions. The bird left her eggs, gave out a cry and flew in the face of the lamb, and as she did so her mate came down and joined her. Here was some fun for the lamb, for she discovered that the more she butted the new playthings the more they "played" with her! The little white lamb frisked round them, ducked her pretty head and ran full tilt at the angry birds, and the more they called and flapped their wings, the more she liked it. Her mother was trying to call her away, but she was not going to heed her with two such lively toys before her. The lamb ran a couple of yards, and of course the birds followed, and she thought it was a right royal kind of race. Back

she went again, all the time frisking dangerously near the eggs, with the two birds doing their utmost to drive the annoying little creature away. I do not know how long the game would have continued, but when it was getting rather bad for the birds, the lamb discovered that her face was getting sore, and each time she charged, a sharp prick from a beak made her draw back. One real good peck on her soft black nose made her give up, and calling loudly, she ran away to her mother. The hen Lapwing went to her eggs, no doubt glad that they had escaped.

For three weeks she sat patiently upon her four eggs, her mate keeping watch and guarding that part of the moor that they rightly regarded as their own. Almost as soon as the four young had left their shells they began to crawl about. Now one and then another would creep from underneath its

A YOUNG LAPWING.



LAPWING AT HER NEST.

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mother's breast and explore the strange world into which they had come, and before the day was over they had almost learnt to capture flies on their own account. They saw the black specks on the grass stems, and their mother had shown how to peck at them quickly, but the babies were too slow, and missed the insects as they took to their wings. But hunger made them more cute, and the next day it had to be a very artful fly which escaped their quick beaks; here and there they darted, picking them up rapidly.

A Carrion Crow, which had its nest in the little coppice on the hill-side, had discovered that the young Lapwings were about, and the large robber had made several attempts to capture them. Each time the Crow came to the top of the hill the male Lapwing, which was always on the look-out, gave the alarm, and the young knew exactly what to do

the instant they heard this warning cry. Quickly they ran to shelter, crept underneath a grass tuft, and kept quite still until they heard the soft call of their mother near. But all the time their parents were calling out their warning cries and attacking the Crow, they kept in hiding.

It was not often that I saw the babies when I went to the top of the hill. One bright morning I gave a lengthy search, and eventually found one of them. It was crouching on the ground, with its tiny head pushed under a grass tuft, and just the slightest vestige of a bright black diamond peering through the green, but the instant the young bird knew that I had found it, it jumped up and ran fast across the moor. I went after it, and soon had it in my hands. How scared the parents were, and how they tried to protect their babies! It is surprising what ruses

birds will perform, and how bold they will become when trying to defend their young. One bird threw itself on the ground not far from my feet, and with one wing evidently hanging helpless at its side, and with a leg lying under the tail as if badly broken, it slowly dragged itself along the ground, giving out a plaintive cry meanwhile. In this way it attracted me, or rather it thought it was attracting me, some distance away and then flew up, gave out some excited cries, and thought it had done a very clever thing,

The young birds are well looked after by their parents, and in the early morning especially have a quantity of food given to them and consequently grow quickly. They soon lose their pretty downy appearance, and become long-legged, lanky-looking birds quite able to shift for themselves; and it was a good job they were able to do this,

for one bright morning trouble came to the little colony on the top of the hill. I was sitting on a mound near their home, when I heard a great rush of wings, loud excited cries from the birds, and a Peregrine Falcon dashed down and struck down one of the old Lapwings! Near by I found the dead body of another bird, and all through their attempts at nesting and rearing their young they seemed to be dodged by bad luck. These birds of the open moor are assailed on all sides by enemies, and it is really surprising that so many are successful.

CHAPTER VI

THE NEST IN THE OLD OAK

THE large nest, high up in the old oak, contained four green eggs. For three weeks the two birds had been taking their turns at sitting, and now the nest contained four skinny little birds, which devoted all their time, when their mother was not covering them, to raising their long necks, opening their beaks and squeaking for food.

That fine and magnificent old oak looked out over a great tract of country. It stood there when the farmland all round about was a wild moor, over which kings hunted the wild stag. For a number of years past the Crows had made this tree their home, repair-

ing the nest in each successive season. Although it was so high up in the branches, it was in a secure place, for in the first place the birds had built their home of green twigs which had been bitten off the lower and surrounding branches, for they know that a nest built of twigs which would easily bend, could be fastened to the tree-top in a much more secure manner than with dry, brittle sticks which were to be found in plenty in the fields. Several climbers had tried to reach that nest, but had not succeeded. I remember as a boy I made a big attempt to get up to it, and it had to be a tough tree that I could not climb, but it resisted all my efforts, and the nest has never been reached by a human climber.

All the lesser birds feared the two old Crows. They were the lords of that Birdland, and very few birds attempted to build their nests near by, for if they

did so, the robber Crows took the eggs as soon as they were laid. The Wren, however, had a nest in a bush immediately under the oak; but the Wren is such a tiny bird, and it was hardly noticed by the Crows, for the nest made of dead leaves was cunningly hidden in the lower part of the bush, and I doubt very much, if the Crows had looked right at the nest, whether they would have recognized it as such. A pair of Blackbirds, which had not had any experience of nest building before, made their home in a very open part of the hedge not far away, and the male bird actually had the impudence to sit in the Crows' oak and sing. He did this each evening, and it was not until the nest contained five eggs that he realized that the two large birds above him were robbers. It was about nine o'clock in the morning, when he was still singing, that his mate heard a great noise in the hedge by her side,

and, looking round, she saw a large bird looking down at her. He seemed to be in a fighting humour, for he came towards her, and she, in her fright, left her nest and gave out her loud notes of alarm. Instantly her mate flew towards her, and both birds flew round and about the robber; but what did he care?—why he hardly took any notice of them, and just picking up one of the eggs in his beak he flew to his hungry youngsters above; as soon as the four beaks were raised he held the egg over one big mouth, broke it and allowed the contents to run down the young bird's throat. Straight back to the Blackbirds' home he went, and swallowed two eggs himself, while the owners made a most tremendous noise; but ignoring them altogether, the other two eggs were taken up to his young. The Blackbirds had learnt a lesson, and the next nest that they built was far from the oak, and it was more successfully concealed.

THE BLACKBIRD.

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The Crows were always robbing. It had to be a well-concealed nest that escaped their keen eyes. I had heard a Skylark singing high up over the meadows. I knew he had a nest there, and by the way he sang during the first part of May I also knew that the robber birds had not yet found his nest. When I discovered it, it contained three young birds about a week old, and as the nest was so carefully hidden under a tuft of grass I hoped it would escape the Crows' notice. But it was not to be, and very soon after, one of the robbers went to the Larks' home, and the young birds were carried off to help satisfy the hunger of the birds in the tree-top. Day after day the Crows carefully quartered the surrounding country, and each evening as it approached saw those young Crows getting larger and plumper, and also many more nests robbed. Mice, rats, moles, and also all kinds of carrion were taken to them, and

before many more days had passed, the four young birds were ready to leave their home. I saw them up there, through the fresh green leaves, sitting outside the nest, and the parents tried hard to get them to take to their wings. They attracted them with food, standing on a distant branch and calling loudly, and at last one was induced to trust itself in space. It half flew and half fell down to the ground, and landed there with a big bump which knocked all the breath out of its body. The parents followed it, and when it had recovered it took some of the food which one of them offered. They walked on in front of it, called excitedly, and did all they could to get it to follow, and in a clumsy and funny manner it waddled after them. The parents knew, however, that the ground was no place for their baby, and after a tremendous lot of calling and not until they saw a man

approaching did it attempt to rise. It beat the ground hard with its wings, and struggled after the two old birds, for as a final attempt they had given out a loud note of alarm, and even a baby Crow knows that that means it is time to shift. He saw his parents high above him, circling around, but he was low down, and however much he beat those wings of his he did not seem to get much higher. He dashed towards a tree, and by a great stroke of luck landed on a tough branch; still panting and with all the pluck knocked out of him, he waited until he heard the loud *krraar* of his father. Before the evening came on he managed to use his wings fairly successfully, and he roosted in a neighbouring oak on a branch which swayed to and fro; and before the sun rose, and while it was quite dark, he managed to fall off his rather insecure stand, and fell, a scared bunch of feathers, to the ground

below. There, huddled up in the dew-covered grass, he waited, and even before it was properly light some food was brought to him by one of his parents which had been with him in his new home. Once a weasel passed close to him, and instinct told him it was an enemy, and no doubt something might have happened to him if his parent had not given an angry note from above, reminding the little four-footed thief that a more powerful creature than he was ready to attack. The weasel slunk on his way, and was soon lost in the grass under the hedge.

Two days later the other young left the nest, and their first adventures in the air were quite as exciting as their brother's, but all survived, and very soon it was quite a common sight to see the family of six birds flying about the country. All through the summer the young remained with their parents, and many

things they learnt from them. The artful old birds taught them the difference between a farm labourer with a hoe or rake and the same man with a gun; they found out that it was never wise to fly low over a thick hedge without first looking on the other side. They learnt the difference between a Stoat and a Rat, and that it was never wise to attack the former, while the latter could be killed if the bird got the first blow in with its powerful beak. Their parents taught them never to search for food close to a hedge, without continually looking through, and that it was not wise to remain too long in a corner of a field. All the tricks known to older birds they were proficient in by the time the autumn approached, and then their parents thought it was time to send them out into the world so that they were not dependent upon them in any way. After the harvest had all been gathered in, and the stubble had turned

from gold to grey, and the Swallows had all gone, then it was that the young birds discovered that the whole conduct of their parents had changed. They no longer wanted them, and each time they approached them they were violently attacked. In the evening, when they wished to roost in the old familiar spots, they found two angry Crows ready to drive them away, and so violent did the two old birds become that the whole four young birds took the broad hints given to them, and went off on their own account. Where they went or what became of them I do not know, for they were never seen in the district again.

Through the severe frosts and snow of winter the Crows had a rough time. Food of all kind was hard to find, and on one occasion the birds went for three whole days without a particle of nourishment, but finding a Thrush in the same plight as themselves, that is starving, they

attacked it, and made a scanty meal, but it kept them going for another two days, then the frost went, and the floods came, and they had enough and to spare.

With the first call of spring they went to their old nest in the oak. It was still there, although dilapidated with the winter storms, and about the middle of March they set to work to repair it. It took them a long time, for they did not hurry. While the weather continued warm they kept at their work, but as soon as a cold change came, all work at the nest ceased. By the second week of April the nest was ready, and then a great tragedy came into their lives. The farmer had for a long time been watching the birds, and one afternoon, while they were far away, he cunningly hid himself by a tree on which they usually settled in the evening. It was after sunset when the birds flew towards him, and before they settled two shots rang

out. One bird fell with a loud thud to the ground, it rolled about there for a moment or two, and was still. The other bird, untouched by the shot, went up in large circles and called loudly and piteously, but no answer came from the ground. The farmer picked up the bird and carried it to the centre of a large field, and placing a tall stick in the ground, he tied the Crow to this and left it there dangling about in the wind as a "scarecrow."

A day or two after this I saw the remaining Crow sitting on top of a tree on the edge of the field in which his dead mate was. There he sat with all his feathers ruffled and his head drawn in, and at long intervals he uttered a mournful note. For days the poor bird sat there; you did not see him quartering the ground for food. I do not think he thought about eating. All he wanted was his mate; he kept on calling her, but

no answer came back to him. Once he went out to her, and then I think he knew. Back to his perch on the tree he went, and the last time I saw him alive he was still there.

Not many days later I passed by there again. The Crow was not on his branch, he was nowhere to be seen, but when I reached the tree I saw a black object on the ground. There he lay, dead. I picked up his body, and curiosity caused me to examine him. I knew he had not been shot, and on a further examination I found that he had had no food for many days past. His death was caused through starvation. He had mourned his mate, and fell dead within sight of her.

The Crow may be a cruel bird, but he knows how to love.

CHAPTER VII

THE NEST ON THE GREY CRAG

THE stronghold of the Welsh Raven is wild, bleak, and bare. Grey valleys, with great grey hills rising above them; vast grey slopes of crumbling slate; here and there a touch of green showing where a clump of ivy grows in the crevices of the grey rocks, but as far as the eye can reach grey is the prevailing colour. It is a fitting and wild home for a bird which we associate with freedom in its wildest sense, and here he has lived for generations past.

Before the snows of winter have left the hills, the Ravens begin to see to their nest. Most of the pairs have several nests, and early in February, and even

in January if the weather be at all warm, the birds begin to repair these. One year they use a nest in a large dingle, and perhaps the next they will go to one of their other nests a mile away. I have seen three nests on the face of a small cliff, all repaired and ready for eggs, and not very far away this same pair had a nest in a large tree. I believe the birds do not know themselves which nest they will occupy until the last moment, for they seem to roam about, adding sticks to their different nests.

The nest is a large structure, and if it should be in a secure place where the violent storms of winter do not damage it much, it grows to an enormous size in the course of a few years. The lower portion, or foundation, is composed of stout sticks; smaller twigs are placed on these, and the inside is lined thickly with sheep's wool, which the birds have no difficulty in finding on the surrounding

hills. The birds spend a lot of time in finishing the nest; often a whole fortnight is spent on the lining alone, and a very cosy and comfortable nest is made.

The eggs vary in number. It is quite a common occurrence to find two and three. On one occasion I found a nest with a clutch of seven, but four is the usual number. The male bird keeps a careful watch over his sitting mate. One nest that I know of is on the face of a great sloping rock, and the male bird may often be seen from a distance of a mile, sitting on a prominent rock against the sky-line. If we keep to the valley he will remain there, but if we should attempt to climb up to his home, then he gives a warning *krraak*, *krraak*, and the hen is seen, by those who know the exact locality of the nest, to slip off her eggs, and fly close in to the rocks for a hundred yards or more before showing herself. The nest is often cunningly

THE RAVEN STOOD ON GUARD ON A ROCK ABOVE THE NEST.

concealed amongst the thick ivy, and the few sticks which may project above the ledge are difficult to spot as we climb about the face of the cliff. Incubation lasts three weeks, and as soon as the young appear the old birds are very bold, and show instant fight if any other large bird should go near their home. I have seen many a fight between a Buzzard and an angry Raven, and the Raven is usually victorious. Near one nest that I found, a Rock Dove had her nest, and when the young Ravens appeared on the scene, the Dove had very great difficulty in getting to or from her nest, for the instant she showed herself the male Raven would dash after her, and with his great wings hissing as he cut through the air, chase her for a mile down the valley. Time after time I saw her making attempts to reach her eggs, but he went at her in a most desperate manner each time she appeared.

There is one green dingle that I have often visited, it is like a beautiful little oasis in a grey desert, and in this a vicious pair of Ravens had their home. When they had young they would not allow any creature to come near that dingle without attacking them, and one morning a Kestrel flying over entered the glen and began hovering. Instantly the Raven dashed out at the smaller bird, and for some minutes the Kestrel, with greater powers of flight, just toyed with the larger bird, and twisted and turned about him as he darted down towards him. Round and round they went, their wings whistling as they fought, the Raven all the time rising above his enemy and making a wild dash down at him. It was a wonderful exhibition of flight, and one hardly knew which to admire most, the small graceful Kestrel, as it glided up and down, round and about, or the great powerful black bird, as with wild cries

he dashed at his opponent. Whether the Kestrel misjudged the speed of the Raven, or whether he "slipped" in his flight, it is impossible to say; but with one of those great rushes the Raven for a moment seemed to be mixed up with the Kestrel, and the next second the smaller bird, lifeless and with his head completely severed from his body, just tumbled down to the bottom of the glen, and the Raven, with one or two loud cries, went back to the rock over his nest. It was not easy to see what really happened, but I think the bird's head was severed with a stroke from the wing of his enemy.

It is not often that the Raven will attack a human being, for I have noticed that, in the majority of cases, the birds will leave their nest long before we reach it, and will not be seen while we remain in the immediate locality; but two years ago I spent three hours in the company of the boldest pair of Ravens that I have

ever come across. One bright April morning, I climbed up the three hundred feet of sloping slate cliff and was able to get within about ten feet of the nest, and as I approached the two old birds became very vicious and circled over my head calling loudly. I thought that here was a good opportunity for obtaining photographs of the birds, for they repeatedly settled on the rocks not more than four yards from me. I exposed a few plates that morning, and decided to make another visit with a companion. A few days later the local gamekeeper accompanied me, and long before we were able to get to the nest the birds began calling. I was equipped with a good supply of plates, and placed myself on a convenient ledge on the face of the cliff and level with the nest. The female bird was far more bold than her mate, and she mounted up to about one hundred and fifty feet above our heads, then came down like a great feathered

THE RAVENS LEFT THE CRAGS AND CIRCLED OVER MY HEAD.

RAVEN ATTACKING THE PHOTOGRAPHER.

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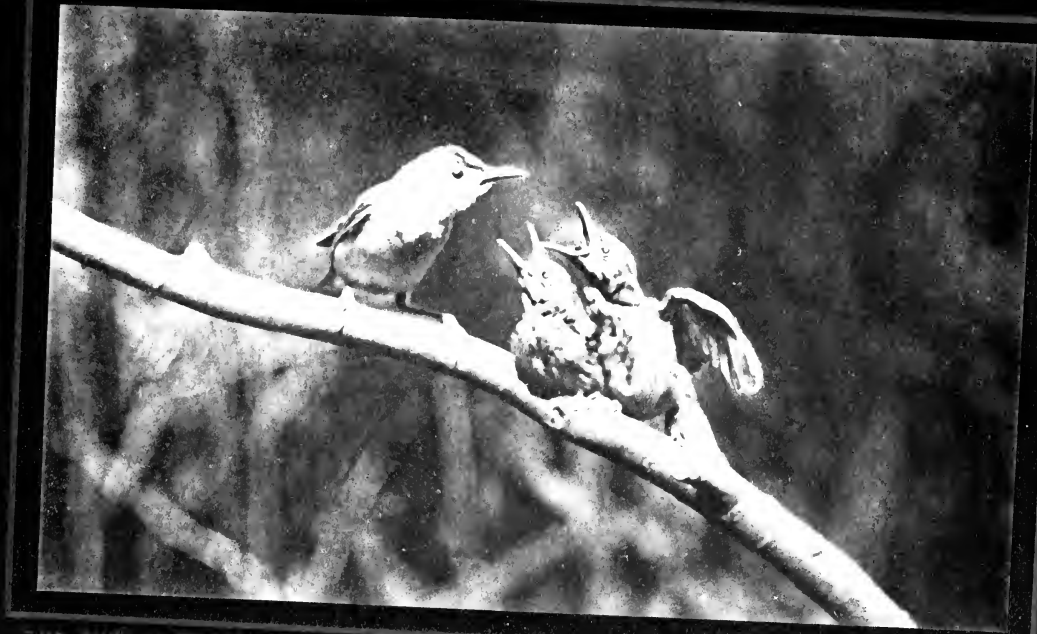
dart towards us. It was an exciting experience to sit on that narrow ledge, with this large bird darting down towards us, and on one or two occasions the bird came alarmingly near. The gamekeeper made the suggestion that if he tied a red pocket-handkerchief at the end of a fishing rod and held this in front of the nest, it might make the almost fully fledged young call out, and so bring the old bird in a convenient position for photographic purposes. This little suggestion of his worked even better than he anticipated, for the instant the mother heard her young call, she came down at a most tremendous speed towards the man, struck him upon his head with her claws and knocked his hat over the edge of the cliff! This was the only time that the bird really struck us, but for the whole of the three hours she was swooping at us. The male bird was not quite so bold as his mate; he contented himself

with sitting on the rocks above my head, and he repeatedly picked up small pieces of rock and threw them towards me; he also settled on a bush growing from the face of the cliff, and in his great anger broke off some of the branches, tore them to shreds with his powerful beak, and threw the pieces over the edge of the cliff. All the time the two birds were giving out their wild "bark," and if a Jackdaw or any other bird came near, they left us for a moment and dashed madly after the fresh intruder. It was a most exciting three hours, a time to be remembered, and when we once again reached the valley, and got away from the wild cries and the whistling of the birds' wings as they attacked us, we seemed to be standing in a place of peace after a violent storm. In my photographic work I have been attacked by all kinds of birds large and small, but never have I come across quite such an interesting

pair of birds as this remarkable pair of Welsh Ravens.

The Raven is the scavenger of the hills. He eats all kinds of carrion, but he is a wary bird, and before going to a carcass he likes to see another bird there before him. He does practically no harm, and he will not attack a lamb while it is alive. I have repeatedly been violently criticised by naturalists who probably have never seen a Welsh Raven in a wild state for making this statement, but I know my facts and my bird, and I have spent many months in his company on the wild hills during the past ten years. The Raven will not attack living lambs, and added to my own experience I have the evidence of dozens of shepherds to support me. On the other hand, the Carrion Crow will attack lambs, and many of his sins are put upon the head of the Raven. The Crow is a desperate robber, especially

if the weather should be at all hard, but the Raven is really a useful bird, and I am glad to say that, owing to the protection accorded him, he is increasing in numbers in that part of Wales which I know and love so well.



THE REED-WARBLER WONDERED WHEN THEIR LARGE APPETITES WOULD BE SATISFIED

CHAPTER VIII

THE CRADLE IN THE REEDS

ON the eastern side of the lake there was a long fringe of reeds. These varied in width; in some spots they were twenty yards wide, and in other places only a few feet divided the bank from the open water. Beyond the reeds on the banks grew a whole host of wild flowers, and in the months of spring it was nothing more or less than a bower of sweet-scented blossoms, filled with a chorus of song from the throats of a thousand birds. The reeds ended in a small creek, and here the still water was overgrown with weeds, and later on in the year we saw the baby Moorhens running about on the leaves of water-

lilies and other aquatic plants, picking up insects and enjoying their little lives.

Year after year, into this creek came two small birds. Whether it was the same pair each season it was not easy to say, but as surely as we heard the Cuckoo's loud call, or listened to the twitter of the Swallows as they darted over the lake, as surely did we hear the chatty little song of the Reed-Warblers, for as soon as they had completed their long journey from the south, they seemed to settle down in their home and begin to look out for the site for their nest. Day after day they could be seen in the waving reeds, talking harshly all the time; but although there seemed at first to be a deal of uncertainty about the actual site, they always eventually settled on practically the same spot as they used in previous years.

The most difficult part of the nest building was fixing the foundations;

REED WARBLER'S NEST. THE MALE BIRD'S NEST.

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grasses were carried to the reeds, and some of these were twisted round the stems so that other grasses would lodge on them. And as the little pile of grasses grew, the female Reed-Warbler stood on it, and slowly twisted round and round, arranging the grasses with her beak in a very clever manner. She pushed them in and out, twisted some together, and with her breast pressing against the side, she made it a beautiful cup-shape. The male bird brought the grasses to her, and she did most of the building. As the nest grew, the outside grasses which were fastened to the reeds were strengthened with cobwebs which bound them still tighter to the four stems supporting the nest. At the end of a fortnight the nest was finished, and a beautiful and neat home it was. The birds had made it very deep considering the small size of the nest, but they knew that the winds would blow it

about, and unless it was deep the eggs would roll out, but this was deep enough to prevent such a thing happening in the most violent storm that might rock it.

Four eggs were laid, and for a fortnight the little sitter was rocked to and fro; sometimes the nest swung more than eighteen inches from side to side, but the bird sat there as perfectly as if she had been part of the nest, and the biggest gust of wind never shifted her. Her mate was most diligent in feeding her, and I do not think there is a prettier sight in the world than that of a male bird feeding his sitting mate. I have seen it many times when watching the birds, and to me it is always fascinating. But the male, besides feeding his mate and singing, seems to have a lot of spare time, and in this he surely does a very strange thing. It is a habit peculiar to all the male members of the Warbler family while their mates are

REED WARBLER FEEDING HER YOUNG.

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sitting. He collects grasses, and attempts to build a dummy nest, and when he has failed with this he begins another and another, and often will build four. Why he does this I cannot tell, but my photographs will show the vast difference between the beautiful nest made by the female bird and that built by her mate! I have known the Garden-Warbler to build five of these dummy nests. The Blackcap also occupies his time in this way. I once heard a Blackcap singing loudly in a small isolated bush by the stream side. I knew that his mate was sitting on her eggs in a bush not far away, so I thought I would like to see how near I could stalk to the bush without driving the bird away. Going silently forward, I was able to get right up to the bush, and still the bird sang. Noiselessly I moved the leaves aside, and there saw a pretty sight. There was the Blackcap upon his dummy nest; he was

turning round and round, doing his utmost to make the little heap of grasses into the shape of a nest. He seemed to be hopelessly entangled in them, yet he was as happy as the sunshine, for he sang loudly over his work. Suddenly he looked up and saw two human eyes looking down at him. The effect was remarkable, for he stopped in his work, ceased his song, and the next second flew away, and as far as I could tell he never returned to his dummy nest again!

When the young arrive, the parents are most diligent in obtaining food for them, and from sunrise to sunset they work hard. For the first few days, when the young are very small, one bird will remain brooding on them, while the other searches for food. They take turns at this, and immediately after feeding the young the bird settles down upon them and waits until it hears its mate coming through the reeds; then it jumps up and

REED WARBLER AND HER YOUNG.

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quickly goes off in search of food, while the one which has just arrived at the nest will protect the young until the other returns. By doing this they are able to keep their young warm all through the day, and also keep them provided with a good supply of food.

When the young are able to leave the nest, even before they can fly, they are very clever climbers. Their legs seem to be stronger than their wings, and they climb about the reeds with the greatest dexterity. If one should have the misfortune to fall into the water, the parents will flutter over it calling excitedly. The baby will show very little signs of fear, for it just flaps its wings, and kicks about until it reaches another reed, then it quickly climbs up it.

While I was photographing the young, I noticed a very interesting fact which goes to prove that the bird remembered which young it had fed. The two babies

were sitting on a branch as seen in my photograph, and the parent had just given food to the baby next to her immediately before the plate was exposed. She was absent for about ten minutes, and on her return with food she no doubt remembered that baby number one had been fed, for as soon as she settled on the branch the first baby made great efforts to take the insects from her, but the mother just ignored it, and lifting her head over the head of the bird next to her, popped the food into the beak of baby number two! It was interesting to notice how she fed her young in turns.

All through the months of May and June the birds kept to their corner of the lake, and each time I went near their home they did their utmost to drive me away with loud, angry cries. I could see them with their crests raised as they swung to and fro on the swaying reeds, and even when I had left, it seemed to

REED WARBLERS AT THEIR NEST.

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take them some minutes to settle down again. In July, when the reeds had grown up, and they had ceased to sing, I lost sight of them, but the sudden jerk of a reed stem or the sound of wings told me that my birds were still there; but with the approach of autumn they, with the numerous young birds, flew away to the South, for these little travellers must live in a perpetual summer, where they are able to obtain plenty of insect food.

CHAPTER IX

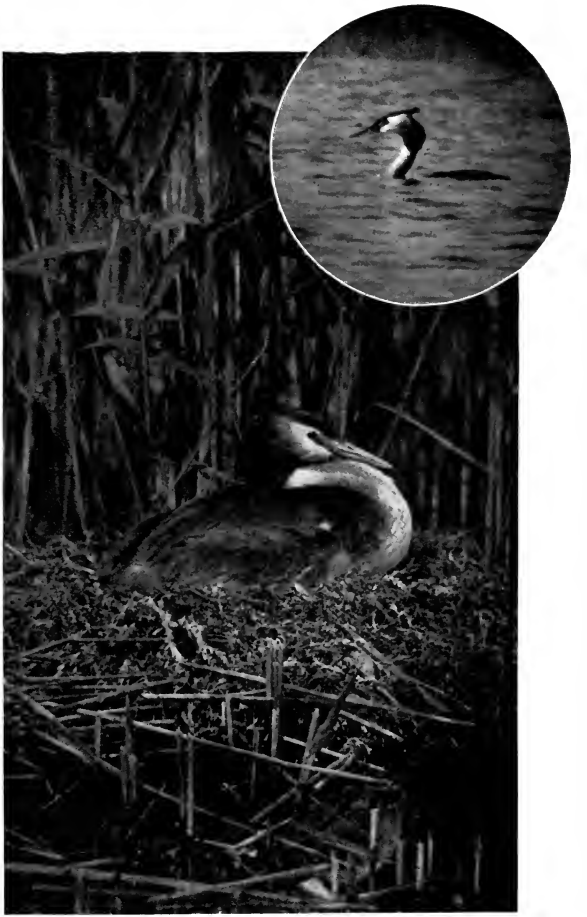
THE LAKE IN THE VALLEY

IT was a small lake in a small valley. When I first saw it, the whole of the still surface was tinted red from the sunset's glow. It was one of those still, silent evenings of spring, when Nature seems to rest for awhile during her great and wonderful awakening. All around there was a chorus of song. It was difficult to pick out one distinct song, for Thrushes, Blackbirds, Skylarks, Sedge-Warblers and Reed-Warblers seemed determined to outdo each other in giving out the loudest music. But one by one the birds which sang such rich notes to the setting sun ceased, and when the Cuckoo was

calling his last evening notes, two birds swam out into the centre of the lake. The long V-shaped ripples first called my attention to them. They were advancing from different directions, and when about twenty yards separated them I heard their loud and curious calls. *Kee-u-war*, *kee-u-war* it sounded like, and every time they uttered it I saw their long necks raised, and the frills around their necks were opened out, and the crests on their heads were raised. I knew the two Great-crested Grebes were rivals, but each seemed afraid or unwilling to attack, and there they remained for a time, continually giving out the loud calls and swimming round each other.

Before the red tinge had left the water, a third Grebe swam out from the reeds, and almost immediately the two birds prepared for battle. They swam towards each other, and their long necks

were laid flat on the water, their wings were raised in the form of a shield over their backs, and they advanced one towards the other. When they met, their necks were lifted and each gave the other a few harmless pecks, and each retreated. Once again they advanced and the same thing happened, and for ten or fifteen minutes this rather weak battle continued. The hen bird, which was the third bird which appeared, took very little notice of the fighters, and it was principally this fact which caused the two male Grebes to fight in such a tame manner. However, before it was too dark for me to observe their movements they went for each other in a really desperate manner, and I saw the still surface of the lake turned into large ripples, and the fighters were dashing one at the other in real earnest. How the battle ended I could not very well see, but I did notice that the



AT REST ON HER EGGS.

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vanquished bird had left the water and was flying hurriedly away to a neighbouring lake with the victorious Grebe chasing it.

In one corner of the lake there was a small creek, with a quantity of young reeds making their appearance; it was in this corner that the two Grebes determined to build their nest. It so happened that a pair of Coots also had their home here—and the Coot is a bird which likes privacy—and when they saw the Grebes appearing here, in their own corner of the lake, they were very much annoyed and determined to put a stop to this trespassing. The Grebes, however, were a match for the Coots and determined to stay, and stay they did.

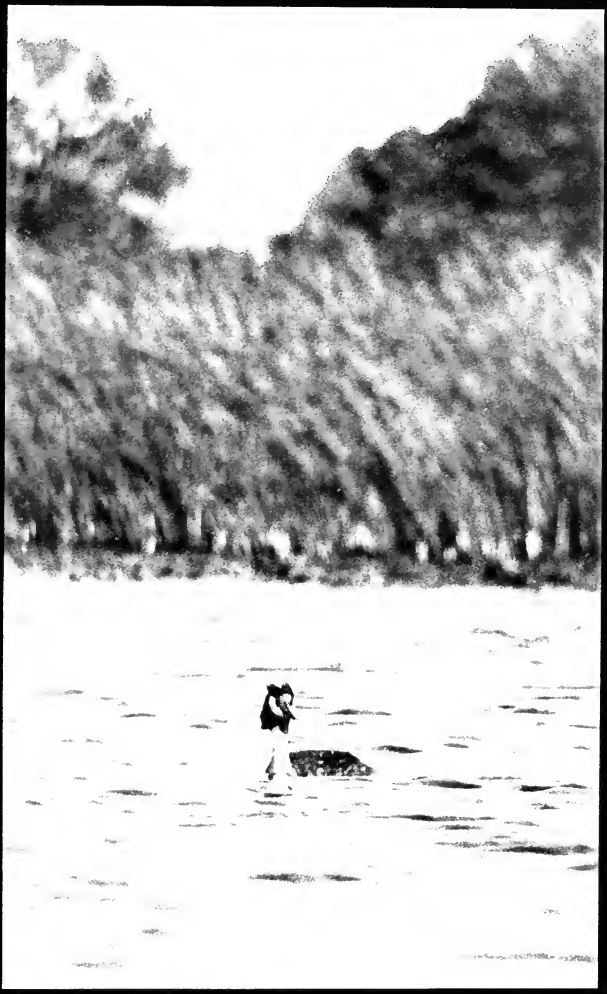
I watched them building their nest. The two birds kept diving to the bottom of the lake and bringing up large beakfuls of the decaying vegetation lying at the bottom; this was placed on the water

amongst the young reeds, other material was collected from the surface of the lake, and while the hen was putting the nest into shape, her mate would swim a hundred yards or more and come back with a small piece of weed in his beak; then handing this to her—and she took it as if she thought he had gone through a vast amount of labour for such a small item—he turned round and went off in search of more. With such energy did the birds work, that in less than two days quite a good nest had been made. The following morning this contained one egg, and while one bird kept guard near the nest, the other was a distance from it, searching for food in the deeper water. The Coots now seemed to take very little notice of the Grebes, but they were waiting their opportunity, and later on in the day both Grebes left their corner, no doubt thinking that the egg was safe. Very soon after they

had gone, the Coot slipped off her nest, crept quietly through the reeds, and approaching the Grebes' nest, she mounted this and viciously attacked it, and in a very few moments she had torn it to pieces. She tossed the egg out, scratched at the rather loose structure with her feet, pulled the wet weeds apart with her beak, and did not stop until she heard the swish of wings beating the water. But before the Grebes could return she was back at her own nest, and there with angry calls defied them. The Grebes for a time swam around the ruined nest, and after examining it seemed still more determined to defy the Coots.

The spot where the nest had been built seemed really the only sheltered spot with the exception of that occupied by the Coots, but rather than run the risk of having their home destroyed a second time, the Grebes commenced to

rebuild their nest right on the margin of the reeds, and quite ten feet farther from the Coots. With tremendous energy they set to work, using the old materials again, and I never knew a nest built quicker. The birds commenced to build late in the evening, and when the creek was visited the following morning the hen was sitting on her nest and it contained one egg. This was the second one she had laid, for the first had sunk, and could not be recovered. I noticed that the hen did not leave her nest, but sat there the whole day. She had learnt a lesson, and did not intend to let the Coots destroy her home again. A day later two eggs were in the nest, and then a new danger threatened to destroy it. A strong wind sprang up and blew right across the lake towards the creek. The nest was not sheltered, and it looked as if nothing could keep it from being washed away. The hen was



GREAT-CRESTED GREBE SWIMMING

sitting, but she looked like a bird on a small round boat on a rough sea. The nest, which was only an inch or two above the water, bent up and down as the waves rolled in. The birds knew their danger, and again showed what determination can do. The male bird worked as he had never worked before. He swam rapidly to a sheltered part of the lake, then dived and brought up a bunch of wet weeds; hurrying to his mate he gave these to her, and not waiting a moment went away in quest of more. All the morning he worked like this, and every time he brought material his mate placed it on the nest to strengthen it. The result was, that later in the day the nest was so firm that it withstood the force of the gale; but still the Grebes did not rest, and they kept adding to their home until it had been raised several inches. I could not help admiring their pluck; I have seen many a Grebe's nest

washed away in more secure spots than this was built in. I remember one pair of birds which had particularly bad fortune, for twice in one season, after the full clutch of eggs had been laid, their nests were washed away by gales. The birds certainly showed that they could learn by experience, for on the third attempt at nest-building they first made a high pile of weeds, quite nine inches above the water, and the nest proper, constructed of wet water weeds, was built on top of this.

For three weeks the birds took their turns at sitting, then two small striped birds arrived upon the scene. In less than two hours after they had left their shells they took to the water, and so much at home were they in this element that they were able to take little dives, or perhaps it would be more correct to say they were able to bob under the water for a couple of inches. They were

quite able to climb on to their father's back, and he took them for short journeys from the nest, and caught small fish for them. Sometimes they made themselves comfortable under his wings, and he was able to dive with them in this position and carry them quite long distances under the water. At the slightest sign of danger, he gave a short note which they very soon learnt to obey, and instantly scrambled under his wings, and just a few ripples on the water showed where he had gone down. These two young birds seemed to be his own special property, and his mate continued to sit for another three days. At the end of this time two more fluffy babies arrived, and the hen took charge of these. They did not return to the nest, although one egg was left in it. For many weeks the parents looked after the young, and it was very interesting to note how the two young birds which left

their shells first, remained close to the male, while the second two clung to their mother.

In another corner of the lake, where the trees overhung the water, a pair of Little Grebes had built their nest. Owing to their extreme shyness they were not so easy to watch as the larger Grebes, but by building a small hiding place on the water and surrounding this with dried reeds I was able to observe them at their nest from a distance of six feet. When the hen first arrived at the nest she seemed very suspicious, and although she was in deep water she just raised her head above the surface so that her eyes and beak could be seen, and she remained in this strange position for just twenty minutes. It was a game of patience between the photographer and the bird, and I am glad to say the photographer won and I secured a good set of pictures.

THE LITTLE GREBE AT REST ON HER EGGS.

There was a Coot's nest close to this Grebe's nest, but the birds seemed on friendly terms. The nests were so close together that I was able to photograph both birds from my one hiding place. When I discovered the nests I was very much surprised to find that the Little Grebe's nest contained three of her own eggs and one laid by the Coot! This clearly showed that the Coot on one occasion at least had mistaken her home, and she probably spent a night on the Grebe's nest, but whether the Grebe retaliated by sitting on the Coot's eggs I cannot say. In one of my bioscope pictures I was able to photograph the Little Grebe standing immediately under the Coot's nest, but I was not able to get pictures of the Coot near the Grebe.

I was particularly struck with the rapidity with which the Grebe covered her eggs over. If anything alarmed her, she jumped up on the nest, threw

wet water weeds over her eggs, completely covering them, slipped off and dived in ten seconds. When returning after an alarm she always came along under the water, and when close to the nest just slowly lifted her head above the surface, not making a ripple in doing this, and looked well around before showing her body.

Very soon after the young left the shells I visited the nest, and just to see what would happen I showed myself instead of going into my usual hiding place. The young were swimming near the nest, and when they saw me made comical efforts to dive; they just went under, then popped up again. The mother was in a state of great excitement, she hurriedly swam away, and called her five young to her. The note of alarm is not easy to put into words, but it might be described by the word *peuf* uttered as a loud

musical note. *Peuf*, *peuf*, *peuf* called the Grebe, and her five babies swam quickly to her; as soon as they reached her all of them quickly scrambled under her wings, she dived with the whole family, and swam a good distance under the water, carrying them to a place of safety.

I did not see them again, for there are few birds which are so successful in concealing themselves as the Little Grebe.

CHAPTER X

THE HOME IN THE OLD STONE BRIDGE

IN a large cavity, right underneath the old moss-covered bridge, where a stone had tumbled out during a heavy flood, a pair of Dippers had built their home. It reminded one of a large nest of the Wren. It was domed over, and had a hole at the side just large enough to admit the bird. There was a tremendous amount of material in that nest, and it took the two birds a fortnight to build, and they worked hard at it too, from early morning until sunset, just going off for short excursions for food. The walls were so solid, and the moss with which it was constructed was so well worked together, that no water would

penetrate through. Large drops of water were rolling down from the sides and top of the low tunnel through which the small mountain stream passed on its way to the larger river only a few feet away. Some of the drops fell upon the nest itself, but the inside where the five white eggs were concealed was quite dry. It was a wonderful home, built by wonderful birds.

I well remember, when a boy, how I used to devour all articles dealing with bird life that I could come across. One of these dealt with the Dipper, and I longed to see that water bird more than any other. Twelve years ago I first saw the bird, and it has fascinated me ever since. The nest of which I am writing was on the same stream as the one where I first saw the bird. I have visited this spot every year since, sometimes twice and three times in the course of twelve months, for on every opportunity

I run off to the mountains of wild Wales and in a delightful little inn, surrounded with hills and tumbling streams, I have spent some of my happiest days.

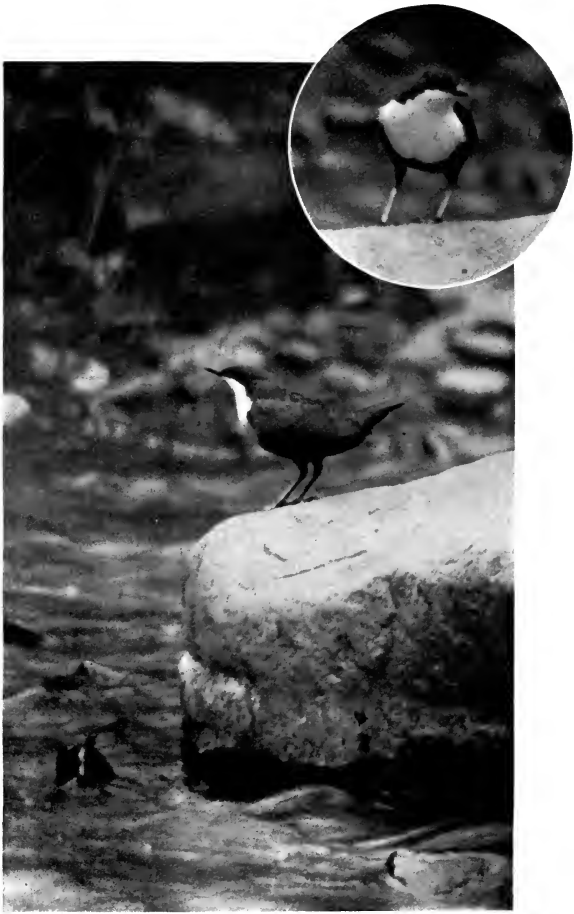
Let us follow the stream up to the hills. As we wander along, climbing over rough boulders and going carefully over marshy ground, the stream gets quickly smaller, and before we have gone three miles it is not a yard wide, and not very much farther on, amongst a tract of rushes and coarse mountain grass, is its source. But the Dipper is not up here; we must go to where the water falls over the rocks, and runs tossing and tumbling over stones, or to where it rushes through deep gullies, and there we are sure to find him. On this stream there are several pairs, but they keep to their own stretches of river. One nest was actually underneath the falling water of a fall about ten feet high, and the birds when they went to their nes

THE DIPPER'S NEST

had to dash right through the water as it fell over the rocks. This nest was built when the river was low, but a rise of the water did not disturb the birds in the least; they had built their home well underneath the rock, and although a large quantity of water seemed to actually wash right over the nest, it was really in a safe spot, and the birds were simply put to a little inconvenience as they entered or left their home. But what did this matter to the Dipper! Why, the bird revels in water, and I have seen them dash right underneath fast running water, and come up a moment or two later with food. Another nest was on the bank itself, underneath a piece of overhanging turf.

I often sat on a rock by the stream side near the old bridge and watched the birds. One, I knew, was sitting on the eggs, and the other had just left her. I think he had been taking food to her, and now

he was sitting on a small rock in mid-stream, his white breast looking like a snowball when the sun shone upon him. Not for a moment could he keep still; all the time he sat there he was bobbing up and down, turning round, now looking up stream, the next minute flying to another rock farther down, but all the time he was moving. He was coming nearer to me, for this rock on which I sat was near the entrance to his bridge, but he did not mind me; he discovered a day or two ago, when I photographed him and his mate, that no harm would befall him. A short way up stream there was a narrow space through which the water flowed, and this was a favourite hunting-ground of his. On one occasion I was fortunate to stalk right up to the grassy bank while he was under the water, and then, peeping over, I saw him there. He came up for breath, then went under again. The water was clear and



THE DIPPER.

I could see all his movements. He faced the stream, walked along with the greatest ease against the running water, and with his beak he turned over the smaller stones. I could see him picking up the insects, and it was really wonderful with what quickness he snapped these up before the running water carried them away. Then up he came, mounted a stone, shook his feathers, preened his wings, hopped to another stone, and under he went again. Over the pebbles he ran with the water running over him, and when he had found another beakful of food he hopped out, and down to the bridge he went with a gift for his sitting mate. Again I saw him in another part of the river, where the water ran still more swiftly, and he dived in like a Kingfisher, making a great splash, and brought out something which he carried to his mate.

The Dipper is a strange bird. He has the note of the Kingfisher, and a similar

flight; he builds a nest like the Wren, is as much at home at the bottom of a river as he is in the air; he has a short, but loud and beautiful song, and seems quite at ease on a swaying twig, and will sometimes be seen at the top of tall trees. He belongs to the mountain streams, and is not found in the flat country where the rivers are sluggish. He must be where the waters are running and falling over rocks, in those spots where the music of the hills comes from their bubbling rivers. He loves the roar of the falls, and delights to be amongst their spray; the dampest and the darkest spots serve for his nest, and he goes to the same old haunt in each succeeding year.

One morning as I passed the bridge I saw both birds outside on the rocks, and I guessed that the nest contained young. There were four, I discovered, for one of the eggs was unfertile; I removed

this, and it was not until over three weeks later that I saw the nest again.

There was a great commotion under the old stone bridge. Loud, shrill cries greeted me as I neared it; and no wonder, for there, sitting on the moss-covered rocks leading to the larger stream, were some quaint-looking birds. The baby Dippers had for the first time left their mossy home, and were looking out upon the great world of water outside. On a rock in the river the parents sat, bobbing up and down, and spreading their wings and calling loudly. Backwards and forwards they went to their young, urging them to follow them. One gave a hop and slipped down into the water, but, not a bit scared at this mishap, he followed them, and found to his astonishment that his wings would carry him wherever he wished to go. The other three followed, one giving the quaintest little hops from stone to stone, as though

he was afraid of wetting his feet! But down the river they all went, led by their parents to a place of safety.

That evening as I passed the old bridge I looked down the big stream, and there, on a large rock with the water swirling round it, I saw the Dipper—he was still bobbing.

CHAPTER XI

THE BIRDS OF COWSLIP CORNER

WE always called it Cowslip Corner, because when the birds had their nests in the little bushes there, the beautiful yellow flowers covered the ground. We never found such large cowslips elsewhere; they were the finest of all the countryside, and if you picked a large bunch from that small corner, there seemed to be just as many left. It was just a corner of a coppice, and in the months of April, May, and June was filled with song. Hardly a minute passed throughout all those days without bird music being heard there; and the night, too, had its notes, for Sedge-Warblers,

Reed-Warblers, and sometimes the Nightingale nested close by.

Perhaps it was the warmth that attracted the birds to Cowslip Corner. On the south and east side was a high hedge — a "Bullfinch" hedge, for this Finch loves such a spot—while on the east, protecting it from the winds, were tall trees; the west was open, and it was when the setting sun sent his evening warmth into that corner that the birds sang their loudest, sweetest, and best. All through May the bright yellow flowers bloomed, on into June, but as the spring grew older, the tall grasses and numerous umbelliferous plants, ever growing higher, covered them. It was not easy to discover the nests when the leaves were thick on the bushes and the grass tall on the ground, but the songs always heard there told us that the singers had their small homes near.

There was one small bird that sang

WILLOW WRENS AT THEIR NEST.

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persistently all through the day. He often sat on the topmost twig of a willow stem, and from this high perch the Willow-Wren gave out his pretty undulating song while his mate was sitting on her eggs. I knew that it would be a hopeless task to attempt to search for their nest in the thick grass, so I waited until they had young. One bright day in late May I saw the two birds with food in their beaks, and I guessed that the young had arrived. Hiding behind a small bush near by, I waited for them to drop into the grass and so show me the site of the nest. I waited and waited, yet those birds would not go down. They knew that I was near, and watching, and refused to help me. One bird, the hen, kept flying from one small branch to another about three yards apart, and I imagined that it was near here that the nest was situated. So I got up, and walked right away, gave the birds a few

minutes, and then returned. The male had ceased his song, and the female was not to be seen. I stalked silently up to the spot where I thought the nest ought to be, struck the grass with my stick, and the bird flew up almost from my feet. Parting the grass aside, I saw the most cunningly concealed nest, well domed over at the top, and with a very small entrance. On opening this, five big open beaks greeted me, and the mother called me a lot of names from a branch close by. It is remarkable how bold these small birds are. I have had the Willow-Wren fly right at me; it spread its wings, opened its beak and hissed at me, and even tried to do damage by inflicting some tiny pecks. If only some of the larger birds were as bold as the small Warblers it would be impossible to get near their nests.

I built my hiding place near by, and the next day went inside with my camera

WILLOW WRENS AT THEIR NEST.

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and bioscope. While securing living photographs I saw the very prettiest little incident that I have ever seen while photographing our smaller birds. The female was inside attending to her young, when her mate came down and settled on a small twig just above. A moment or two later he flew to the nest, and seeing that his mate was inside and busy, he waited outside. Very patiently he stood there just at the entrance, and lying across the tip of his beak was an insect. He kept quite motionless until his mate had finished feeding the young with the food that she had brought. Suddenly she looked up, and saw her mate there. Instead of giving way and allowing him to enter the nest, she went towards him, and very beautifully lifted up her little beak and tenderly took this love-gift from him. As soon as she had done this he flew away for another supply, and she handed the insect to one of her

young. With my bioscope I was able to secure a living record of this interesting scene.

Another song that we always heard in Cowslip Corner was that of the Linnet. As surely as the flowers bloomed, he and his mate built their nest in a small bush near the hedge. It was a little song and easily drowned in the chorus from Thrush, Blackbird, Blackcap and Garden-Warbler, but nevertheless a very sweet song it was. While in my small bird-watching tent, I often had him singing not more than a yard away, and between each visit to the nest he gave out a few notes. On one occasion that he returned, his mate was brooding over her young. He stood on the nest by her side, and when she saw he had food, she too stood up, and he began to feed the babies. But she called to him with tiny twittering notes, and vibrated the tips of her wings rapidly, a sure sign that she was pleased,

LINNETS AT THEIR NEST.

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and presently he paused in his work. She opened her beak and he handed all the remaining food to her; she almost immediately passed this on to the young, and he still stood there watching her. When all the food had been given he did a pretty thing. I do not know if birds ever kiss, but it certainly looked like it. He had no more food to give her, and just before leaving he just turned towards her, and with the tip of his own beak he gently rubbed hers! The next instant he turned round and flew away to search for another supply of food; but on his journey he paused a moment, and sang a few little notes to his mate, as she went again to her young and covered them with her warm wings.

In a bush underneath the tall trees a Blackcap had its home. It was a fragile structure, and when I discovered it one side of the nest had broken away from its supports, and an egg had slipped out

and was lying on the ground underneath. Both the Garden-Warbler and Blackcap are very careless nest builders, and I have often seen their nests falling away from the branches. I fastened this Blackcap's nest up securely, and when I visited it again the male bird was sitting. I have often noticed that in that part of the wood occupied by the Blackcap the Garden-Warbler is absent; they seem to keep to their respective corners of the wood. Perhaps this is owing to their songs being alike, for some birds, and especially the smaller ones, are desperate rivals. Both songs are very fine, but that of the Blackcap can easily be distinguished as it is continued often for many minutes, while the Garden-Warbler gives out short snatches lasting perhaps ten or fifteen seconds. The actual notes, however, are practically the same. I once had the good fortune to hear the Blackcap and the Nightingale singing in

the same bush. When listening to the pure loud notes of the Blackcap I have often thought that surely he is our best feathered singer, but when I heard the two birds together I had to acknowledge that the Nightingale was the best. In the hours of spring when so many birds are singing, and when in the general chorus it is not easy to pick out any individual song, the Blackcap's notes are lost; if we could hear the song in the silence of night when all other songs have ceased, we should appreciate it far more. But the song that I should love to hear in the dead of night is that of our English Thrush. Some of the birds that I have heard in the wild hill country, with their superior notes, far louder and purer than those of the low-lands, would draw thousands to their leafy concert-hall, if only they would sing when all other songs were silent. It is the silence and the darkness that

gives such charm to the Nightingale's song, and when we hear one singing, as we often do in the light of day, the music loses half its charm.

The Whitethroat always has its nest in Cowslip Corner, but I have never been able to find it, for a Whitethroat knows as well as any of the Warblers how to conceal its nest. It is a clever bird, full of all kinds of little ruses to attract you away. The male will sing continuously over a certain bush, knowing well that you are watching, and all the time the nest is in quite a different spot. I once went towards a bush in which I knew there was a Whitethroat's nest, and as I passed it, the small brown bird just tumbled out of the nest and lay upon the ground at my feet. It was not dead, for I could see it panting; one wing was hanging helpless at its side, and a leg apparently broken was sticking out from under its tail. What was wrong? I had struck the bush

THE WHITETHROAT.

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with my stick, but not the bird. I stooped down to pick it up, but with a plaintive cry it dragged itself along the ground. I followed, still trying to capture it. Just out of my reach it kept, crying piteously, and with that broken wing hanging limp by its side. When I had followed for over twenty yards, I cried, "I will capture you," and jumped forward. So did the bird! Suddenly she changed, no longer was she a wounded bird, and flew up with a jaunty flight, settled on a high branch, and with a few lively notes asked me how I liked being "had." The Whitethroat had played a clever ruse, and attracted the supposed enemy away from her precious eggs.

Each spring the Thrushes had their nests in Cowslip Corner, and from the time when the blue and white violets peeped above the green grass, until the wild roses had faded from the bushes, their songs were heard. In one small bush a

Thrush and Linnet built their nests almost side by side, and I was able to obtain some bioscope pictures of both birds at their nests at the same time. Another nest was built in a little pile of cut branches thrown upon the ground, and when the young were a week old a Stoat pulled the nest down and carried away the young. The feathers of the mother bird lying all around showed how desperately she had fought for her babies, but without avail. Blackbirds, Greenfinches, and Hedge-Sparrows, all had their nests there. I have never come across such a small corner which contained so many nests. On some occasions I have taken my bird-watching shelter there at the beginning of the season, and left it there until the birds had finished nesting, and I have been kept busy photographing all the time. I never go into Cowslip Corner in winter or summer without seeing something of interest, and the photographs that

THE YOUNG HEDGE-SPARROWS CLAMOUR LUSTILY FOR MORE FOOD.

I have secured there would more than fill a book; hundreds of plates have been exposed, and nearly a mile of bioscope film. And yet each visit I see something new, and each time I take my camera a fresh picture is secured. No matter how long I linger there, the time is not wasted. There, a hundred songs greet me; from the ground, in the bushes, and in the air above, and from the lake beyond the creek, which comes almost up to Cowslip Corner, I hear the harsher cries of Grebe and Duck, of Coot and Moorhen. Turtle Doves call from the tall trees, and a Cuckoo from the hedge, for there is always a young Cuckoo hatched there, and Sedge-Warblers are always the foster-parents. The Cuckoo and her mate remain near their egg, and the young bird when it arrives, although they have nothing to do with the rearing of it; but they like to be near at hand, and to know that their young have been successfully reared. And in this

favoured corner there are the flowers—what would a spring be without its colour? If we had the songs and the blue sky alone, it would not be a springtime without the gay flowers. There seemed to be the flowers of a dozen meadows crowded into this small corner, and violets, primroses, cowslips in the greatest profusion; patches of the lovely blue veronica, with its thousand small faces pointing up to the blue above, looking as if little flakes of the sky had just tumbled down and settled upon the grass to add to the beauty below; wild roses, pink and white, tall red campion in the grass, ragged robin, and a host of others all appeared in their turn, and made that corner one of the loveliest spots of a beautiful countryside. Then, over all, there was the song of the Lark, and there were few months of the year in which there was not a Lark singing above. Mixed up with the music of the Warblers, Thrush,

and Finch, there was the hum of a thousand insects' wings as they went to and fro, from flower to flower, or the bees, happy in the sunshine, passed from or to their hives.

But all this is in the spring and summer months. Last time I was there the winter had not long gone, but the signs of spring were already showing, and on the top branch of a bush, silhouetted against the sky, I saw the Blackbird. He knew the spring was coming, and his beautiful deep contralto notes told me, and all his little world around, that it would not be long before the butterflies flitted their short lives away in the sunshine, over the flowers, in Cowslip Corner.

CHAPTER XII

BIRD-WATCHING

"HOW is it you see all these things? I often walk through the country and do not see things you write about." This is a question put to me hundreds of times, especially after my lectures on bird life. Well, I suppose it is, in a way, because I have trained my eyes to search out the birds. But perhaps the chief asset of the successful bird-watcher is patience, and plenty of it. With a fair amount of patience, a small green or khaki tent, and a good field-glass it is possible to see almost anything you wish in Birdland. And if you add a camera to your equipment, then your enjoyment should be complete, for you are able to

obtain records of what you see. But if you have no inclination to double yourself up and hide for hours in a small tent, then you can see an enormous lot of interesting things by simply going into the woods or fields with your field-glass and sitting still, and waiting for the birds to come to you. With a powerful binocular such as I use you can do a lot of bird-stalking, and look upon the most fascinating scenes as if they were happening only a yard from you; but on the other hand, if you simply find a comfortable seat in the grass—or perhaps the best place of all is by the stream side—and wait, keeping your eyes open, you will be surprised at the varied things you will see. I have used all kinds of telescopes and field-glasses, but for the past twelve years I have used a Goerz Prism Binocular, and although this has had the hardest and roughest wear a glass could be put to, it is still in good

condition. This firm have recently introduced a new Prism glass, which gives more light and a larger field, and I can say without the slightest hesitation that this is the finest thing of its kind that it is possible to obtain, or to wish for; and the naturalist equipped with one of these glasses knows that he has something that will open up to him the secrets of Birdland, and show him Nature in a new light. A bird two hundred yards away is quite unconscious that you are watching it, and to see bird-life at its best the bird must not know that you are near. I put all the success of my bioscope pictures down to the fact that the apparatus is almost silent, and that even when only five feet away from a bird, it has not had the slightest idea that I am hiding and obtaining a living record of all its actions. If the bird hears anything to make it at all nervous, then you do not get a natural picture. It is the

THE AUTHOR GOING OVER THE EDGE OF A CLIFF.

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same with bird-watching: if the bird knows you are there it is nervous, and will not behave in a natural manner. I have sometimes watched a bird which could see me, and by its expression I have imagined that it felt like we do when placed before a camera in a studio, with a man standing cap in hand waiting for us to put on a non-photographic expression!

To see bird-life at its best you should be completely hidden, and when you find a nest, and wish to observe the home-life of the two birds, erect your bird-tent near, cover it with branches or any other material handy, and allow the birds to get quite used to the strange erection near their home. When you go inside, endeavour to take with you, to the site of the nest, two or three companions. They can help you in, and when there they can cover up the tent more completely, and very soon after they move

away the birds will be back—that is if you are carefully concealed. If the birds see you go inside your time is really wasted, for they know you are there, and will not come back for many hours. I remember once trying to photograph a Thrush. I waited over two hours and the bird did not appear, so the following day I went to my shelter again and took with me four companions. As soon as I had my two cameras ready they walked away, and in less than ten minutes the bird was at the nest, and I secured a number of photographs. There are some birds which seem as if they will not return to their nests, even if we wait days, such as the Buzzard and Grey-lag Goose. I believe that these birds have a very strong sense of smell, and when wishing to photograph or watch such birds it is a good plan to smother the tent, when it is erected, with a fair amount of oil of aniseed. This has a powerful

WHEN THE WREN STOOD NEAR THE NEST THREE HUNGRY BEAKS WERE THRUST OUT.

and not very unpleasant smell, and it seems to quite overpower the human scent as far as the birds are concerned. It is as well, however, not to wear clothes that one might wear when visiting friends, for the smell will attach itself to you for days, especially if you spend many hours in your scented tent, and if you should walk through the streets of a crowded town you might attract some little attention! It is one of the most fascinating things I know of, to be in hiding near the nest of a rare and beautiful bird without it knowing you are near. I once spent over six hours in the company of that rare bird the Black-throated Diver. I was only ten feet away, and all the time the bird was perfectly natural in its movements, and it was one of the most delightful times I ever spent in bird-watching. The small birds, however, those which we find nesting near our homes, are very interesting, and some of the very prettiest

scenes I have ever looked upon have been the domestic life at the small nests of Warblers and Finches.

Of all places for successful bird-watching I think the sides of a stream are the best, especially if the banks should be covered with bushes and trees. So many birds come to the stream, and if you keep perfectly still they will take little notice of you. I have mentioned before that I once had a beautiful Kingfisher come and settle a few inches from me while I was sitting in full view on the banks; in fact I was at the time writing an article on the birds of the stream, when this obliging little bird came and stayed with me for twenty minutes! Two years ago I knew that a pair of Kingfishers had a nest near a picturesque lake, but although I searched every available spot, as I thought, I could not find the nest. Almost at the end of the nesting season,

THE AUTHOR NEGOTIATING AN OVERHANGING LEDGE.

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right at the end of June, my sister went out on to the banks of the lake with a book. When she returned, she mentioned quite casually to me that a lovely Kingfisher had been capturing fish in front of her all the morning, and that it kept carrying the fish into a hole in the bank. I quickly went to the spot, and there found the nest, and I could tell by the excited cries of the young at the end of the long hole in the bank that they were almost ready to leave. As soon as possible my hiding place was erected near the nest, and I secured a most successful photograph of one of the parent birds carrying a fish to its young.

To give some idea of how little notice the birds will take of you if you keep still, the following incident is of interest. Last year I was sitting behind a screen with my cameras, waiting for a water bird to come to its nest. The screen consisted of two hurdles stuffed with

reeds. I noticed a noise going on near my head, and turning slowly, I found to my surprise that a pair of Wrens were actually building their nest a few inches from my head! I kept as still as I could, and they worked all through the day, and when I left they had built quite a large amount of their home. The following day they still kept at work, taking no notice of me, and eventually eggs were laid in the nest, the young appeared, and I secured a good series of photographs of the parents feeding them.

The Nature lover equipped, as I have stated, with patience, will be more than repaid for all the trouble he or she takes, and the hours you spend with the birds will not have been wasted, for all the time you are learning something new from the great and ever-changing book of Nature.

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