

NOTES ON THE FOOD AND HABITS OF THE
SPARROW-HAWK.

BY

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THE following notes made from time to time on the habits of the Sparrow-Hawk may be of interest as supplementing or corroborating the observations recently published in these pages. In connexion with some of the observations, I have to acknowledge assistance from A. P. Adams, one of the boys at Felsted School.

Curiously enough I have never seen a nest of a Sparrow-Hawk which had as its foundation the old nest of another bird, though my brother, O. R. Owen, says that he often finds Sparrow-Hawks' nests built upon old nests of Wood-Pigeons. In 1914, however, I knew of two cases of Sparrow-Hawks laying in nests from which the hen birds had been shot in 1913. One of these was a second laying after the eggs had been robbed from a new nest; the other was a first laying, and suggests that the cock has some choice in the nesting-site.

It is hard to say when incubation commences; in some nests I have watched, the eggs have hatched at intervals, but in one case all four eggs hatched during the course of one day. The incubation-period is practically thirty-five days. During incubation the nest gets well flecked with down from the female, and is often a very pretty sight. When the young are hatched this disappears at once, being, I believe, removed by the female after feeding the young the first time. Later on the nest gets flecked with down from the young as they get their feathers.

When the young are newly hatched the eyes are open and the iris is very dark brown, the pupil being deep indigo. The iris then becomes greenish-grey, with a black outer line. Later this line disappears and the

iris gets much more yellow. At birth the head is entirely covered with short, thick, white down. Then a space becomes clear of down between the eye and nostril. This bare skin is at first nearly green and has a few hair-like down-filaments on it. As the skin becomes bare it becomes lighter (yellow), and afterwards gradually darkens. It is very noticeable that birds in the same nest, when fully feathered, vary very much in colour. The breast-markings in particular vary from quite a light brown to a very dark reddish-brown. It is possible to tell females from males before they lose the down at all by the greater length of limb, and especially of the tarsus.

Often the nest is built up as the nestling period proceeds, and is much flatter and some inches higher when the young leave than when they were hatched. The cup of the nest is lined with leaves or bark at the time these additions are made. I think the object is for sanitary purposes, to cover any small bit of food, or dung, or pellets not taken away by the female.

It is interesting to note a marked difference in the actual feeding of these and many other nestlings: whereas it is usual for a nestling not to swallow until the food touches the back of the throat, these Hawks make a grab for the food and jerk it into position in the throat before swallowing. I do not think the young begin to peck for themselves until seventeen days old, but after that they can do a little self-feeding.

In a nest a boy and I watched last summer young Starlings were brought most often; Blue Tits were also brought more often than might be expected. The birds were always plucked before being brought to the nest, and I think this was often done on big limbs of the neighbouring trees, as we climbed several and found traces in most of the trees. Except for legs and feet, all bones were cleared away until the young had left the nest. After they leave the nest the young come back to feed, and then bones are allowed to accumulate.

They probably use the nest as a feeding-place, partly for reasons of safety.

I have personally never seen Partridge, Pheasant, or chick brought to the nest, or seen remains of either at any nest I have watched, or at a dining-table. On the other hand, I have known young hens take very large Pheasants along rides and eat them where they killed them. Last April on an island in a large pool, I found the remains of three Teal that had evidently been eaten by Sparrow-Hawks. The same day I saw a cock Sparrow-Hawk dash at a Teal that was coming to the pool. The Teal went headlong into the nearest rushes, and when it reached them the Hawk was barely a yard behind it. This is especially interesting as the Sparrow-Hawk usually leaves a bird passing over water. At the same time, I have known one pick up a young Moorhen as it swam across an open pool. I have only once seen a Sparrow-Hawk with a Wood-Pigeon; it was trying to carry the Pigeon (a young one about three months old) away, but could not get far at each attempt. The Pigeon was not dead, and I went to examine it, and found it horribly mutilated on the back and neck, and with one eye out. In most of the woods round Felsted I find skeletons of Wood-Pigeons clean-picked by Sparrow-Hawks, sometimes right under the nests, as if the Hawk had been unable to lift the bird to the nest. I think these must be wounded Pigeons, finished off by the Hawks. I have also known Sparrow-Hawks take Turtle-Doves, Partridges, Great and Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers, and Cuckoos, besides many common smaller birds.