

SOME BREEDING-HABITS OF THE  
SPARROW-HAWK.

(2) THE HEN AT THE NEST.

BY  
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THE hen Sparrow-Hawk is easy enough to study when once laying has begun, as she will never be far from the nest. Laying takes place on alternate days and apparently at any time during the day, for we have found birds laying and known eggs deposited at all times from 4 a.m. to mid-day. The period at which the hen begins to incubate is variable: she may start directly the first egg is laid, or when more are laid, or even not until all have been laid. If she is not incubating she will almost always be on the nest, *not covering the eggs but sitting beside them.*

As a rule, the hen does the whole of the incubation, unrelieved by the cock; cases are reported of the cock being shot from the nest, but these are rare, and it is not always stated whether the eggs had hatched or not. I have on occasion seen both birds at the nest during laying and incubation, but personally I have never known the cock help to incubate. Usually the hen is provided with food by the cock entirely during the laying, incubating and nestling periods; it is only rarely that she has to do any hunting until the young have left the nest.

Normally, a hen with six eggs keeps them in two rows of three, and if they are disturbed she puts them back into that arrangement with her bill as she covers them. Once, however, I saw a hen leave a nest of six eggs in rows of four and two. As often as not, five eggs are arranged in rows of three and two, and not symmetrically.

The behaviour of individual birds when flushed from the nest varies very much. Some go off silently and keep

silent, but do not go far away. Others go with a great swish of wings, but are otherwise quiet. Some rush from tree to tree of the wood, uttering loud alarm notes—"kew-kew-kew"—repeated very rapidly about ten times. When the young are hatched, this alarm note sometimes becomes "kyow-kyow-kyow" (a farmyard turkey note). One bird, and only one, shrieked "kill-kill-kill," and flew



Fig. 1. SPARROW-HAWK.

"As incubation advances the hen sheds down about the nest."

(*Photographed by A. P. Adams.*)

backwards and forwards through the nest-tree, often passing within a few inches of us and on rare occasions even touching us. Another bird flew very high backwards and forwards over the wood; she was silent and acted rather as the hen does in the spring evolutions. On another occasion the cock joined the hen, and both flew together up and down and above the wood, giving their alarm notes; it was especially interesting, as it was the only time I have known this happen, and the hen had at the time barely finished laying.

Like other birds, they vary much as to closeness of sitting, but nearly all sit especially close as the time for hatching comes on. I have on more than one occasion had my head level with the brim of the nest before the hen has left, and once touched the bird with my hand. This also is the case where the hen has been kept off the young rather a long time or during heavy rain, even when the brooding period is past. Until the brooding period is past, the hen will come on the nest in less than a quarter of an hour after being disturbed; often when I have watched from a hut she has been back at the nest within a minute of my companion leaving me. Her courage is really marvellous, for I have timed one to be on the nest in a little over an hour in face of a camera placed in the open a bare six feet from the nest. A hut is treated with great indifference after a very short time.

Ordinarily, when the laying commences, the nest is made only of various sizes of twigs, and the well of the nest is lined with the finest. Sometimes the part that is to bear the eggs is lined with bark, rotten wood, or leaves in addition, before an egg is deposited. If this is not the case, the hen will add a certain amount of such material to the nest during the laying and incubation periods. Her activity in this respect is greatly increased at the time hatching should commence. She also adds material to the nest, mostly in the form of twigs, during the nestling period. These are all broken off the nest-tree or trees in the immediate neighbourhood. They are sometimes brought because a young one seems uncomfortable, but the chief reason, in my opinion, is for sanitary purposes, to cover any pellets, dung, or bits of meat that have become wedged or sunk among the nest material. Some of the twigs brought are strong sticks, and these are put on the outside, but most of them are very fine and placed in the well. It is for this reason that a deep-cupped nest becomes nearly flat, and often inches higher, at the end of the nestling period.



Fig. 2. SPARROW-HAWK.

“ I have more than once seen a hen take up a gizzard and try to split it while the young waited expectantly.”

*(Photographed by J. H. Owen.)*

When the young hatch, the hen does not take the eggshells to a distance and drop them, as so many other birds do, but eats them while she broods, being evidently unwilling to leave the nest even for the short time



Fig. 3. SPARROW-HAWK.

“The hen almost invariably takes the food with the foot.

(*Photographed by J. H. Owen.*)

that would be necessary to carry the eggshells away. During the nestling period, until nearly the end, she pays great attention to the cleanness of the nest, and at first picks out the dung, the young being not strong enough to eject it clear of the nest as they do afterwards. She sometimes swallows the pellets of the very young, but as

the birds advance in age she picks the pellets up and, with a quick side jerk of the head, throws them clear of the nest. After most meals (after all, at first) she makes a more or less careful examination of the well of the nest, and to do it thoroughly she has to shift the young, which



Fig. 4. SPARROW-HAWK.

"She tears a morsel off and holds it to the youngster's bill."

(*Photographed by J. H. Owen.*)

she does much more gently than most birds—the warblers for example.

As incubation advances, the hen sheds down about the nest, until at hatching time it is really a beautiful sight to see her sitting in the middle of a well flecked nest (Fig. 1). This down is removed very soon after the young are hatched, and it is done in the following way. When the hen completes plucking a bird on the nest, she throws away such feathers as she does not swallow or feed to the young,

and some are caught on the nest. These she removes later, and with them bits of the down. She holds the prey between her feet and by the inside claw of each foot. To tear a bit off she takes a portion in her bill and twists and pulls at the same time, and thus gets the greatest possible power on the joint. The time taken over a meal varies very much, the limits being from one and a half minutes to about a quarter of an hour. Usually three minutes are enough. As with sitting, so with brooding and feeding, the hen takes up a position with her back to the wind, or nearly so, to shelter the young. Sometimes in a dry strong wind she feeds or sits facing it, or sideways to it, after trying to keep her back to it.

If a young one rejects a morsel because it is too big, or the morsel slips out of its bill before the young one can bolt it, the hen will offer it to another of the brood. If it is again rejected she may offer it to a third or bolt it herself. I have more than once seen a hen take up a gizzard thus rejected and try to split it, while the young waited expectantly, and on each occasion she had to swallow it herself in the end. (Fig. 2.)

Until the youngest is twelve to fourteen days old the hen does not leave the nest much, except to meet the cock or for some purpose that will not keep her away long. She comes and goes very noiselessly on these occasions. When she gets back to the nest with food she very often calls "kew-kew-kew" loudly, just after alighting. I thought for a long time that this was a signal to the cock, and it well may be, but it was not done always. If the cock brings food to the nest he leaves it and goes. The hen seldom does so, but takes the remains of the carcass with her if she leaves the nest while feeding. She may occasionally leave a bird at the nest when the young can feed themselves, and I have once seen her do so in the earlier period; that was a Sky-Lark brought by the cock during a terrible thunderstorm, towards the end of which the hen was put off the nest and left the Lark behind. If the cock

brings a bird to the nest, the hen almost invariably takes it with the foot (Fig. 3). Sometimes she leaves the nest and carries it away for a minute or two. Once I saw her pick the bird up and carry it away with her bill, but she returned with it in her foot. In the



Fig. 5. SPARROW-HAWK.

A pause in a meal.

(Photographed by J. H. Owen.)

early stages of the nestling period she tears a morsel off the prey and holds it to a youngster's bill (Fig. 4); it is grabbed and jerked down. Later she tears a bit off and lifts her head, and there is a simultaneous grab at it by all the young. She prefers to do the carving herself right up to the end of the nestling period, but

when the young become big enough they pull bits off the carcass while she holds it. Sometimes a young one seizes the prey while the hen's attention is distracted; in such a case she usually recovers it immediately by firm but gentle means. She is a wonderful mother, and only once have I seen one really peevish with a young one: on that occasion the youngster tried to help himself and took his mother's middle toe by mistake; the twist and pull action must have hurt her horribly, and she banged the offender on the side of the head, but she seemed most careful not to hurt but only to warn.

After she has fed the young and examined and cleaned the nest, she always cleans her feet, and particularly the claws that have held the prey. To do this she takes these toes in her bill and draws them roughly and violently through it once or twice. The extreme violence of this action often made me shudder and fear that she would rip a talon off.

If the cock is getting game faster than it is needed, the hen will not fetch it. On one occasion he brought three birds to the wood in just five minutes; the hen fed the young with the first and part of the second, which she finished herself. When he called the third time she turned her head in his direction, gave one awesome shriek, and resumed her original position. After that it was more than an hour before I heard the cock again.

It is a very pretty sight to see the hen go to brood after a meal. She looks at the young first and then round the neighbourhood. Then she puffs all her breast feathers out to the widest extent and looks at the young and glances round about again. Sometimes she has a wonderful look of satisfaction as she gazes at the young (Fig. 6). Finally she bends forward a little and edges over them by degrees, pushing her way forward little by little. Once, and once only, I saw her dump herself down on the young and they very quickly tried to



Fig. 6. SPARROW-HAWK.

" Sometimes she has a wonderful look of satisfaction as she gazes at the young."  
(*Photographed by J. H. Owen.*)

wriggle from under the weight (Fig. 7). The amount of time spent in brooding seems excessive and unnecessary. The young, when a week old, keep struggling from beneath the old bird, and when they are ten days old they do not care to be brooded at all and spend most of their time clear of the mother, unless the weather



Fig. 7. SPARROW-HAWK.

“Once, and only once, I saw her dump herself down on the young and they very quickly tried to wriggle from under her weight.”

(*Photographed by J. H. Owen.*)

conditions are bad. She often goes to sleep on the nest and closes her eyes, but the very slightest noise or movement is sufficient to make her extremely alert again. When asleep the lids always cover the eyes. At the end of the brooding period the hen just sits beside the young on the nest, she seldom covers them in the daytime, but “mothers” one when it chooses to nestle under her. I have no notes as to what brooding she does in the night.

After the brooding is over she perches in a tree *upwind* from the nest ; sometimes she selects a dead leafless branch full in the sun, sometimes one very much shaded : sometimes receiving all the wind to be got, sometimes equally carefully avoiding it. In the selected place she will stay, for hours if need be, until the cock calls her. Much of the time is spent in preening and cleaning. When she does her toilet she is always most particular about the wings and tail ; the flight feathers are each drawn through the bill two or three times at least.

Very seldom did we see the hen attempt to capture anything ; Adams once saw one take a Greenfinch close to the hut, and I think the same bird also took a Long-tailed Tit just below the hut ; at any rate, she slipped off the nest and was back in a minute or two and had obviously fed.

When the young begin to leave the nest, the hen's movements are harder to follow and become, to a certain extent, a matter of conjecture. Watching from the hut breaks down because the noise made in climbing up makes the young shift to another tree. The cock then seems to attend to those that have gone while the hen watches over the rest. I have seen her stay on the same perch for more than three hours at a stretch. In that time I heard the cock take food to each of the young that had left the tree.