

NOTES ON THE BREEDING-HABITS OF THE
DOTTEREL ON THE YENESEI.

BY

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THE Tundra, although not varying in altitude for more than two or three hundred feet for many miles round the River Yenesei, has nevertheless most marked distinctions in avifauna. The lowest marshes are full of Divers and Phalaropes: the gullies and swampy slopes hold Willow-Grouse and Red-throated Pipits; and on the highest points there are Shore-Larks, Wheatears and Dotterels. But in that country of vast level horizons, these belts of different conditions are, as it were, telescoped together, with the result that sometimes a bird misses its proper environment by a few yards, and you may find such anomalies as a Willow-Grouse breeding among the Stint in the river swamps, or a Dotterel nesting in willow-scrub and marsh-grass in such a place as a Snipe might have chosen. Such a nest was that shown in Fig. 1. It was built in one of the wide, wet valleys that slope from the higher tundra to the river; and I think that the view from the spot must be one of the most noble in the world; for the silent, slow Golchika winds eastwards among the grey-green mud hills, and you can trace its course mile after mile, until in the furthest distance it meets the thick clotted clouds that hang along the curve of the earth, and alone, as it seems, set any limit to human vision.

The bird at the nest was very tame. How tame can be judged by the photograph, which was obtained by careful stalking, and shows the camera and tripod reflected in the bird's eye. When put off her eggs she crept off in a curious mammalian way, and began to feign injury. I tried to get a series of photographs of her attitudes at such times, but the extreme quickness of her movements and the nature of the ground baffled all attempts. It would have needed a kinematograph to do justice to



Fig. 1. DOTTEBEL ON NEST IN A SWAMPY PLACE AMONG BOG GRASS AND DWARF WILLOW.
(This nest was at a level 20 ft. lower down than that in Fig. 2.)
(*Photographed by Miss M. D. Haviland.*)

the variety of her arts. First she threw herself on her breast and lay as if crucified. Then, jumping up, she ran forward and collapsed into a fluttering heap. Next she dashed up in a kind of anger, and ran sideways (and this was how I liked best to see her) like a little *Ædicnemus* in display, with feathers all bustled out. When she had (or thought she had) drawn you from the nest, she would break off and run quickly out of sight. Moreover, if you paid no attention to her guile, but went straight to the eggs to handle them, she would drop these tricks of pretence at once, and if you glanced secretly at her while still pretending to examine the nest, you would find her watching you silently or else tripping round the place nimbly enough. Only when she thought that she had captured your attention and could bamboozle you again did she fall anew to her antics.

It is only just to say that I have never identified a Dotterel's sex at the nest, and use the feminine pronoun here only because it pleases me better than the neuter. The Rev. H. H. Slater, who observed the Dotterel in northern Europe, found two males on the eggs, and Naumann (*Die Vogel Mitteleuropas*) also says that the male incubates. In the *British Bird Book* it is stated: "The young . . . are assisted in their search for food probably by both parents, but there is no direct evidence." On the Yenesei I shot a female Dotterel that was accompanied by a nearly full-fledged young one. Mr. Trevor-Battye (*Icebound on Kolguev*) shot two females off their nests in Kolguev.* One nest he remarks contained four eggs, evidently all laid by one bird, and Dr. Walter (*Ibis*, 1904, p. 229) found a similar clutch on the Taimyr.

I found two nests of the Dotterel at Golchika, and heard of a third, all within a space of half a mile and placed on the little hills that form the bluff boundary of

* When in Russian Lapland with my friend, A. E. Hamerton, we shot, Aug. 4, 1899, two old Dotterel within a few yards of two young scarcely able to fly. Both the old birds on dissection proved to be males.—H. F. W.

the tundra in the angle of the meeting of the Golchika and Yenesei Rivers. This agrees with the statement of Heysham that this bird is sociable even in the breeding season, and with the experience of Mr. Trevor-Battye, who shot two nesting females within two hundred yards of each other. One of the nests was in a marshy spot (Fig. 1), but the other, although not more than sixty feet above the swamps, was made among an Alpine flora



Fig. 2. DOTTEREL ON A NEST IN THE USUAL SITUATION AMONG STONES AND ALPINE HERBAGE.

(Photographed by Miss M. D. Haviland.)

in soil as dry and stony as the mountain top that it resembled in miniature (Fig. 2). I never saw more than one bird near the nest; but the late Major F. W. Proctor, who had seen this species breeding in Scotland, told me that there, as in the case of most waders, the "male" gives the alarm to the "female" on the nest.

The call of the Dotterel has been variously rendered. Aplin gives it as "wite wee; wite wee; wite wee," and Naumann as "düt-düt-düt-düt."* I have heard a little

* Hence the German "Dütchen."

plaintive sound, as inarticulate as a sob or sigh, that seemed to be wrung from the bird by the strength of her distress; and also once a long sibilant trill which may be the note written by Naumann as "Sisihririri." Otherwise the bird was very silent at the nest. The note that I liked most to hear, however, came later in the summer when the broods joined in little "trips" on the great open slopes of the tundra, which at that season, when the Asiatic Golden Plovers were congregating in the swamps, were empty of any sound or movement but that of the wind. Here, walking over the rough hummocky ground, you would suddenly hear a tinkle of notes, very soft and liquid, like the drip, not of water, but of something slower and richer—nectar, perhaps, which, as it was the drink of the world in the celestial Childhood of Things, surely must have been golden and sticky.

Then up would spring half a dozen Dotterel, and whirling away up the slope on a curious curve, as of a ball that is thrown with a spin and breaks sideways from its trajectory, they would plump down as suddenly as they rose, and instantly became as invisible as if they had been turned into the peaty tussocks around. Even with a field-glass it was very difficult to pick up their slim stone-coloured forms among their surroundings, and it was hard to believe that the tangerine tint of their breasts, which appears in the first plumage and persists through life, could be so inconspicuous on the grey tundra. I have seen as many as twenty birds in such a "trip" in August.

One day I was lying on the tundra, and taking up my field-glasses to look at some distant spot, was astonished to find that it was eclipsed by a moving blurr near at hand, which was presently condensed into a Dotterel which was crossing a ridge only twenty yards in front of me. I then became aware that four birds, three young and an adult, were feeding close by, and because the place was not far from the site of the nest shown in the photograph, I have a sentimental hope that it may have

been the same bird and her prosperous brood. All four birds seemed quite unconcerned at my presence and must have been there for some time. I lay and watched them for a while, enjoying a sight that seemed so secure and happy, when suddenly it was rudely interrupted by a Rough-legged Buzzard which came sailing over the hill. The three young ones flew away at once—they were not taking any chances under a trial of colour protection—and the Buzzard, recognizing, I suppose, that they were strong on the wing, ignored them and went on looking for Lemmings. But the adult Dotterel lay down sideways (the old trick) and made pretence most sorrowfully, fluttering about the tundra, as if the brood were still in the down. It seemed a queer thing—for life to play at cross purposes with itself. One bird offered to sacrifice herself for young which did not need it, to another who did not expect it: thus, so I interpreted his behaviour, mistrusted, and therefore ignored it. Probably the Buzzard had been hoaxed in that way before, for at first he took no notice of the little martyr's invitation. However, as she became more insistent, he stooped at her as she fluttered over the ridge. He would probably have missed her, for a Dotterel's flight has incalculable twists, but I was not going to let her suffer for her heroic stupidity, and so sent a charge of small-shot after the Buzzard. It did not ruffle his feathers, but he sheered off majestically, and gave the Dotterel a chance to whizz over the hill after her brood.