

## SOME NOTES ON THE RUFF.

BY

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THESE photographs of the Ruff (*Philomachus pugnax*) were taken on one of their classic "hills" in Texel, between May 19th and 22nd, 1920; my observations extended over three weeks. This "hilling" ground was at the edge of a narrow meadow, separated from a cross-road by a dyke only. Sometimes the Ruffs played in this road, but there were always some to be seen on the meadow. By far the greater number of Ruffs assembled on the main road, where I have seen from forty to sixty at a time. Some would be dancing, others sleeping or fighting, on their hills on the grassy margins of the road; but many were always rushing about on the road itself. If you are cycling, they run aside to let you pass, and are back again to their old position almost before you can look round. If a cart passes, they give it rather a wider berth, and return to their absurd amusements the moment it has passed. They are more wary of people walking, and generally fly to the meadows before you are within fifty yards of them. I thought at first that it would be quite easy to stalk them with a camera on the open road, where they would have made good photographs, but they eluded me; so I put up a tent in the midst of them on the "hill" in the meadow. There were nine bare places within range of my camera, tenanted by as many Ruffs; as each bird's plumage is distinctive, I knew them all individually; each one usually resorted to his own special patch. The grass around this area was several inches high, and consequently the Ruffs do not show up as distinctly as they would have done by the roadside. Each little hill was about eighteen inches in diameter, and absolutely devoid of any vegetation. The Ruff is either as motionless as if he were carved in stone, or else he is vibrating like a toy on wires. It is the rapid, restless motion of the feet, and the dancing, which have worn down the grass and hardened the ground in these circular patches.

The birds paid no attention to my tent, although the wind was so strong one day I could hardly keep it up, and the canvas rattled and roared like a ship in a storm. As a matter of fact, Ruffs are supremely indifferent to anything except their own concerns. The wind seemed to excite them, for on that day they sparred a great deal, while the next day,



**RUFFS:** On the *qui vive*.  
(*Photographed by E. L. Turner.*)



RUFFS: Preparing to waltz.  
(*Photographed by E. L. Turner.*)

which was oppressive and thundery and very dull, the birds slept and were only intermittently active.

When excited, the Ruffs' movements are extremely rapid. They rush round with the regularity of a clockwork mouse. When several are fighting together, they are an indistinguishable whirr and blurr of feathers. I exposed six dozen plates in three days with only about ten satisfactory results, the rest show nothing but a smudge. But most of my time was spent in wondering what it all meant. They filled me



RUFF AND REEVE.

(Photographed by E. L. Turner.)

with amazement. Why do they behave in this ridiculous manner, and what is the meaning of their extraordinary behaviour? How did it originate, and what is the use of it? Viewed dispassionately, the entire get-up of a Ruff in nuptial plumage is absurd in the extreme. But you cannot view them dispassionately for long; they arrest attention and keep you on the *qui vive*; for it is impossible to tell what the next move will be. No photograph can begin to do justice to the variety and wealth of colouring of the plumage. Many of the tippets are very lovely. Rich chestnut and black,

black and white, soft buffs and browns, and occasionally pure white, with ear-tufts to match—these colours are harmonious and do not detract from the birds' dignity. But when you get a silver coloured tippet and white ears, then the effect is ludicrous.

I did not see Ruffs fighting at the beginning of the breeding-season, but certainly throughout the time I watched them their whole attitude struck me as a pose. I never saw anything approaching the passionate display and fierce fighting



RUFFS.

A general *mêlée*.

(Photographed by E. L. Turner.)

that characterizes the Moorhen (*Gallinula ch. chloropus*). On no occasion did I see even a feather fly; and though they definitely made lunges at the warts on each others' faces, I did not see blood drawn. I have never heard the Ruff utter any sound. The noiselessness of the display is one of the reasons why it seems so unreal; you feel as if you were watching a dumb show. I have been very familiar with the spring and autumn migrations of the Ruff, but I have never, even then, heard them call.

The Ruff in the foreground of the photograph on p. 149 was



**RUFFS:** An intruder is driven away.  
(*Photographed by E. L. Turner.*)

only four feet from my tent. He invariably returned first, and seemed to be "cock of the walk." He seldom moved from his own hill. Twice a day, during about three days, at 11 a.m. and 2 p.m. (solar time) a Reeve alighted close to him. All the Ruffs on this hill saw her coming, and bowed themselves to the ground as she approached, and remained in this devotional attitude for some seconds after she left. This Reeve is visible on the plate ; she is standing by the Ruff on the right-hand side, with her back to the observer.



RUFFS.

An affair of honour.

(*Photographed by E. L. Turner.*)

She is preening her breast, and the wings are parted, showing the white rump. Each day she took her stand by this Ruff ; she did not approach the others. After her departure, the six or seven other Ruffs would suddenly straighten themselves, and either begin to dance or else two would fight. Sometimes all fought, and there ensued a characteristic whirl of wings ; if two only engaged, the rest looked on at the duel. But as far as my limited observations went, the fights were sham fights, and mere exercises in the art of fencing. The arrival of an extra bird on the scene generally meant a display of

energy on the part of all the Ruffs, which had taken up their positions. They either rushed at him, or else gyrated on their own little hills. If all the hills were occupied the intruder flew away.

I saw a number of nests, they were generally placed alongside the dykes, where the ground is slightly raised. The Reeves were very tame ; it is difficult to keep them off the nest while you are erecting your tent, and they slip back and snuggle down in their rather deep nests long before you are ready for them. The Reeve's life is a busy one, and there seems no room in it for fear. The beautifully pencilled plumage harmonizes well with the lush green grass and rushes. These so-called meadows where the Reeve and many other of the Texel birds nest are charming in May and June. They are gay with pink thrift and sea-aster, for the flora is largely of a maritime character. I was reproved for calling these fields "marshes." They would be marshes at home, but in Holland they are reclaimed lands. The Reeve allows herself very little leisure, when on the feed she feverishly pecks insects from the grass and never wanders far from her nest.

Both Ruffs and Reeves are numerous everywhere in Holland where there is suitable breeding-ground. They are looked upon as game, which seems a pity. However, the Dutch have learnt wisdom from our mistakes. Their wealth of bird-life must inevitably decrease before the advance of science, and, so, large reserves have been purchased within recent years. Here the birds may breed in peace. I owe a large debt of gratitude to the controllers of these sanctuaries for letting me wander at large, for alas, the Englishman is regarded with considerable suspicion! As one eminent Dutch ornithologist remarked to me: "We preserve our birds for the English to steal their eggs."