

FIRST IMPRESSIONS OF SOME BIRDS SEEN ON
THE NAARDERMEER.

BY

EDWARD A. ARMSTRONG, B.A.

THE welfare of the birds in a country so near to us as Holland must always be a matter of interest to British naturalists. If a bird be exterminated in Holland there is so much the less chance of its ever appearing in our islands, and if a species becomes abundant in the woods, "polders" or "meers" of the neighbouring country, we have reason to hope to be visited by the bird and even to expect it to breed with us. We know that many of the birds of Holland, for example, the Black-tailed Godwit, Spoonbill, Avocet and Black Tern once bred in England, and when we hope that they may once more be included among our breeding species we are looking forward, not so much to an extension of the real range, as to the re-occupation of territory vacated for an interval. The return of the Bittern and the fact that Reeve's eggs are occasionally to be found with us must be attributed largely to the stronghold which these birds have in Holland.

I was delighted to have the opportunity of making the acquaintance of some of these birds when, on the 21st of June, I spent some hours on that lovely piece of water, the Naardermeer. Permission to visit the place must be obtained from the "Vereeniging tot Behoud van Natuurmonumenten in Nederland," and certain formalities must be observed, but the authorities are most obliging, prompt and sympathetic, and there is no unnecessary "red tape." Bird photography proper is not allowed, but I was permitted to use a small pocket camera. The Meer is reached by an hour's journey in the steam tram from Amsterdam and is thus easily accessible. Indeed the railway runs right through it, so that the traveller may easily catch a glimpse of its beauties. The industrious Dutch tried to reclaim the land but the porosity of the soil rendered the work fruitless; ornithologists have much cause to be thankful.

From the boatman's house the course lies down broad lodes or "sluits." The scene is enchanting; in front the water stretching away in a thin, gleaming ribbon, on either side whispering reeds tapering high above one's head, from which issue the strains of both Reed-Warblers. Lilies, white and yellow, lift their blossoms above the tranquil surface, the pale cups of the "Water Soldier" peep out here and there and

other lovely flowers shine among the reeds. Overhead dart Black Terns (*Chlidonias niger*), a Marsh-Harrier (*Circus aeruginosus*) wheels and soars high aloft and in the distance Purple Herons (*Ardea purpurea*) and Spoonbills (*Platalea leucorodia*) flap across the sky as they seek out remote feeding grounds. The very water is alive with fish.

The Great Reed-Warbler (*Acrocephalus arundinaceus*) is very common. Though only observed now and again as a brown bird flitting from one side of the sluic to the other it



EGG AND YOUNG OF MARSH-HARRIER IN THE NEST.

(Photographed by E. A. Armstrong.)

makes its presence apparent with its loud song, which, truth to tell, reminds me of a motor-hooter. Yet the song as one hears it is pleasing and the volume of sound greater than one would expect from the size of the bird. It is a common sight to see Bearded Tits (*Panurus biarmicus*) in pairs or family parties clinging to the tall reed stems and pecking at the feathery heads. The call, a metallic, though soft, ring, is very pleasing. The Purple Heron is quite numerous. Its nest is composed of long reeds and built on the reeds. The young

in a nest I photographed were quite big but differed somewhat in size. The cry of the Purple Heron seemed to me slightly less of a scream than that of its commoner relation.

Every now and then the monotonous rattling song of Savi's Warbler (*Locustella luscinioides*) rings out, showing that the bird is by no means uncommon on the marsh.

I was shown a nest of the Marsh-Harrier, a substantial structure some three feet or more in diameter and built of reeds. There was no food to be seen. The two young were about a fortnight old, according to the boatman, and still in down. One was smaller and less energetic than the other. There was one egg in the nest. The flight of the adults was graceful and easy. There was a breeze blowing and they soared and glided with great effect. The call is a mewling scream.

The Spoonbill is very carefully protected and one is not allowed to visit the nests. There appear to be about fifteen pairs breeding together in one colony. One bird, recognisable by its mutilated leg, has been observed here for twenty-five years. In flight the bird carries the neck outstretched, differing from the Heron in this; the legs stretched out behind often sag a little. These birds nested on Texel Island this year where they were troubled by the attentions of a Harrier. On the Island they go to feed on the Prinz Hendrik polder where, thanks to protection, they are not at all wild. I watched one feeding there within eighty yards of where I stood in full view. The bird feeds moving the head rather quickly from side to side, snapping with the bill while advancing in the water. Twice I saw an Avocet chasing one, the larger bird retreating ignominiously. Like Herons they come with considerable regularity to favourite feeding grounds, and on this polder they always came to feed in the evening. They are sociable both in nesting and feeding habits. It is to be hoped that these lovely birds may increase in Holland and that the time is not long distant when they may establish themselves in Norfolk.

On Texel the Black Terns breed on the polders, but on the Naardermeer all the nests I saw were situated on small floating patches of vegetation only a few square yards in size. There were seven nests on one patch within eighteen inches of one another. These patches of rushes may have been cut specially for the birds, but at any rate it would be well worth while creating similar floating islands in those places in England where Black Terns linger in the Spring. At the

Naardermeer there were no signs of young birds, whereas on Texel the eggs were chipping a week or ten days before.

The Avocet is not found on the "meer" and the Great Crested Grebe appears to be rather uncommon.

In conclusion I should like to put on record the great kindness with which I was received everywhere in Holland. The kindness of the Dutch is extended as much to the wandering bird-lover as to the breeding bird. We are happy in having such people as our neighbours.