

## TURNSTONES ON A BALTIC ISLET.

BY

RALPH CHISLETT, M.B.O.U., F.R.P.S.

AN unexpected result of our trip to Öland of 1924 has been the belief that, given time and favourable circumstances, I could find Turnstones (*Arenaria interpres*) breeding in the Shetlands were I to visit those fascinating islands again. I saw Turnstones on my last visit, though they showed no signs of breeding; but neither did the birds we saw in the south Baltic, until we had closely narrowed down the locality of a nest.

Saxby's description of the nest and eggs he discovered in Shetland some fifty years ago, although unsupported by evidence acceptable as complete proof, is unmistakable enough to leave little room for doubt as to the truth of his record. And he adds, "I have no doubt that if some of the smaller islands were carefully and patiently searched, other nests would be found." The Turnstone's breeding range in the Baltic begins considerably south of Shetland. Danish ornithologists tell me that the species breeds on their side of the North Sea, on both sides of latitude 56. Shetland, the bulk of which lies north of latitude 60, is on a regular migration route of the species. Some birds always appear to remain through the summer, but with so much scattered, suitable ground available, the would-be finder of their eggs, in the absence of a stroke of extremely good fortune, would need to devote his time to the one species until rewarded by success. Few of those who go so far feel they can afford to do this, which probably accounts for the fact that the Turnstone is still unrecognized as a British breeder. This description of our experience with the species on an islet off Öland may perhaps be of service to one who would seek to alter the status of the Turnstone on the British list, and who has the opportunity to make the attempt.

I was accompanied by my wife and our friend Jasper Atkinson, a fellow-member (now President) of the Zoological Photographic Club—that club to which every photographic ornithologist should belong whose work is sufficient in quantity and quality to enable him to fulfil the obligations of membership.

On June 4th we landed on one of the landward points of the rough triangle of which our little, low islet consisted, and as we did so two Turnstones flew silently away in the direction



TO THE LEFT REAR OF THE NEST.  
(Female Turnstone)  
(*Photographed by Ralph Chislett.*)

of the seaward angle. In length the triangle's sides approximated three-fourths of a mile. The side the birds had followed had a narrow, stony beach, rising rapidly and merging into a low hill some 30-40 feet above sea-level, and covered with long grass and much tall, umbelliferous growth. In the cover a few pairs of Velvet Scoters (*Oidemia f. fusca*) nested. We followed after the Turnstones, but no others were seen until we had rounded the beacon marking the next angle, where a bird was seen on a rock well out in the water. Here a considerable search was made, during which the Turnstone disappeared and was seen no more.

Along this, the seaward side of the island, nothing of interest was seen beyond Common Gulls (*Larus c. canus*), Arctic Terns (*Sterna macrura*) and Ringed Plovers (*Charadrius hiaticula*) until we had passed two-thirds of its length, when another Turnstone was seen which called once or twice half-heartedly. Protracted search revealed nothing more exciting than the nest of a Redshank (*Tringa t. totanus*) in a narrow patch of grass under the lea of a large rock. The Redshank called frequently, and a second Turnstone appeared on another stone in the water. More for the possibility it gave of observing the Turnstones than for any other reason a hiding-tent was left by the Redshank's nest. For a similar reason a tent had been left by a Common Gull's nest near to the beacon. The Turnstones had displayed no anxiety and very little energy, and when we left that day our hopes were not very bright.

On the following day both Atkinson and I passed some time in the tents without seeing anything indicative of breeding Turnstones. The same pair of birds flew away from the apex as we landed, they had doubtless watched our approach. Round the second point a bird was seen again, but it soon disappeared behind the bluff on which the beacon stood, and did not return. The Redshank's neighbours were there again, but further away, and one of them called faintly a time or two. Systematic search over shingle and in herbage amongst rocks revealed nothing. On the landward side a Turnstone was seen standing, unconcernedly as usual, on a stone in the sea. Disappointment had taken the place of hope when we left that night.

On June the 19th Atkinson followed the same direction round the islet as before, whilst my wife and I reversed it. Less than half-way along the landward side a Turnstone was noticed at the water's edge before us, and by flights of varied lengths it continued to keep some hundred yards ahead.



THE SITE OF NEST NO. I.  
(Some herbage has been removed.)  
Male Turnstone sitting.  
(*Photographed by Ralph Chislett.*)

When we reached the end of that side it stood on a rock a similar distance out in the sea, and waited there until we had passed far enough along the next side to lose sight of it, without doubling back or doing anything which a non-breeding bird would not have been equally likely to do.

One of the Redshank's Turnstone neighbours called as we came up. This was the only one of three pairs which ever uttered a sound in our hearing. I see from my note book I rendered the call at the time as "Tcherwio-tcherwio, sometimes repeated half-a-dozen times so as to form a rippling whinney." After a little preliminary search we selected a spot which commanded as good a view as the broken nature of the ground allowed, and fixed the tent against a rock. When I had entered my wife walked away to see how Atkinson was progressing—also incidentally to beguile the Turnstones. Soon afterwards both Turnstones flew to rocks some fifty yards away. After a few minutes one of them flew to the edge of the beach and ran up and along past me, less than a dozen yards away. This looked like business, although the bird soon flew back to its mate. Against the sky, not more than thirty yards away, appearing over the top of a rise in the ground, as seen from the hiding-tent, was a group of chervil flower-heads. One of the Turnstones, on taking wing, flew directly to these flower-heads and appeared to settle in the midst of them. After giving the bird time to get settled on the eggs (I hoped) I crawled out of the tent, and keeping low was within six yards of the chervil clump when the Turnstone took wing from a point two yards on the other side, repeating its cry much more meaningfully than hitherto. I had been prepared to find the nest under shelter of some sort, but had not expected the eggs to be so completely hidden from view as proved to be the case here. The nest lay on the seaward side of the clump. To obtain a view for the camera, a tall chervil stalk, some leaves and grasses, had to be removed. The definite scrape was lined with bits of seaweed and dry grass stems to a depth of more than one inch. The four eggs were greenish in ground colour, mottled and blurred brown over grey, underlying markings.

A hiding-tent was fixed, but as the bird had not returned in half-an-hour it was moved a little farther away and I left ostentatiously. Before leaving the island I paid another visit to see if the bird had returned; it had.

On the landward side of the island, on a spit of grass mingled with thrift and clover, a number of pairs of Arctic Terns had eggs, and, in a few cases, young. As I passed on

my last journey I fixed and left the second hiding-tent there, then passed on to the landing apex to pack up for the day. I had seen no Turnstone as I came along, nor as I fixed the tent; but on looking back saw two birds on rocks by the water's edge nearest to the Tern colony. I sat down in the long herbage, and, after I had watched through binoculars



AN OPEN SITE.

Male Turnstone sitting.

(*Photographed by Ralph Chislett.*)

for some ten minutes, one of the Turnstones flew to the top of a large rock to the landward side of the Terns. Thence it jumped to the ground and was eventually lost in the cover.

On the following morning we searched all the chervil and other clumps near to the place of disappearance without success. Then I passed on to photograph the birds whose nest I had

found the previous day, leaving Atkinson in the tent among the Terns, hoping he might repeat my experience. Before I had entered hide No. 1. I could see J. A. "moving," and on running back to learn the news I heard him shout joyfully, as he pushed in tent supports with eager fingers, "I've got it." J.A. supplies the following note:—

"When Chislett left me in the tent among the Terns, these birds returned to their nests quickly, and no doubt were useful in establishing a feeling of confidence in the Turnstone. At any rate one of the pair flew past the tent and alighted on the large rock already mentioned. There it remained for two or three minutes, when it dropped to the ground and walked without any further hesitation back along the line of its recent flight, through the thrift, where presently it became invisible. Giving it time to settle I crept out at the back of the tent, and approaching on hands and knees got within three yards before it flew. The tent was then moved and fixed near the nest with Mrs. Chislett's assistance, and in less than half-an-hour, and—for a wader—with very little circumlocution, the bird (which I also judge was the male) was back at the nest, soon ignoring sounds which came from the tent."

This second nest was only some twenty-five yards from the tent as originally fixed and right among the breeding Terns. It was similar to the other nest but had rather more dry grass stems placed around it. The eggs were open to the sky. The spot was some fifty yards from the water on which the grassy spit abutted.

Photographic details were fairly simple, except that the fierce sunlight was entirely from the wrong direction in the case of nest No. 1. These Turnstones usually alighted on a large rock to the left rear of the nest, and, after running to and fro for a while, dropped to the ground and walked to the back of the chervil clump, through which the striking black and white head shortly afterwards appeared. At first, every sound caused the birds to run out in front and along the side of the chervil, thence round and behind the clump again, and so back to the eggs. More than once, male and female were within a few yards of the nest together. In one bird, doubtless the female, the white head-markings were tinged with cream or buff; the size and shape of the black and of the white areas also differed a little. The back plumages seemed to be alike, the chestnut barrings being equally noticeable in all birds at close quarters. The head-dress of both males appeared very conspicuous against the greenery. In the case of No. 1 pair both birds incubated; with No. 2 birds I

spent less time, and only saw one bird sitting, which I believed to be the male, his plumage being quite as unclouded as in the male of the first pair.

A number of nearer views of the female of No. 1 pair were secured by means of placing a stone by the side of the clump of chervil, which she readily jumped upon when making the little circular tour, sometimes waiting there for a minute or two. The second bird flew up from the water's edge to the edge of the Tern colony, and then ran between the heads of sea-pink.

By this time I had concluded that the Turnstone we usually saw round the corner of the second point of the triangle was one of the pair which flew away when we landed, and that they were nesting along the umbel-decked coast between the two points. Photographic work, however, left no time in which to locate this nest precisely.

The outstanding and to us rather surprising feature was the very small amount of assistance obtainable for a long time from the behaviour of the birds. It was our first experience of the species as proved breeders.



TURNSTONE: IN A TYPICAL ATTITUDE.

*(Photographed by Ralph Chislett.)*