

NOTES ON ALBERTA WADERS INCLUDED IN
THE BRITISH LIST.

BY

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PART I.

SEMI-PALMATED AND KILLDEER PLOVERS.

(Plates I and 2.)

INTRODUCTORY.

THE following notes do not set out to be comprehensive. They represent little more than odd observations collected here and there as opportunity offered. I am indebted to my friend, Mr. William MacDonald of the University of Alberta, who has spent his life in the Province and knows its birds intimately, for many valuable and unpublished notes on the bird life of Alberta and the North-West Territories, some of which are incorporated in these articles.

Generally speaking, very little is known of the birds of Alberta. New species are continually being added to those already known to occur, and migration routes through the Province are only slowly becoming better known than they were. This is mainly due to a dearth of observers. Forests, prairies, mountains, semi-deserts and various intermediate zones afford a most diversified topography, while the size of the Province is so great that it must be many years yet before our knowledge becomes adequate to justify even elementary generalizations.

On my second day in Edmonton, some years back now, I was recommended by the local taxidermists, Messrs. Wolfe and Hine, both bird enthusiasts, to try a spit on a lake some fifty miles out of the city as a centre for collecting and observation. The first opportunity for a visit was accordingly taken. The spot proved so extraordinarily fruitful that I have worked but little elsewhere, and most of the observations here recorded were made there.

The spit reminded me at first sight strongly of Blakeney Point, Norfolk, although it is but two miles in length and the briny atmosphere and the shingle are of course wanting. There is a series of bushes (willows), much used by migrating Passeres, extensive mud-flats (Fig. 1) and a terminal sandy point (Fig. 2). But its waders made anything else that I have



FIG. 1. PART OF THE POINT MUD-FLATS.
(Photographed by W. Rowan.)



FIG. 2. THE TERMINAL SANDSPIT.
(Photographed by W. Rowan.)

ever seen sink into oblivion. There were literally thousands. The most striking thing on that first visit was the abundance of many species that one might see but once in a life-time on the British coasts, or perhaps never at all, and with which one had become familiar only through literature and collections. To see hordes of Sanderlings thoroughly at home on a fresh water mud-flat was perhaps equally remarkable. But one was almost completely overwhelmed by the vast concourse of water-fowl. As far as one could see over the lake with binoculars (X8) were Ducks, in myriads. Here and there were rafts of Geese, including Canadas, Hutchins's, Lesser and Ross's Snows and White-fronteds, while once in a while a large flock of Swans would cross the Point in a ragged string, or an immaculate V of Cranes would pass sedately southward. Numerous Pelicans lent a bizarre touch to the whole scene. A single flock of Bonaparte Gulls numbered four thousand, close packed, floating a short distance out from shore. Every yard of mud seemed to be occupied with waders. Harriers and Short-eared Owls were never out of sight. It was a remarkable experience, but even so, so far as the waders were concerned, not to be compared with conditions in the spring, when we have collected no less than thirty-one species in a few days on the terminal mile of mud. Altogether, we have thirty-eight species and sub-species on the Point list.

Such, briefly, is the place in which most of these observations have been made. We have kept a steady, unbroken watch on the Point through the main migrations of four springs and two long autumns and have put in shorter stays in other years. Hitherto we have been unable to be in camp for the latter half of June and the whole of July, although odd visits have been made during those periods. I am greatly indebted to Mr. C. G. Harrold of Winnipeg for spending many weeks on the ground during which I was not able to be there in person and keeping meticulous records which have helped to link up the notes of one year with those of another. (I also have to thank him for useful comment on, and criticism of, these notes.) From the combined lists we have gathered some facts of exceptional interest with regard to the migration of waders in general. These will be summarized in the last instalment of the notes.

While my purpose is to deal mainly with those species occurring in England, I propose to include remarks on a few others, either because they are great wanderers and may sooner or later be incorporated in the British list, or because they offer points of special interest.

THE PLOVERS.

Of the six Plovers occurring on the Point, the Piping Plover (*C. melodus*) is casual (Alberta is not included in its range in the *A.O.U. Check-List*), while our sole specimen of the Asiatic Golden Plover (*C. d. fulvus*) is the only record for the whole of inland America. The other four, all on the British list, are abundant as migrants, the Killdeer (*C. vociferus*) being a breeder as well as a migrant.

Charadrius (A.O.U. Check-List, *Ægialitis*)* *semipalmatus*,
SEMI-PALMATED RINGED PLOVER.

The Semi-palmated Plover, as it is known on this side, is so like the Ringed in its general ways and habits on migration that there is little to be said about it. It has the same nervous ways and diffident manners; will run long distances before taking flight if followed; seldom occurs in large flocks; individuals tend to scatter as soon as the flock alights; odd birds associate freely with flocks of other species; flight straight and swift; call-note a soft melodious

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~
tu-whee,*

sometimes appearing to be three-syllabled.

On the spring migration the birds usually arrive at the close of the first week of May. They soon become numerous, but by the 23rd and 24th the last has gone. We have but one record—a single bird—in the last week of May and none in June. In the fall the adults make their appearance at the beginning of August. By the end of the first week they are very plentiful. Young begin to arrive about the middle of the month or a little later, when for a time adults and young mingle together. By the end of the month the adults have all disappeared, leaving the juveniles in considerable numbers till the middle of September, when they also depart, though stragglers may remain till the end of the month. We have

*As the generic treatment in vogue on this continent may prove of interest to British readers not familiar with it, the *A.O.U. Check-List* name will be inserted in brackets after the one employed herein. I have adopted the *Practical Handbook* nomenclature throughout, except that I have treated the two forms of *Ereunetes* as full species—see Part IV. Differences in the popular names will be indicated in like manner.

†For an account of the method of recording bird-calls used throughout these notes, see Rowan, *Brit. Birds*, Vol. XVIII., pp. 14-18, "A Practical Method of Recording Bird-calls."

no October records for the species. We have never seen or taken adults in winter plumage. Quite a considerable proportion of young have an incomplete breast-band.

Charadrius (A.O.U. Check-List, *Oxyechus*) *vociferus*,

KILLDEER PLOVER.

The Killdeer is our only breeding Plover. It is the first wader to come north in the spring and the last to go south in the fall. It may arrive as early as the middle of March and stay till the middle of November. These are remarkable dates for a shore-bird in this country, since the lakes remain frozen as a rule till the end of April and exceptionally right into May. Even the rivers may remain solid till the middle of April. The latest Killdeers have been noted in the fall, weeks after the freeze-up. The earliest nesting record we have is of a set of eggs taken by Macdonald on May 1st, 1922, about half incubated. This is exceptional, but laying is probably general in normal years early in May. We have never noticed anything that could be called a distinct display.

The Killdeer in most of its habits is also reminiscent of the Ringed Plover. It seldom occurs in large flocks, and, when it does, the flock is invariably of the scattered variety. The bird is a great runner and exhibits all the nervous traits of the Ringed Plover. As we are in its breeding range, which extends casually as far north as Great Slave Lake, we have no striking migration phenomena, although large numbers, evidently on the move, are generally to be seen on the lakes in the middle of July. The birds arrive in small parties and scatter on arrival. They are largely paired by the middle of April.

In the field the Killdeer can be mistaken for no other bird. Its double breast-band, its large tail and red rump, its typical Ploverish ways, its incessant and characteristic calls, make it one of the most easily identified of all species.

The Killdeer chooses a great variety of sites for nesting. All the nests I have personally seen have been on rough pasture, and this, I think, may be considered the usual situation in this part of the world. But a great selection of sites, from the roofs of buildings to bare sandpits, is on record. No preference is shown for the vicinity of lakes, although nests naturally occur there frequently on account of the abundance of the species. The nest is merely a depression, typically grass lined, often in a hummock or in a clump of weeds (Fig. 3). The usual number of eggs is four.

It might be well, in passing, to comment on an American descriptive term that appears constantly in literature on this side, that I am sure must be misunderstood by the majority of British readers. I refer to the word "teeter." Since it quite adequately describes a call, that in one form or another is common to many shore birds, one would naturally suppose it to have some such significance. The context generally abets the delusion. As a matter of fact it refers to no call at all, but to the action of tipping up, Sandpiper fashion. I



FIG. 3. NEST AND EGGS OF KILLDEER PLOVER.
(*Photographed by W. Rowan.*)

discovered the meaning of the term by accident myself by erecting a see-saw in the garden for my youngsters, who presently began to talk about the "teeter-totter," the English for which is "see-saw." The Killdeer has a modified kind of "teeter," common when accompanied with young. The tail is raised in the air, not momentarily, but long enough to permit the bird to complete one of its longer calls, when it returns to the horizontal. The wings are often drooped at the same time (Plate II).

The Killdeer is probably the noisiest shore-bird in the country. It is not only indecently noisy, but excessively

demonstrative when running with young. I know of no bird (except possibly the Avocet) so persistent in the broken wing performance (Fig. 4), or capable of so many variations of it. It may range from the mere dropping of one wing, while running quite fast, to a complete flattening of the bird on the ground, tail and both wings spread out, to the accompaniment of many curious noises. Both sexes participate in this



FIG. 4. KILLDEER PLOVER FEIGNING INJURY.
(Photographed by Alex. G. Lawrence.)

exhibition, often simultaneously, so that there can be no mistake about the male's share.

The chief calls of the Killdeer appear to be the following :—



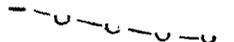
“ Kil-dee ” or a slurred “ dee-dee,”

loud, clear and ringing, is the common call-note. It is more usually used in flight, but also at times on the ground. A

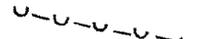
curious variation is the duplication of the last syllable, which is then dropped instead of being raised, thus


dee-ee-e.

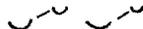
This appears to indicate greater agitation. It seems to be an abbreviated form of a rapid call generally used when the bird has been flying round one in great excitement and is about to settle or in the actual act of settling and running swiftly over the ground :—


dee-dee-dee-dee-dee.

This may be substituted in the same circumstances by a rapidly and frequently repeated


tit tit tit tit tit.

The only other call in constant use is softer, more melancholy and more typically Ploverish and sounds like


dee-e dee-e,

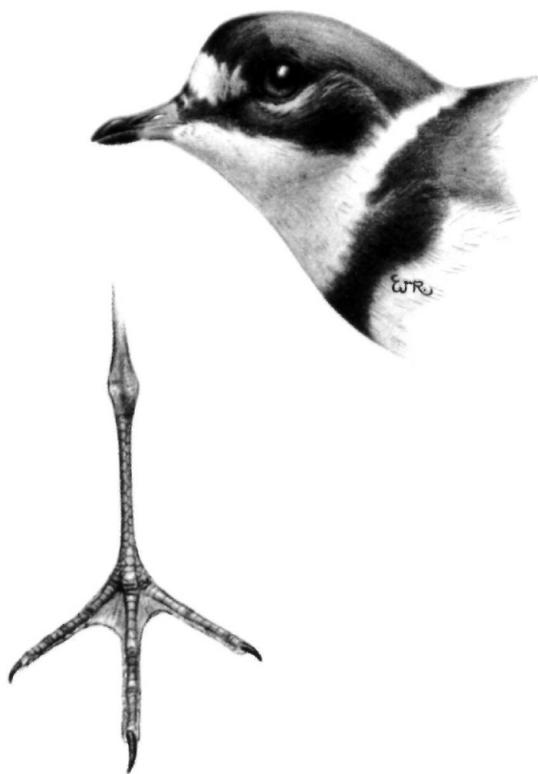
the last syllable, although raised, being much lower pitched than in the rather similar call-note. The significance of this call I have not been able to determine, but it is probably more frequent out of the breeding-season than it is in and generally uttered when the bird is on the ground.

The Killdeer seems to feed largely on insects, particularly during the breeding-season, many of them being noxious.

The following description of a downy chick recently out of the egg may be of interest, since no example was available to the authors of the *Practical Handbook* (see Plate II.).

Down on fore-head white divided centrally by buffish line running backwards from blackish patch at base of upper mandible; crown greyish-buff irregularly streaked and speckled black-brown, completely encircled by irregular black line passing at sides above eye; nuchal collar and tips of wings white; black streak from base of upper mandible nearly to eye; single black pectoral band extending to back of nuchal collar, but incomplete behind; remaining upper parts

greyish-buff (yellowish-buff on wings) irregularly and finely marked and speckled black-brown ; black line along wing and from thigh to thigh round sides of rump, across base uropygial tuft and down middle of back ; uropygial tuft long, black, yellowish-buff underneath ; thighs yellowish-buff ; underparts white ; bill black ; eye black ; legs french-grey ; soles of feet yellowish.



SEMI-PALMATED RINGED PLOVER.

Adult, May, nat. size.

Copyright by W. Rowan



KILDEER PLOVER.

Adults and nestling, June. Nestling approx. $\frac{2}{3}$ rds nat. size.

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