

## BREEDING OF THE WHIMBREL IN INVERNESS-SHIRE.

BY

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It is satisfactory to be able to put on record that a pair of Whimbrel (*Numenius ph. phæopus*) nested this year on the mainland of Inverness-shire, north of the Spey, and that the eggs duly hatched. The *Practical Handbook* gives no authentic record of breeding on the mainland of Scotland, but since the publication of that work Mr. Dugald Macintyre has stated (*Field*, II.IX.24, p. 403) that while fishing on the Spey near Newtonmore (no date is given) he heard the unmistakable call of the Whimbrel, and on leaving the river to investigate he found a couple of these birds, which acted as though they had young. He returned on several occasions and at last found a young one with the help of a terrier. This bird he describes as almost fledged but not much larger than a Golden Plover, the streaks on the breast appeared smaller and more numerous than in the adult and the bill was still short, but no mention of the distinctive stripes on the head is made. The old birds flew round, uttering their characteristic call. Whether this record is found acceptable or not, the rarity and interest of the event seems to warrant a somewhat detailed account of the nest found this year.\*

It was on May 29th, 1931, that I set out with two friends to work a remote lying grouse-moor with the object of endeavouring to find nests of Golden Plover and Dunlin. After a short time I heard the well-known and easily identifiable rippling call of a Whimbrel and immediately afterwards heard another from a different direction, shortly after which both birds flew round calling at a distance of 25 to 35 yards. A feature of the flying bird is the very much more rapid wing-beat compared with that of the Curlew. The following day, May 30th, and on June 2nd, the locality was again visited with the same result; both birds were in evidence but no sign of a nest could be found. On June 3rd, both birds were seen for a considerable period, feeding on marshy ground bordering a small burn within 150 yards of

\* The Rev. F. C. R. Jourdain informs me that in the Tring Museum (N. C. Rothschild Collection) there are two clutches of eggs of Whimbrel, said to have been taken near Cape Wrath in 1902 and in Sutherland in 1906, while in another private collection there are also two clutches purporting to come from Ben More, Sutherland, in 1909 and 1910.

where they were seen on the first day. Owing to the birds' extreme tameness an excellent opportunity was offered to myself and a friend of watching them at a range of 30 to 40 yards. At this distance, with powerful glasses (XI2 Zeiss), every feather was clearly defined and the light eye-stripe contrasting with the dark crown was very conspicuous; also the very much smaller size of the bird compared with the Curlew and the considerably shorter and less decurved beak. During the whole of this period both birds continually made from the ground their ordinary rippling note,



Nest of Whimbrel in Inverness-shire, June 3rd, 1931.  
(*Photographed by A. H. Daukes.*)

but very gently, so as only just to be audible at a distance of 40 yards. As the birds, although feeding, appeared to be anxious, we thought it possible that we might be near the nest and therefore moved away about 50 yards. We then picked them up again, each observer concentrating on one bird. The left-hand bird gradually worked to the left, feeding spasmodically apparently on flies on the grass about 9 inches above the ground, while the other proceeded quickly to the right, feeding in a similar fashion. In about ten minutes this bird had covered approximately 100 yards when

it settled apparently on its nest. The spot was marked and walked up, when the nest was found with four eggs. These were similar to those of the Curlew but considerably smaller and rather more pointed. The bird appeared to run from the nest and not to rise direct.



Breeding Ground of Whimbrel in Inverness-shire, June 1931.  
(*Photographed by A. H. Daukes.*)

The ground is about 1,500 feet above sea-level and consists of a stretch of miniature peathags by the side of a small burn, small hummocks of lichen, dry grass and heather not above 9 inches in height interspersed with hollows containing water, wet peat or sphagnum moss. The nest was in dry grass on a hummock and was quite open and lined with a

small quantity of dry bents. Golden Plover and Dunlin were nesting close by.

The nest was visited several times between June 4th and June 12th, when I had to return to London. On June 16th, my friend looked the birds up again and found that the eggs had hatched. He sent me the following account, which I may perhaps be pardoned for quoting in full, as the features of the young birds are an important point in a satisfactory identification of this particular species.

The account is as follows:—

“On going to the nest I found two young birds apparently hatched within a few hours. There was a considerable amount of egg-shell lying in the nest. I could not find the other two birds. At 10 p.m. on the same day I returned to the nest and again found two nestlings, but as both parent birds appeared considerably disturbed I did not wait to find the other two young ones.

The following is an attempt at a description of the young birds: In size they were between newly-hatched Curlews and newly-hatched Lapwings. The most striking feature was the blueness of their legs. The head was strongly marked with two black stripes. The bill was almost straight, but with a very strongly marked but very small white spot at the very point. When first seen at 6 p.m. within about three yards of the nest they were inclined to be lethargic, and did not appear to have found their legs. At 10 p.m., however, they were able to run strongly.”

As regards notes. The birds appear to have three calls:—

A. The usual rippling note familiar to everyone who has seen the bird on migration in spring or autumn.

B. The same note, but delivered *sotte voce* so as to be barely audible at 40 yards; this note was always made by the birds while on the ground.

C. A trill lower and fuller than the usual note and quite distinct both from that and from the bubbling cry of the Curlew. It sounded to me more to resemble the bubble of the Cuckoo.

Invitations were sent both to Mr. H. F. Witherby and to Mr. A. Holte Macpherson to come up to see the nest but, unfortunately, neither of them was able to come.