

NESTING OF THE PINTAIL IN KENT  
AND SUSSEX.

BY

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ALTHOUGH for a considerable time I have had almost conclusive evidence that the Pintail (*Anas a. acuta*) has occasionally nested in the Romney Marsh-Dungeness area, I long ago determined to let this accumulate until I could produce a certain case at first hand. Now that I am at last in a position to do so, it seems to be a suitable occasion to put the rest of the evidence on record.

Up to the summer of 1909 (*cf. Hist. of the Birds of Kent*, p. 354) there was no reason for regarding the Pintail as other than a winter visitor to this area, somewhat irregular in appearance and very variable in numbers from year to year, while records of it later in the spring than the middle of April were very few. This is still true in the main, though I should now amend it by saying that in some years there is a considerable passage of migrants in March and early April, while in most years stragglers are to be seen at a later date and may sometimes remain to nest. It is probable I think that this is not actually a new thing, but has merely been established by the increased number of observations that have been made during the last twenty-five years in the localities the Pintail is known to frequent. Except for the war years, when no visits were made to these haunts, I have notes of one or two pairs having been seen in the latter half of April or in May (even so late as the 28th) in every year except 1911, 1921, 1924 and 1935.

On August 28th, 1909, I examined an adult drake, in eclipse plumage, immediately after it had been shot at the decoy pond in the parish of Peasmarsh. This is on higher ground that forms the southern boundary of the Rother valley a short distance above where it debouches into Romney Marsh. (*British Birds* Vol. III., p. 265). The question at once occurred to me: "What had this bird been doing there at that extraordinary date?" and there flashed across my mind the somewhat extravagant answer: "perhaps it was one of a pair that had stayed behind to nest in the marsh."

The next year, 1910, was one of the infrequent ones in which the Pintail occurs in really large numbers. I have never before, or since, seen so many as were to be seen on the flood water at Fairfield in the early days of April that year. Teal, Wigeon and Shoveler were also present in very large numbers. By April 10th, however, the water had been pumped away

and though a good many ducks of all species were still present, most had gone before the 16th and on that day I failed to find any Pintail at all. In that year I did not visit the other fleets myself, which as it turned out was a serious omission for at the end of August I received a letter from Mr. F. Finn of which the following is an extract: "In May our 'Looker' found me a nest, which he said was a 'Shoveler's,' and, as I wanted some eggs for hatching, he directed me to it. The duck had commenced to sit, but flew off before I was close enough to see her properly. Unfortunately I took it for granted that our man knew a Shoveler too well to make a mistake and I accordingly took the eggs—five in number—home and hatched them under a hen. One of these died when a week old and a second was killed by a rat. But the strange part of it is that they turn out to be Pintail. At least so far as I am able to identify them. . . . If you should care to run down and have a look at them any time I shall be only too pleased to see you and show them to you."

In accordance with this invitation I went over to Mr. Finn's farm at St. Mary's-in-the-Marsh on September 24th with the late Michael J. Nicoll, and Mr. Finn showed us the two birds. They were on a small, wire-enclosed pond in company with about a dozen young Mallard that he had also reared. They had been pinioned and were quite tame, coming for food quite close to our feet. We were both agreed that the birds were unquestionably young Pintail, apparently duck and drake, and there was no reason for doubting the story that they had been reared from eggs taken from a nest in the Marsh. Mr. Finn told us that the fifth egg was cracked and so did not hatch, and that the nest was in a tuft of grass, that barely sufficed to hide the bird, in the middle of a very large and bare grass field, that he subsequently pointed out to us, in the vicinity of the fleets. He also remarked that he took no trouble to identify the duck when she left the nest, feeling confident that the "Looker" knew a Shoveler duck when he saw it.

On May 28th, 1922, Fred Austen, the Dungeness watcher, reported to me that a pair of Pintail were to be seen on some marshy ground on the outskirts of Dungeness near the coast, but I mistook his direction and evidently went to the wrong place, for I failed to find them and have since learned that I had been a mile or more from the right one. Later on, in July, I heard from him that they had nested and hatched and that he had himself seen the duck with her brood. The nest was in a tuft of grass on a grassy flat between two pools. I subsequently commissioned a man, who had also seen the nest before the eggs hatched, to procure me some of the down

and feathers from it, but unfortunately on his going to do so the area had been mown and raked for hay, and so all such evidence had disappeared. On September 26th a Pintail was seen on the Hoppen Pits, Dungeness, by Mr. H. G. Alexander, a very early date for a migrant.

In early April, 1925, there were once again large numbers of Pintail at the fleets. A few were still there on the 10th and a single pair remained well into May. I saw the duck on the 24th. The late Mr. J. Selmes, then living at Camber, and a well-known sportsman and wild-fowler, who knew ducks exceedingly well, was tenant this year of a shoot in the Sussex portion of the Marsh. This included a small fleet, which he frequently visited. Amongst other ducks there in July he identified a Pintail duck with a brood of young ones. On August 1st his dog caught one of them that was not yet able to fly. Before the end of September he had shot the entire brood. This he related to me the following spring.

On May 2nd, 1926, I was at the fleets with Messrs. W. H. Mullens and G. E. Lodge. We spent a considerable time watching a flock of Black Terns that were hawking up and down the fleet and during the whole time a Pintail drake was behaving in a very curious manner. We were well hidden and had not disturbed the other ducks at all, but this bird appeared to be in a most restless and excited state, constantly flying up and settling again, without any apparent reason, and flying round repeatedly in high and wide circles. On the 24th, Mr. Witherby and I found him again at the same place, but on this occasion he was sitting asleep on the far shore of the fleet opposite us. Presently, while we were watching the other ducks, he rose, circled round and went off straight away from us until we lost him in the distance. After a few minutes we saw him coming back, accompanied by a second bird, which proved to be a Pintail duck. They settled together at the original spot and started to feed. There was no opportunity either then or on a later occasion to investigate the matter further, but the drake's action certainly suggested that he had been to fetch his duck from her nest in order to feed.

In the spring of 1930 a pair of Pintail haunted a certain area of marsh and pools on the borders of Dungeness, where they were constantly seen and identified by a local man who knows them well. Some time in late April or May, while he was spudding thistles near one of these pools, he put the duck off a nest of seven eggs, well hidden in a long grass tuft on a slightly elevated and drier stretch of marsh. The eggs were afterwards eaten by a hedgehog. I did not learn of this till some years later

In 1933 a flock of nine Pintail arrived at the Midrips in September and remained throughout the winter. It was constantly seen at flight to or from the sea by local residents, and on several occasions in October by my son, H. F. Ticehurst. Two birds, one of which I saw, were shot from it on different occasions. September is a very early date for migrant Pintail to arrive on this coast and this, together with their number and the fact that they were always together, did not mix with the other ducks, and were, so far as could be ascertained, the only Pintail in the district, strongly suggests that they were a family party that had been bred at no great distance.

In 1936 about a dozen Pintail were at the fleets on February 26th, where they remained until the middle of March, leaving behind them two pairs which I saw there on the 22nd. These were constantly present up to April 6th. Miss Stone failed to find them on the 8th, but they were seen by Mr. R. H. Allen on the 16th, but were apparently absent again on the 18th. Between the 16th and May 11th I have failed to find anyone who saw them in this locality, so it must remain uncertain whether they were the same birds as those to be immediately referred to. I am inclined to think that they were, for the distance between the two places would be nothing to a fighting duck.

In the meantime two pairs appeared in another area, near the coast, on the 11th, where they were seen at frequent intervals during the next four weeks. Here my son, Richard N. Ticehurst, was watching one of the pairs on the evening of April 24th with the idea of tracing the duck to a possible nest, when he quite by chance put the duck of the other pair off her nest. This was situated about twenty-five yards from where he had been sitting on the ground and the bird flew up before he had advanced more than fifteen paces. After circling round, she pitched in a near-by pool where she was immediately joined by her drake, who came from a distant pool, where he had been seen to pitch shortly before.

Two days later he took me, my elder son and Miss A. Morley to the place, which was so situated that we were able to approach within thirty yards of the nest under cover of a fold in the ground. As soon as our heads emerged into the sitting bird's line of vision she stretched up her neck and gave us an ample opportunity to identify her with glasses at close range. Her long slim neck, yellowish brown head with dark pencillings, finer than those on the head of a Mallard, and her narrow blue-grey bill were apparent to us all. As we approached nearer she sprang from the nest and circled round

us when we were able to remark her slim shape, with long, slender, outstretched neck, more tapering, slightly longer and more up-turned tail, and her more sharply pointed, narrower and more quickly beating wings, as compared with the Mallard ducks that were almost constantly in sight at the same time. If further identification were needed this was furnished by her settling on to one of the pools in the vicinity, where she was at once joined by an unmistakable Pintail drake.

The nest was placed in a hollow, scratched by a rabbit, in a patch of mixed moss and lichen on shingle, measuring  $14\frac{1}{2}$  by 9 inches and  $4\frac{1}{2}$  inches deep. One egg had been laid since the 24th and there were now nine, arranged in a circle with bare stones showing in the middle with a thick circle of down well mixed with fragments of lichen surrounding them. When sitting the bird's back must have been flush with the surrounding ground, and when covered the mass of lichen-encrusted down rendered the nest almost invisible. Otherwise there was no cover whatever. The situation was distinctly a surprise and I should imagine quite unusual, for there was ample accommodation in long grass close by, though it is in such situations that Mallard nest in that area quite commonly, indeed, they seem to prefer them.

The nest was not touched by us, except to cover the eggs before we left it. Its subsequent history was a disappointment. The locality was left severely alone and only visited once, on May 3rd, when the duck was found to be sitting. On the 10th the eggs were found to have been quite recently destroyed and two, partly eaten, were lying just outside the nest. The destroyer was in all probability a hedgehog, as these animals are exceedingly numerous in that locality and are annually responsible for the destruction of the nests of ducks and other ground nesting species. Nothing was seen on this day of either pair of birds, but one pair was at the fleets on May 11th.

The Rev. F. C. R. Jourdain has very kindly examined the two sucked egg-shells together with a sample of down and feathers from the nest, without any previous knowledge of their identity, and is completely satisfied that they are derived from a Pintail.

I am indebted to Miss A. V. Stone, Messrs. H. G. Alexander, H. R. Allen, P. Allen and R. G. Williams for allowing me the use of their dated records to supplement my own.