

BANDING IN THE ARCTIC

By Mary Schmid

A dream came true last June when my husband John and I went to Churchill, Manitoba, Canada, the most accessible Arctic area on the North American continent. Our purpose was to photograph those amazing travelers that return each year to nest in the tundra from as far away as the southern tip of Africa and the Horn of South America. No bander, however, could resist the hope of some day knowing the travels of a bird banded on its Arctic nest.

To band in Churchill requires a special permit and bands issued by the Canadian Wildlife Service. Mr. F. H. Schultz of the Migratory Birds Administration was most helpful and sent us a permit to net and band. The bands were returned to the Canadian Wildlife Service from there. Banded birds were reported on the Banding Schedule, Form 3-860, and a copy sent to the Fish & Wildlife Service at Patuxent.

Arriving in Churchill on 21 June, we were too late to see the migration when vast numbers of birds going even further north stop for several days of rest. The birds remaining were already scattered in their territories and brooding eggs.

Shore birds, which we usually see only in drab plumage, were beautiful in nuptial dress. Songs that can only be heard at the nesting site filled the air with new and lovely melody. It was also most amusing to hear "Hee-haw hee-haw" as an ending to the gurgling flight song of the Stilt Sandpiper.

On the 26th of June we found our first nests in the tundra moss. Stopping at one lovely spot we walked across the tundra toward a small pond. Birds left their nests to fly out to meet us and loudly protest our presence. Since the precocious young leave the nest as soon as they are dry, shore birds lay their eggs in a slight depression in the mosses and lichens. The coloring blends so perfectly with the background, the eggs are very difficult to see and hours were spent in finding them. We would return to the road and watch a bird through the scope. When it returned to its nest, we would locate a rock or small bush nearby as a landmark. Even then, it was necessary to search to find the eggs. A small cairn would be built near the nest so that it could easily be found again.

Since the altricial nestlings of the longspurs and Hoyt's Horned Larks are fed by their parents for several weeks, their nests were usually found in a grassy area. Grass was used as a roof over the nest to hide the movement of the nestlings from the sharp eyes of the jaegers, Herring Gulls, hawks and owls which patrol the tundra in search of food.



An unusual Semipalmated Plover nest in the tundra. Most of these nests were only a slight depression in the gravel.



Nest of Hoyt's Horned Lark built like bandshell so that fledgelings will not be seen by cruising hawks, owls, etc.

Within several acres of tundra we found nests of a Whimbrel, Semipalmated Sandpiper, Semipalmated Plover, Golden Plover, Lapland Longspur and Hoyt's Horned Lark. There were normally four eggs laid by the shore birds; four to seven by the longspurs and larks. On 27 June, one nestling was in the Lapland Longspur nest with three eggs. On 1 July, a lark nest was found with five nestlings several days old.

Nests of Dowitchers, Red-backed Sandpipers, phalaropes, godwits and jaegers were usually found in marsh areas on a small hummock of moss or grass completely surrounded by water. Hip boots were a necessity in this area and the slimy bottom of the pools made walking so difficult a long walking stick for a third leg prevented slipping down. Head nets were worn in the marsh because of the extreme annoyance of the many mosquitoes -- repellents kept them from biting. These nests were also very difficult to find and required many hours of patient watching and wading through the marsh. Though there were many Hudsonian Godwits in the area that would fly in from far out in the marsh to meet us, we were never able to find a nest. Mr. Joseph A. Hagar, who was making a study of godwits, was able to find only one.

When eggs were being brooded, only one bird was seen at or near the nest; but as soon as eggs were hatched, both parents were feeding nestlings or guarding the precocious chicks. When both parents were together, we looked for young. In either tundra or marsh the camouflage of the shore bird chicks was so perfect they could only be seen when they moved.

On 5 July we banded our first chicks, three Stilt Sandpipers. Later in the day, two Dowitcher chicks were found in the marsh and banded.

A few miles further south at tree line, gulls could be found nesting in trees. Bonaparte's Gulls do not nest in colonies. Patience and sharp

eyes are necessary to find the nest five to six feet up in the branches of a stunted spruce. Even far from the nest, Bonaparte's Gull will dive on an intruder.

On 7 July at tree line, we were attracted by a pair of Lesser Yellowlegs yelling at us from their perch in a spruce tree. The nest was found nearby on the ground carefully hidden between the branches of a small fallen spruce. Four chicks had just hatched and were drying off. As soon as they were dry and ready to leave the nest, all four were banded.

As July 7 was our last day in the tundra, all known shore bird nests were checked and eggs were found still unhatched. Five Lapland Longspur and four Horned Lark nestlings were large enough to band. Nestlings in two Horned Larks' nests had left and could not be found. They would crawl out of the nest before they were able to fly.

Arctic Terns, that would soon depart on their annual 20,000 mile round-trip to the Antarctic, were nesting in colonies. One colony was in the Townsite. The two or three eggs were laid in the gravel at an ESSO tank farm. Even though the truck drivers were bombed each time they came into the yard, and often were hit on the head, they had put



John Schmid looking for shorebird nests in wet tundra. In the difficult walking, a stick helps as a third leg.



The author carrying the Startech camera for wildflower pictures.

oil drums and markers near each nest so the eggs would not be destroyed accidentally. We regretted that we were not able to band some of these beautiful terns, but none of the eggs had hatched when we left on 10 July.

Nets were never used. There is usually a strong wind blowing across the wide-open tundra with no "hedge rows" to form a natural flyway. Birds were much too scattered in nesting territories. Perhaps nets could have been effective at tree line when birds first arrived, or when they were flocking before leaving. Much more banding could have been done had we concentrated on banding and stayed several weeks longer.

Even with 20 hours of daylight, there is not enough time in this fantastic land. Besides the fascination of birds and mammals, arctic flowers were a carpet under foot. Tiny jewels of beauty that changed from day to day - a paradise for the botanist.

We hope that some day we shall be able to join the great migration in early June and stay to see the complete cycle of life in the beautiful Arctic tundra.

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