

THE BIRTH OF A SNIPE FAMILY (*CAPELLA DELICATA*).¹

BY HENRY MOUSLEY.

Plate XXII.

IT WAS late in the afternoon of May 10, 1931, that I found near Lachine, a suburb of Montreal, a nest containing four young Wilson's Snipe just hatched out—a very early date for these parts—and either in this or adjoining fields, a pair (possibly the same pair) of Snipe have since hatched out a brood each year, the last one in 1934 forming the title of the present paper.

The nest composed entirely of dry grasses and well concealed in a large tuft of grass in a rough pasture, was shown to me on May 23, when it contained four eggs far advanced in incubation. Visiting the site for the next few days, I was more than fortunate in arriving on the 26th, just as the first chick was emerging from the shell, this giving me a long looked for opportunity of witnessing the birth of a whole brood, and noting the varying time between the emergence of each chick, as in some cases the whole four may not emerge on the same day. It was not until two and one-half hours later that the second egg was seen to be cracking, by which time chick No. 1 was thoroughly dried out (fig. 1) and able to leave the nest, three pictures showing this event, as well as chick No. 2 in the very wet stage, just after emergence (fig. 2) and also partly dried out (fig. 3), in which stages it cut a very poor figure as compared with chick No 1, now in its fluffy dress of varying shades of brown, the down feathers lightly sprinkled with white at their tips, making a young snipe one of the prettiest objects imaginable. These pictures show also, quite distinctly, the so-called "egg-tooth," a whitish protuberance at the tip of the upper mandible, formed of calcareous salts deposited between the layers of the skin, which drops off soon after hatching, leaving no sign of its former presence. It is by means of this instrument that young birds are able to chip their way out of the shell.

Upon my first arrival at, and all subsequent visits to the nest up to this point, to see how matters were progressing, the male bird had always flushed within a few feet of the nest, but from now onwards to the hatching out of the fourth chick, he was never seen or flushed again, the novelty of the birth of his offspring, apparently, having worn off.

The female when leaving the nest always flushed silently, as did the male, the "scaipe" or "escape" notes never being once uttered, as is invariably

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the case out of the breeding season, whenever the bird rises from the ground on being flushed or put up accidentally. This is important, as most authors fail to point out this usual silence in the breeding season, until the general public have come to look upon the Snipe as always giving vent to the loud harsh "scaipe" notes, whenever they rise from the ground. At this point, it may also be well to mention that the nest lay between two small sheets of water containing beds of cat-tails and rushes, and it was the invariable custom of the female on flushing from her nest, to at first go away in a straight line, then make a half swing round, finally pitching precipitately in one particular spot on the edge of the water, to the east of the nest where, upon alighting, she would give vent to two notes sounding very like "kuk" "kuk" or "chook" "chook." From there, she would approach the nest through the grass unseen by me, as my hiding place was in an opposite direction.

After the hatching of the second chick, an hour and a quarter went by before the emergence of chick No. 3, by which time it was with difficulty that I could persuade chick No. 1 to remain in the nest, it being very hot at the time, making the opening up of the nest—for photographic purposes—a very disturbing element. However, being anxious to obtain a picture of these three youngsters all dried out, and in a quiescent stage, I allowed the mother to brood them for the best part of an hour, hoping by then that they would all have fallen asleep. Fortunately, this proved to be the case, and I was lucky in getting a picture of them all snuggled together before they again woke up. Another two hours now elapsed before the birth of chick No. 4, this making a total of six and one-half hours from the time of my first arrival at the nest, when chick No. 1 was making its debut into the world.

With this fourth arrival my real troubles began, since chick No. 1 absolutely refused to remain in the nest and allow me to get a well "stopped down" picture giving detail. Time and again I replaced him—I am only assuming the sex of course—sometimes covering him for a time with my hand, at others, putting my cap over the whole brood to try and quiet them down, but all to no purpose, for directly my hand or the cap was removed, his "cussedness" made off as fast as his little legs would carry him. Luckily, the others had so far kept pretty quiet, but by now were becoming very fidgety, and I could see that if I was to get any pictures at all of the whole brood, I must act at once, and take a chance with chick No. 1 before it succeeded in getting very far out of the nest. All things considered, I obtained two very fair pictures, one in particular showing the "egg-tooth" on chick No. 3 (fig. 4) even more distinctly than that already seen in the previous picture of chick No. 1, which said chick in these last two pictures, owing to movement, appears a little blurred—as might be expected. It was

now getting late in the afternoon, so I decided to withdraw and allow the mother to brood and dry out chick No. 4 in peace.

Before concluding, however, I would like to draw attention to an interesting and important matter, which can best be indicated, I think, by my quoting from the late Fergus Menteith Ogilvie's 'Field Observations on British Birds,' 1920, where on page 87, he says: "If you watch such a nest you will see that as each chick hatches, the broken fragments of shell are removed at once, and removed to a considerable distance by the parent bird. For the broken egg-shell, with its glistening white inner surface and the remains of the blood-stained membranes, is now very noticeable among the surroundings, and is a source of danger. The chicks that are hatched, leave the nest, and there remains in it only the one unhatched egg with its inmate assiduously hammering away at the confining walls. The point I want especially to draw attention to is the removal of the tell-tale fragments of broken shell, which would almost infallibly catch the eye of any passerby, if they were left in or about the nest." Now it must be remembered that Mr. Ogilvie is speaking of his experience with the European Snipe (*Capella gallinago*), which would seem to differ from that of mine with its near relative out here Wilson's Snipe (*Capella delicata*) judging, not only from the present photographs, but also from several others I have of nests taken in former years, all of which show the presence of the empty egg-shells up to the very last, and this is so with the Woodcock (*Philohela minor*), no attempt so far as I have been able to judge, being made by either of these two ground nesting birds to remove the empty egg-shells, which remark applies equally well to the European Curlew (*Numenius arquatus*). The Redshank (*Totanus totanus*), Dotterel (*Eudromias morinellus*) and Killdeer (*Oxyechus vociferus*) on the other hand, usually, if not always, remove the empty shells. Looking to the fact that the young of so many Limicoline birds leave the nest very soon after hatching, it would hardly seem necessary that the empty egg-shells should be removed by the parents—at all.

I was glad to find some reference to this matter in Mr. Ogilvie's book, as he is one of the very few authors who has anything to say regarding this interesting but much neglected subject, most people taking it for granted that because a large majority of birds do carry away the empty egg-shells, they must all do so, which is very far from the truth, some birds, at least, eating the shells to save carrying them away.

Even in the case of the European Snipe (*C. gallinago*) the removal of the empty shells does not always hold good as recorded by Mr. Ogilvie, for I find Miss Turner in her 'Broadland Birds,' 1924, gives an instance on Hickling Broad, Norfolk, where no attempt was made to remove the broken shells, she doing that herself eventually. Of this same bird, Miss



HATCHING OF WILSON'S SNIPE.

UPPER LEFT. CHICK No. 1 TWO AND A HALF HOURS AFTER HATCHING.
UPPER RIGHT. No. 2 JUST HATCHED.
LOWER LEFT. No. 2 PARTLY DRIED.
LOWER RIGHT. No. 4 JUST EMERGING FROM EGG.

Turner remarks that when she was within three feet of the nest, the old bird flew up from it screaming loudly, whereas, my bird (*C. delicata*) always rose silently—as already mentioned. Again, in 'Bird Haunts in Wild Britain,' 1932, by Winnall and Yeates I find the following on page 68; "One day we went down to get some last studies of the bird and found the eggs hatched. The egg-shells were still in the nest and so we looked about for the chicks. As they were all very close, we decided that they might not yet have strength enough to wander far, so that there was perhaps a chance of our getting pictures of the parent bird brooding them. I accordingly got in the hide, and in a very short time I saw the mother running to and fro in the grass calling excitedly. But she was reluctant to come into the clearing we had made in order to see her, and her plaintive calls soon moved the chicks 'to put their best leg forward,' and so we were deprived of our pictures."

In conclusion, it would be interesting to see a list of those Limicoline birds which usually avoid the general rule of safeguarding the nest and young by the removal of the empty shells.

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