

NESTINGS OF SOME SHOREBIRDS IN WESTERN ALASKA

By LAWRENCE H. WALKINSHAW

In an earlier paper (Condor, 50, 1948:64-70) I reported observations on the nesting of some passerine birds in the vicinity of the Johnson River, 30 miles west of Bethel in western Alaska, in the summer of 1946. In this same area the nests of shorebirds were a matter of major interest to our party. Presented herewith are selected notes and photographs pertaining to this group of birds.

Pluvialis dominica. Golden Plover. This plover was not uncommon at Johnson River. The call, *ter-eee*, was similar to that of the Black-bellied Plover but there was a difference and we knew when approaching a territory, prior to seeing the bird, which was scolding us. While at Johnson River I often saw a beautiful flight behavior. The bird would fly with slow wing beats high in the air, suddenly drop almost to the ground and then as quickly rise to pass far out over the tundra. Often they called as they did this.

On June 7, about one-half mile north of our cabin, I found a Golden Plover nest with three eggs on a damp spot of tundra. It was on top of a small mound surrounded by sedges, and it measured 112 mm. in diameter and 47 mm. in depth. It was lined with reindeer moss and small, smooth pieces of sticks. The irregular black spots were several millimeters in diameter and were evenly distributed over the entire egg surface. The parents flew about calling the shrill *ter-eee* call or sometimes a less shrill *kweee*. When I left the area, both flew ahead of me for some distance, eventually returning to the nest region.

That same day I found another pair of Golden Plovers even closer to camp and spent several minutes the next day searching for their nest. It was finally found on June 8 on a much higher, completely dry section of land and surrounded by sedges which were not dense but in scattered clumps. The nest was very similar to the other in construction and measured 125 mm. in diameter and 28 mm. in depth. The male was incubating the four eggs as he was on June 9. However, both birds did help with the incubation. The measurements and weights of the seven eggs were: length, 47-50.5 (48.6); width, 32.8-34.0 (33.4); weight, 23.3-25.6 (24.9).

This male flopped along ahead of us as if with a broken wing and continued to widen the distance if we left the nest region. There were still eggs here on June 20.

Squatarola squatarola. Black-bellied Plover. The first day we were at Johnson River, we found a pair of these birds just a short distance from our cabin. The male was much lighter than the male Golden Plover and appeared larger. They were rather wild, but on June 5 in the afternoon Jim Walkinshaw and I found their nest built on a little flat above one of the lakes. Because of its position on top of a mound it was in no danger of being flooded. The nest measured 141 mm. inside diameter and was lined with reindeer moss. The four eggs measured and weighed on June 5: 53.3x36.7 mm., 35 grams; 54.1x37.5 mm., 35.9 grams; 53.5x36.6 mm., 35 grams; 53.5x36.6 mm., 34.9 grams. The eggs, white in color, were spotted with black, more of the spots being located at the larger end.

Both parents incubated the eggs. On June 8 I spent from 9:30 a.m. until 12:15 p.m. in the blind. The female came back to the nest almost before I was inside the blind and incubated until 10:35. When she left she called *ter-eee*. The male, who had been feeding about 150 meters from the nest, came on foot rapidly across the tundra and started incubating. He started incubating at 10:40 a.m. and left at 11:15 a.m. The female came up as he left but was afraid of the camera so did not stay. At 11:45 a.m. the male came back and remained there until I left at 12:15 p.m. The eggs were still in this nest on June 20.

At Johnson River the Black-bellied Plover and the Golden Plover were of about the same degree of abundance; 44 of the former and 41 of the latter were observed.

Numenius hudsonicus. Hudsonian Curlew. On June 5, 1946, I found my first pair



Fig. 43. Male Black-bellied Plover on nest. 30 miles west of Bethel, Alaska, June 8, 1946.



Fig. 44. Nest of the Black-bellied Plover shown in figure 43.

of these birds at Johnson River. The next day after a short search we located their nest, a beautifully constructed affair lined with a thick layer of reindeer moss. It measured 22.8 cm. by 20.3 cm. in diameter and was 55 mm. deep. The four eggs varied in color. One was very light buffy green covered with fine brown spots. Another was darker, with

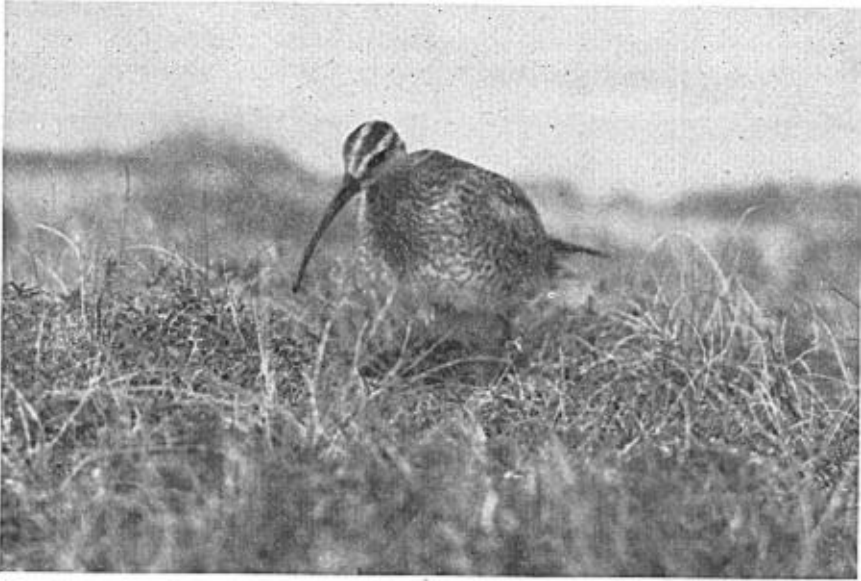


Fig. 45. Hudsonian Curlew at nest, 30 miles west of Bethel, Alaska, June 15, 1946.



Fig. 46. Nest of the Hudsonian Curlew shown in figure 45; photographed June 6, 1946.

a bluish green ground color and was covered with fine spots and some scrawls of black. The third and fourth were alike with a ground color of darker greenish and large spots of gray-green somewhat concentrated at the larger end.

These eggs ranged between 56.5 and 60.0 mm. in length and between 39.0 and 40.1 mm. in width. Weights ranged between 38.7 and 43.0 grams.

Near the nest, not ten meters away, was a Pintail's nest, and only about 100 meters

the nest of a Long-tailed Jaeger. Across a ditchlike creek was the nest of a Parasitic Jaeger and a Ptarmigan's nest as well as one of an Alaska Longspur and that of another Pintail. The only birds of this nesting community that seemed to trouble each other were the Long-tailed Jaeger and the Hudsonian Curlew. If one of these birds flew over the nest of the other a chase ensued until the other bird returned to his own region. Both nests still contained eggs when last examined on June 16.

Curlews' nests were not hard to find because the birds started calling at the first sight of a man. The call, *ter-loo-loo-loo*, was uttered by both birds as they flew about us and the closer to the nest we approached the more excited they became.

Another nest with four eggs was found June 17 on a low tundra area, again only a short distance from another Long-tailed Jaeger's nest. At this nest the curlews attacked a pair of Sandhill Cranes when they alighted near the curlew's nest, and the jaegers and curlews had no better relationship than at the other location, chasing each other if one approached the other's nest. This nest was lined with lichens and fine cotton sedge leaves and measured 142 mm. across and 60 mm. in depth inside. The four eggs ranged between 57.3 and 59.5 mm. in length, between 40.5 and 41.6 mm. in width, and between 47.7 and 54.6 grams in weight on June 17. The average measurements and weights for the eight eggs were 58.3x40.4 mm. and 45.7 grams.

Ereunetes mauri. Western Sandpiper. This species was very common at Bethel, Johnson River and Chevak. Nests were found on June 4 (2), June 5 (3), June 6 (1), June 17 (2) and many more could have been found. Downy young were first found on June 17 (two broods) and two broods were observed on June 18.

The nests were sunken into the moss on little rises of tundra, were arched over with sedges and grasses and often were protected additionally by the branches of the short tundra vegetation—Alaska tea, crowberry or dwarf birch. Usually the nests were lined with some reindeer moss, sedges and dead leaves of the dwarf birch. Measurements of nests were: 70 to 78 mm. in diameter and 38 to 48 mm. in depth.

One set contained three eggs, the remaining seven sets contained four. The eggs were somewhat cream colored and were covered with reddish brown spots. They were rather sharply pointed and the small ends were placed in the bottom of the nest. Measurements and weights of 23 eggs are: length, 30-32.8 (31.4); width, 21.1-23 (22.13); weight, 5.8-8.2 (6.84) grams.

Often, when leaving the nest almost under our feet, these little sandpipers used the broken-wing ruse trying to lead us from their eggs. Again they would fly a short distance, returning to a spot near the nest. One of the calls given at this time was *zwee-zwee-zwee*. Again they would call *tweedle-lee*. Males were often observed giving a flight song, sailing down from about 30 meters above ground on set wings, and calling *tweer-tweer-tweer*.

Lobipes lobatus. Northern Phalarope. This species was first observed at Bethel on June 2, 1946, and at Johnson River I found it almost daily. Joseph Andrews located a nest on June 8 in a shallow marshy spot covered with groups of sedges. The nest was quite snipe-like and was arched over with sedges. The male departed from the nest hurriedly and did not return while we were near. The four eggs averaged in measurements and weights: 29.2x20.8 mm., weight, 6.0 grams. On June 15 the male was incubating.

On June 17 we watched a female Northern Phalarope chasing a male in a small lake near our cabin. He was trying to feed but she repeatedly approached him in the shallow water, sometimes by foot, again by air, often forcing him to swim. Apparently she was courting him.

Battle Creek, Michigan, August 15, 1947.