

NOTES ON BREEDING-HABITS OF AVOCETS.

BY

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(PLATE 2.)

In the middle of May, 1914, I spent a few days in a duck-decoy situated on one of the saltmarshes in the west of Holland. I found the nesting-season in full



AVOCET APPROACHING NEST.

(*Photographed by Miss M. G. S. Best.*)

swing when I arrived. Only a few of the earlier broods had hatched off and of these there were very few survivors, as the weather for a month previously having been unusually dry, the mud was too hard for the soft bills of the young birds, and they had died of starvation: also, the keeper said, the water in the ditches and decoy-pond was too salt for the little birds, as there had been no rain for some time. In the decoy we found several ducklings which appeared to have died

from this cause, as there were no marks of violence upon them.

Only one couple of little Avocets were running about under the bank of a big drain, their covering of down being of so light a buff that it might almost have been white, their long black bills even at that early stage showing the upward curve of those of the mature birds.



AVOCET TURNING HER EGGS BEFORE SETTLING DOWN ON THEM.  
(*Photographed by Miss M. G. S. Best.*)

The nesting Avocets were easy birds to photograph, and returned quickly to their eggs after being disturbed—the only exception I noticed being one bird not very far from a Tern's nest, which fled from her eggs on the slightest alarm and remained in the distance calling in an agitated way.

The bird I photographed alighted at a little distance behind the nest, and approached warily, calling as she came, pausing every few steps to jerk her head and body, much in the same way that a Redshank does,

and at the same time to shake each foot quickly as she raised it from the ground.

Avocets seem to be very restless sitters—always on the move, walking from the nest a few feet to peck at the mud or to preen themselves, giving one the impression that their long legs become cramped when folded under the bird for any length of time. The



MALE AVOCET APPROACHING FEMALE ON NEST.  
(*Photographed by Miss M. G. S. Best.*)

observations were made as much from other nesting pairs within easy distance of my hide as from the pair immediately in front of me.

The absent mate returned generally within an hour of his departure and changed places, flying down to the ground a few yards away and calling loudly as he advanced, which call was answered by the bird on the nest. She waited till he was close to her before standing up, then they both looked at the eggs, making at the

same time a contented crooning note; the new arrival then settled himself down, while she moved off a little way, feeding and stretching herself.

The bird off duty was seldom far away from its nest on these marshes, as there were so many nests of different birds breeding close together that the non-sitter was generally fiercely protecting its mate and eggs.



ALARMED. "Kluit! Kluit!"  
(*Photographed by Miss M. G. S. Best.*)

When the Avocets were trying to decoy one away from their nest, they ran in a crouching attitude, rolling somewhat from side to side, head stretched out and tail spread, wings held on a level with the back, but bent from the metacarpal joint so that the primaries often brushed the ground.

I saw some of these birds one day when it was blowing a gale of wind. They were nearly blown over, and

probably owing to the wind getting underneath their wings, when running into the wind, they held their wings stretched to their full extent straight up over their backs, but half furled them again directly they altered their direction.

The Black-headed Gulls went out of the way to be annoying to their neighbours, but when it came to a fight they were not in it with the Avocets, which flew at them and struck with either wings or feet, the long bill being, perhaps, too flexible to be used as a weapon of attack.

When they were feeding in soft mud, the Avocets waded quickly along, using the bill with a sweeping, sideways motion, not using the point except to pick up things on dry ground.



MALE AVOCET PREPARING TO SETTLE ON EGGS. FEMALE GOING OFF TO FEED.  
(*Photographed by Miss M. G. S. Best.*)