

BIRDS'-NESTING WITH A CAMERA.

BY HERBERT C. FYFE.

*Illustrated from photographs by OSWIN LEE and
UNDERWOOD AND UNDERWOOD.*



STONECHAT'S NEST
IN A NUT BUSH.

THE sport of birds'-nesting is one that must at one time or another have been indulged in by almost every British boy and girl. There is an intense joy in finding out a

nest, in handling the dainty eggs, and in taking some (let us hope not all!) home to add to the collection. The sport also has this recommendation, that there is an element of danger in it; trees have to be climbed, difficult rocks scaled, and cliffs ascended, if certain eggs are to be secured. Very often this dangerous element—the possibility of tearing your trousers, the delightful feeling that you are trespassing and doing something which you ought not to do—tells more in favour of birds'-nesting than the actual securing of the eggs, which very often never find their way into the glass case or the cabinet.

Of late years a new sort of sport has grown up, wherein the object is not the removal of the nest or the eggs, but the portraying, by means of the camera, of the life and habits of the birds of our country. Just as the bad old style of stuffing birds in impossible attitudes and unnatural situations has given place to a better and more interesting fashion, in which, as one may see at the Natural History Museum at South Kensington, the birds are shown exactly as they were on the day of capture, with their nests, eggs, and young, and amid natural surroundings, so the old method of portraying Nature is being displaced in favour of one which is



ROBIN'S NEST
IN AN IVY-
COVERED
BANK.



HEDGE SPARROW'S
NEST IN A FIR
BUSH.



NIGHTINGALE'S
NEST IN
THE BOT-
TOM OF
A THICK
BUSH.



WHITETHROAT'S NEST IN A SYCAMORE.

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more faithful to life. Photography has been termed "the handmaid of Science"; and in his endeavour to show animals as they really are the naturalist is finding the camera a faithful ally.

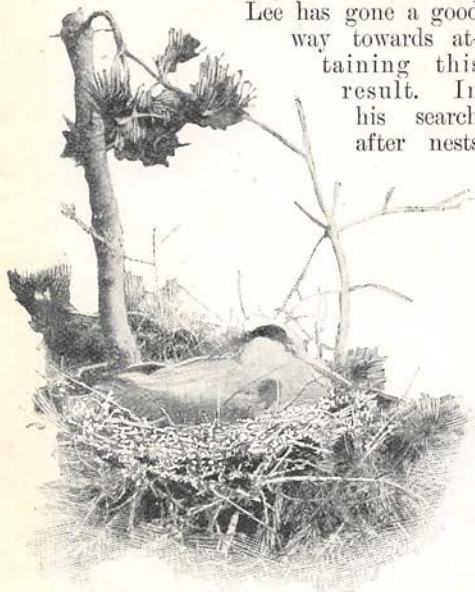
One of the most successful workers in this new and fascinating field is Mr. Oswin A. J. Lee, of Edinburgh. By the kindness of this enthusiastic Nature lover I am enabled to reproduce here some of his photographs, which may well stand comparison with any others of the same kind.

Some years ago, before photography and natural history were so closely allied, Mr. Lee determined to collect a complete series of photographs which, while being accurate and instructive studies of the nesting habits of birds, would yet prove

sufficiently attractive for the ordinary lover of the feathered world.

Although he cannot yet claim to have secured photographs of the nesting haunts of every British bird, Mr.

Lee has gone a good way towards attaining this result. In his search after nests



HERON ON NEST.

he has had many interesting experiences, and, like many others who follow the same line, has only secured some after hours of anxious watching and tireless patience. Take, for instance, our illustration showing a heron sitting on her eggs. The nest was placed in a low Scotch fir tree, about fourteen feet from the ground, in a small plantation on a steep hillside in Sweedsmuir, Peeblesshire.

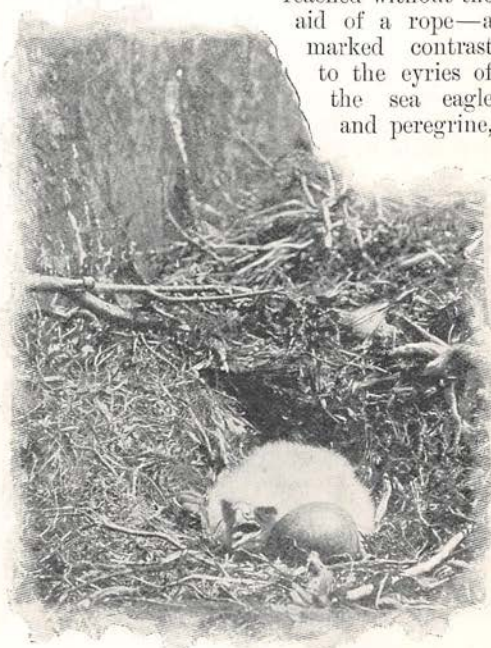
Noticing that there was an excellent place of concealment in a thick tree about twelve yards from the nest, Mr. Lee conceived the idea of photographing the old bird on its nest from there. He accordingly prepared a seat for himself in the thickest part of the tree, surrounding himself with branches. From here he had a string to his camera, which was placed already focussed in another tree overlooking the nest. For four hours Mr. Lee waited in his ambush, but the heron was so scared by the camera that she would not come near the nest. He then took down his camera and fastened up a large biscuit box covered with green baize in the same place, leaving it there all night. The old bird was on its nest as usual in the morning, so up went the camera again in the same place, and when Mr. Lee had got it focussed and set he covered it with the

green baize, leaving the lens looking out, and retired to his ambush. Presently the heron returned and flew round and round the wood croaking, for she saw that some change had been made in the green baize cloth. The poor photographer had to wait for nearly five hours before the bird was settled on her eggs and he could obtain the picture here given.

The photography of animals in their natural surroundings has of late become quite a science in itself, and Mr. Lee has found out by experience many little devices and cunning tricks to prevent birds from being frightened by the approach of the "camera fiend." The great object is to conceal your camera as much as possible, to get as close to the bird as you can without disturbing her, and to possess your soul in patience till the critical moment for taking the picture arrives.

One of the ambitions of the photographic birds'-nester is to obtain a picture of the nest of the golden eagle, that regal bird whose home is among the vast and dreary solitudes of the Highlands. We have all read tales of the fierceness of the eagle, and can therefore realise that he who would climb to its eyrie must possess no little coolness and courage. In very few instances is the nest of the golden eagle—built usually on a rugged cliff—inaccessible, being generally quite easily

reached without the aid of a rope—a marked contrast to the eyries of the sea eagle and peregrine,



YOUNG GOLDEN EAGLE AND EGG.

which are usually in the most precipitous part of some stupendous cliff.

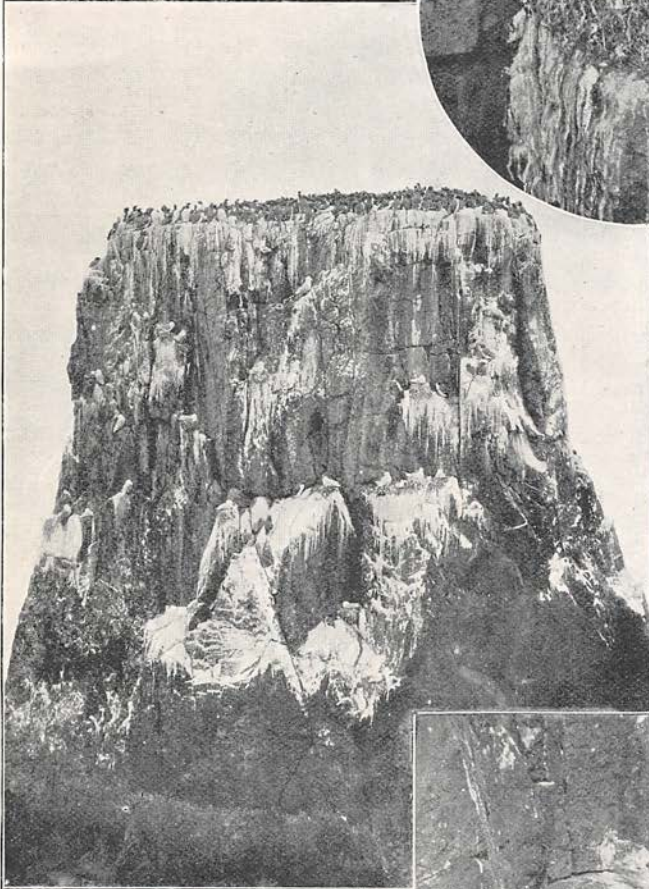
The photograph of the nest of the golden eagle here reproduced, taken by Mr. Lee, shows an eagle's eyrie at Loch-bine, Isle of Mull. The nest was



hares, leverets, and stoats, for the eagle likes to keep a good larder. Fortunately for Mr. Lee the old bird left the nest when he was within twenty yards of it and did not come back to molest him.

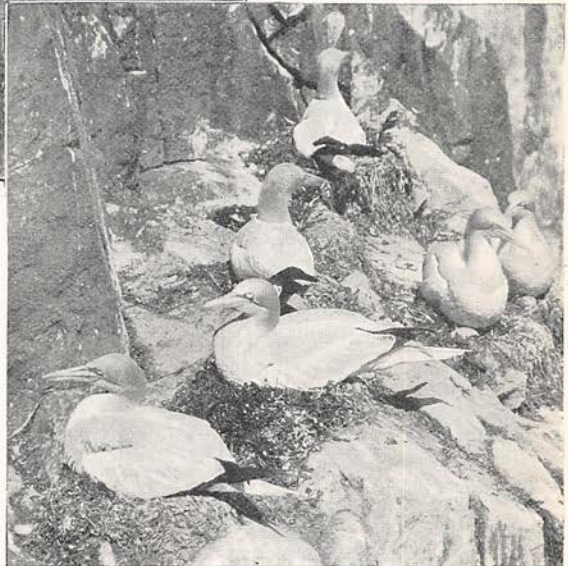
KITTIWAKE
ON NEST.

The eaglet was very timid and did not show fight at all. Four weeks later Mr. Lee returned to the eyrie and found his little friend had grown considerably. Instead of being pleased to see its photographer it snapped its bill and pecked at him. Neither of the parents being in the way, Mr. Lee carried the eaglet home with him. He had great difficulty in rearing it until it was fully fledged, for as long as it was



GUILLEMOTS AND NESTS ON PINNACLE ROCK.

easily accessible, being placed beside a small rowan bush on a grassy ledge of a precipitous face of rock some forty feet high. It was a bulky structure of heather torn up by the roots, and bits of turf, and was lined with a quantity of freshly plucked briar leaves and twigs of rowan. In the nest we see an eaglet, covered with white down, crouching with its beak open and evidently fearing the intentions of the man with the camera. Beside it is an addled egg, and round the nest are remains of grouse, white



GANNETS SITTING ON NESTS, BASS ROCK.

in the downy stage it refused all food, and he was forced to cram some down its throat daily. Once it got its feathers it became quite reasonable and would eat its food readily. He kept it for nearly a year and it grew very tame and developed into a most amusing pet, though its little trick of striking a stranger with its sharp talons did not greatly amuse.

I do not think that a photographer has ever succeeded in taking a photograph of a golden eagle sitting on her eggs in her eyrie, for the bird is so exceedingly shy that she leaves her nest

and then retiring to a distance and releasing the shutter when the bird was settled on her eggs, by means of a pneumatic ball and some rubber tubing, or else by using his telephotographic lens and placing his camera where it would command a view of the eyrie. Both of these methods proved, however, unavailing.

Birds'-nesting with the camera is often an exciting and perilous pursuit. In obtaining his photograph of some "sulan geese," or gannets, on the east cliff of the Pass Rock — one of the



EIDER DUCK SITTING ON NEST.



SKUA'S NEST, WITH ONE YOUNG BIRD JUST HATCHED: HERRING LEFT FOR FOOD.



MOORHEN'S NEST ON A FLOATING PLANK.
Photo by Underwood & Underwood.



SWAN SITTING ON NEST.

if anybody approaches near her. Mr. Cherry Kearton, a well-known naturalist photographer, told me he journeyed to the Highlands of Scotland on one occasion expressly to take a picture of a golden eagle on her nest, but was



obliged to return without it. He had thought to get the photograph either by placing his camera near the nest where it would evade the eagle's eye,

—Mr. Lee had an adventure which nearly cost him his life. Climbing down from the top of the cliff, with camera on back, he put his foot into a gannet's nest, an enormous

finest breeding stations for this bird in the British Isles

structure of seaweed, years old, built on a slightly sloping piece of rock. Being soaked with wet and slippery with decayed fish, it simply shot out into space the instant that his foot rested on it! Had Mr. Lee not had a good grip of the rock above he would then and there have ended his career, as there was a fall of two hundred feet on to sharp, jagged rocks below. Gannets with young, or while on the nest, are easy birds to photograph. Mr. Lee remarks that he set up his camera only five feet from one bird, and it sat quite unconcernedly on its nest, with its plumage puffed out as if it enjoyed having its portrait taken.

Probably few people have any idea of the immense colonies of birds that congregate in certain places round our coasts. One of our illustrations represents the south stack of "The Pinnacles" on the Farne Islands, and it will be seen that the stack is absolutely crowded with guillemots, while every available ledge on the face of the rock is occupied either by a guillemot or a kittiwake. Mr.

you thought the rock could hold not another bird, fresh ones would arrive, land on the shoulders of their neighbours, and elbow their way to their own places. Even with a powerful field-glass it was quite impossible to see either an egg or a young fledgling, so tightly were the birds packed. The reason for this close herding appears to be that the guillemot has many foes, such as the lesser black-backed gull; and if it laid on the ledges of the main island of



PARTRIDGE'S NEST WITH NINE EGGS IN LONG GRASS.

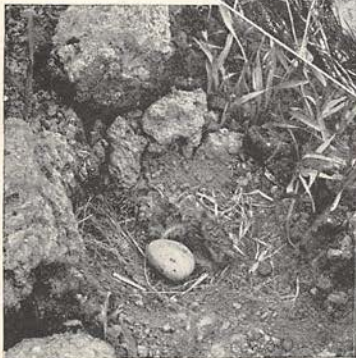
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NIGHTJAR'S NEST ON THE GROUND, WITH TWO EGGS.



NEST AND EIGHT EGGS OF MERGANSER.



PLOVER'S NEST AND EGG IN A ROUGH PLOUGHED FIELD.

Lee found it very difficult to get a satisfactory photograph of the birds on the stack, as they were never still for an instant, spending the whole day bobbing their heads up and down and flapping their short wings. When

the Farnes the egg would be almost invariably destroyed, so "Protection in numbers" is its motto evidently.

This picture suggests the question, "How do the young get safely down to the water from their lofty nests?" Mr. Lee has seen at the Pinnacles, on the Farnes, the fond parents resort to the simple device of shoving their olive branches over the cliff. Apparently the young birds are not much the worse. Some naturalists affirm that the youngster is carried down; but to anyone who has witnessed the manner of the guillemot's descent from its ledge to the sea—the legs and tail both spread out for steering purposes—this idea must seem absurd. The Pinnacles being only some fifty feet high, this method of pushing the young birds over is fairly safe. On the Bass Rock, however, where the cliff is not perpendicular, and where many of the

guillemot ledges are two or even three hundred feet above the water, it is quite out of the question. Mr. Lee thinks that in situations such as these the young do not leave the ledges until they can fly sufficiently well to accomplish the descent in safety.

Another favourite haunt of sea birds are the Treshnish Islands, where dwell kittiwakes, guillemots, razorbills, shags, and those quaint and solemn-looking creatures known as puffins.

The Shiant Islands are perhaps the largest puffin colony in our Islands, and one has but to fire a gun towards the face of the cliff to cause the puffins to leave their burrows and fly down the face of the slope to the sea in hundreds of thousands. The air is literally filled with puffins flying wildly about in legions, crossing and recrossing each other, anon returning to their burrows as the alarm subsides.

As a rule, when the young are first hatched they are fed by their parents on half-digested food, which is disgorged in the nest and administered to the nestling by the old birds. When more advanced in age they are provided with the fry of herrings. Mr. Lee watched one burrow, containing a single large young bird, for half an hour, and during that time the old bird brought in no less



CHAFFINCH'S NEST.

than four fairly large young herrings.

One of Mr. Lee's most interesting pictures gives us the kittiwake gull, the most beautiful as well as the most abundant of its genus throughout the British Islands. During the breeding season it is always found about the cliffs and rugged headlands or rock-faces of our coasts. The picture was not an easy one to take. Here is Mr. Lee's description of the way he took it:—"After



TURTLE-DOVE'S NEST ON A FIR-TREE.

great difficulty in lowering myself and my camera on to a narrow ledge of rock in a deep chasm near the 'Pinnacles' on the Farne Islands, I succeeded in taking this photograph on the opposite side. As there was barely room for me to stand on the ledge with my back against the rock, it was quite impossible for me to set up my camera on its legs, so I had to hold it in my hands for a two-and-a-half seconds exposure, which is not a very easy thing to do."

Kittiwakes are extremely tame when their eggs are highly incubated, and may be easily approached within a few feet. Once Mr. Lee was lowered on a rope to photograph two of these birds on their nests at St. Abbs' Head, and they paid no attention to him, though he dangled on the end of the rope within nine feet of them, and went through the usual photographic evolutions with a large focussing cloth.



REED WARBLER'S NEST IN BULRUSHES.

Birds, like dogs and babies, often object to having their portraits taken. The great skua, for instance, does not welcome the naturalist-photographer when he pries too closely at its breeding-place, but will swoop down with tremendous force at his head, with outstretched legs and loud rushing of wings, striking the unhappy visitor with great force.

While on a visit to a colony of skuas in Unst, one of the Shetlands, Mr. Lee was struck so often and so severely that he found it advisable to hold a stick above his head to ward off the attacks of the birds.

One of our illustrations shows the downy little skuas in their nests in the Shetlands, the only breeding-place of this species in Great Britain. In this, the youngster has just emerged from his egg, and close by is a headless herring, which the parent has provided for his offspring's sustenance.

While some birds are seized with fear at the approach of the photographer with his formidable camera and suspicious-looking focussing cloth, and will at once leave their nests, either flying away

or endeavouring to ward off the intruder, others, on the contrary, regard him with complete indifference, or at any rate sit close on their eggs, not leaving them until absolutely forced to do so. An example of the latter is the mute swan, familiar even to the Cockney. When Mr. Lee took the picture here reproduced the female was sitting on four eggs in a nest which is built by the tame swans every year on the Lake of

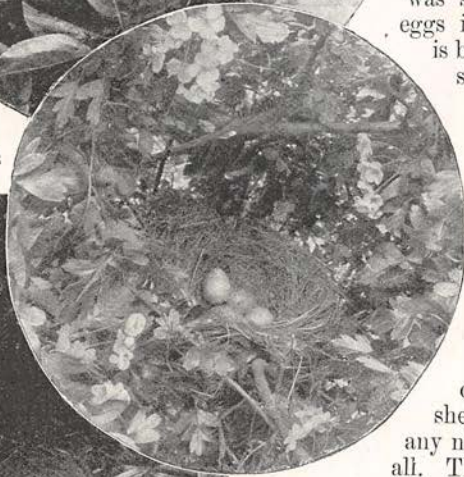
Monteith. She was so tame that though he waded right up to the side of the nest and put his arm under her to count the eggs, she took hardly

any notice of him at all. The male, always so jealous of prying menfolk while his wife is sitting, hurried up from the other end of the lake when he saw the photographer approaching the nest in the boat, but did not trouble to stay when he saw that no harm was intended. When the young cygnets are newly hatched, the old birds guard them very jealously and will attack anyone who goes too near them.

On a small pond close to a house near Forres, where a pair of swans had succeeded in hatching out three cygnets, a mallard had also a brood. Papa swan was dreadfully



GOLD-FINCH'S NEST IN AN APPLE TREE.



BLACKBIRD'S NEST IN A HAWTHORN BUSH.



GREEN-FINCH'S NEST IN AN EVERGREEN.



THRUSH'S NEST IN A HEDGE.

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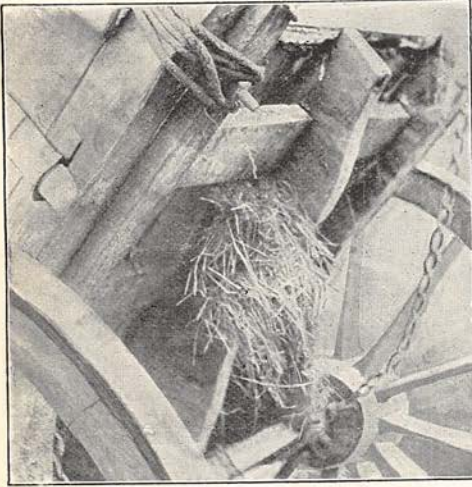
angry whenever the mallards intruded on his part of the pond, often chasing them, and in about a week he succeeded in killing the whole of the ducklings, seizing

sitting on its nest was taken by Mr. Lee in the Farne Islands.

In addition to the interesting photographs which Mr. Lee has kindly allowed me to use as illustrations to this article, I include a number of other faithful studies by the camera. These deal, for the most part, with the nests of the homelier birds and speak for themselves. That they were obtained without the adventurous experiences connected with Mr. Lee's pictures in no way detracts from their beauty or interest.

To Mr. W. J. Thomas, of Mullingar, I am indebted for the two photographs which tell the curious story of a too-confident wren. This bird built beneath the floor of a farm cart, and after hatching her young travelled with them in safety for some ten miles to a neighbouring town. Another six miles were safely traversed on the homeward journey, but then, alas! the nest and its occupants were jolted to the ground.

Birds'-nesting with the camera is one of the most delightful of hobbies. Nature is always revealing to the naturalist-photographer some new fact and giving him continually fresh cause to wonder at her ways. I have been able in this article but to give the reader a glimpse into a realm of inquiry which is as novel as it is enticing, for a few photographs of birds and bird-life will often give one more notion of natural history than a dozen treatises. But he who sets out stalking with the camera must possess infinite patience, determination, and ingenuity, and must not expect Nature to reveal her secrets to him unless he is prepared, on his part, to make some sacrifices.



WREN'S NEST BUILT UNDER A FARM CART.

them in his bill and shaking them, or else holding them under the water till they were choked.

After a good deal of experience in photographing sitting birds, Mr. Lee noticed that they can be approached within a very short distance if two or three persons come up from different sides at the same time, as the bird does not seem to know which way to leave the nest; if only one stalks, it very often makes off at once in the opposite direction. By this device the picture of an eider duck



THE CART WITH THE WREN AND HER YOUNG TRAVELLING BENEATH IT