

NESTING HABITS OF SOME EAST AFRICAN BIRDS.

By D. McINNIS.

GLOSSY IBIS (*Hagedashia hagedash nilotica*).

Among certain of the Jaluo on the shores of Lake Victoria it is generally supposed that the Glossy Ibis, unlike other birds, dives into the water in the nesting season and lays its eggs at the bottom of the lake. They are not however prepared to say whether the parent birds incubate the eggs themselves or whether the warmth of the water is sufficient for the purpose. The reason for this belief is not at all clear, for though the nest is by no means easily accessible, the incubating parent, when disturbed, remains nearby, continually uttering its harsh cry, so that even the casual observer could hardly fail to see the nest.

In appearance this nest is not unlike that of the English Rook, being a large untidy structure composed of twigs, situated high above the ground in a tall tree near the water's edge, often at the extreme end of a branch.

Two to four eggs are laid which are unusually large and elongate and heavily marked with reddish-brown. Incubation begins when the first egg is laid. When driven from the nest, the bird is very unwilling to return unless the observer be well hidden, but it will remain quite close, frequently taking flights round, or settling on the tree.

EAST AFRICAN BUTTON QUAIL (*Turnix sylvatica alleni*, Mearns.)

The nest of this Quail is not easy to find, being hidden in the thick grass, and the bird when disturbed may run for a considerable distance before taking wing. The nest consists of a shallow scrape, slightly lined with grasses. A nest found by the writer contained three eggs, almost spherical in shape, of a buff ground colour speckled and marked with dark brown.

Owing to its situation, it is difficult to observe the bird on its nest, though by watching from a short distance, it may sometimes be possible to see the birds running quickly through the grass nearby.

SPUR-WINGED PLOVER (*Hoplopterus spinosus*, Linn.).

The Spur-winged Plovers are very common along the shores of Victoria Nyanza, occurring generally in pairs, or groups of three to four, but never in larger flocks. It is often very difficult to see the bird on the nest, as it invariably leaves at the first sign of danger, and circles round the intruder uttering loud cries. On closer approach the bird often becomes silent, settling on the ground some distance away,

thereby disclosing the presence of the nest. Three or four eggs are laid in a shallow scrape on dry grass-land near the edge of the reeds.

Apparently a considerable time elapses between the laying of each egg, but incubation begins at the laying of the first egg, not consistent brooding however, but rather as a means of partial protection. A clutch of four eggs taken in April was found to have one fresh egg, two half incubated, and one almost ready to hatch. The same stages were found in a clutch of three taken in June. In size and colour, the eggs closely resemble those of the European Lapwing.

WHITE-WINGED PLOVER (*Hemiparra crassirostris hybrida*,
Rochw.).

These birds are quite common along some parts of the eastern shore of Lake Victoria. As a rule they are rather shy but during the breeding season they may be approached without much difficulty. The birds are usually seen in pairs, but after the nesting season parties of four may be observed. When disturbed they never fly far, but settle again at a short distance or if driven back, circle after reaching a certain distance and return to the nesting ground. The same applies in whatever direction the birds may be driven, suggestive of defined "beats" between each nesting pair. During the breeding season, though more approachable, one seldom observes a brooding bird, and although one is certain of the presence of a nest in the vicinity, the parents seldom give any indication as to its whereabouts. Unlike the majority of plovers, the birds construct a nest of damp mosses and weed in swamps of two to three feet deep. The platform is raised so that the eggs are raised a few inches above water-level. The eggs are slightly larger than those of the Spur-winged Plover and on the whole rather darker, otherwise they are very similar.

THREE-COLLARED RINGED PLOVER (*Charadrius tricollaris tricollaris*, Vieill.).

The Three-collared Plovers do not occur in such numbers as the Sand Plovers, and seldom in flocks unless after the breeding season, when they may associate with the Sand Plovers. They are almost entirely confined to the sandy areas of the lake shore where they may be observed in pairs, hunting the water-line for food. The nest consists of a small scrape lined with stones and shells, usually situated on a slight mound of a foot or more in diameter. The eggs are paler than those of a sand Plover, being less heavily speckled, but in shape they are very similar. Two, or even one, form the clutch.

The parent birds are not at all shy and when driven from the nest they always remain within a few yards of the nesting site. They are however very liable to desert the eggs if too frequently disturbed.

EAST AFRICAN SAND PLOVER (*Charadrius pecuarius pecuarius*, Temm.).

The Sand Plovers may be seen in great numbers on the shores of Lake Victoria, but each flock consists of not more than a dozen. They generally frequent those parts of the shore where there are sandy stretches or mud flats; though they also occur on the grass-lands in smaller numbers. The nest is a slight depression in the sand, and may be unlined, or surrounded by a small collection of pebbles. Two eggs are laid, which, like the parent birds, resemble the colour of the environment to a very marked degree. The ground colour is buff closely speckled and lined with black and brown. The incubating bird remains entirely motionless for a long period at a stretch, and this, coupled with its protective colouring, makes it very difficult to see. At the approach of danger, the bird rises and stands over its eggs and with rapid shuffling of the feet scrapes the sand over the eggs until they are completely hidden, when it runs off the nest, seldom taking wing. Many of these birds are caught during the breeding season by the native children of the district by means of hair nooses set round the nest.

COMMON DRONGO SHRIKE (*Dicrurus adsimilis divaricatus*, Licht.).

The Drongos are very common in South Kavirondo, but are mainly confined to certain areas. Generally speaking they frequent patches of bush along with the Red-winged Bush shrikes, but where the Fiscal shrike is absent. At all times the Drongos seem quite fearless, particularly during the breeding season when they become actually aggressive, attacking any intruder.

The nest is composed of fine twigs and rootlets built into a fork of a tree at a considerable height from the ground.

Two eggs are laid which may be either pale cream or white with irregular red markings with a few purple or black spots forming an indistinct zone round the large end.

GREATER RED-WINGED BUSH SHRIKE (*Tchagra senegala armena*, Oberh.).

The Bush-shrikes are extremely shy at all times, but more especially so during the breeding season, when they are seldom seen. Unlike other shrikes they often settle or feed on the ground under cover of a bush, rather than perch above the ground.

In general structure the nest is very similar to that of the Drongo, being lightly but strongly built of twigs and rootlets but it is always situated within a few inches or possibly three feet off the ground in a low bush. Two or three eggs are laid which show considerable variation in size. The markings are irregular smears of pink or brown on a white or pinkish ground fairly evenly distributed over the whole surface, seldom forming a zone at one end.

VICTORIA RATTLER GRASS WARBLER (*Cisticola cheniana victoria*, Lynes).

Although this species is common round the shores of Lake Victoria, their nests are difficult to find. The birds are much in evidence perched on the top of some high bush uttering their calls and fluttering their wings as the last two notes are sounded.

When disturbed from the nest the bird leaves quickly, keeping to the cover of surrounding vegetation until some distance off when it is joined by its mate. Both birds then return to a neighbouring tree and begin to call with characteristic notes.

The nest is loosely built of rather coarse grass, lined with finer grass and is placed under some natural projection and slung between upright grasses or herbs. The eggs are white with pink or liver spots mainly at the larger end. Three form a clutch. Nests were taken in April to June.

WREN WARBLER (*Prinia mystacea immutabilis*, van Som.).

The nesting habits of these birds seem to vary to some extent. The majority, when breeding, are very shy and leave the nest at once, generally getting away unobserved. A nest containing one egg was found on the 5th June and was kept under observation until June 13th when the egg hatched. During the whole of this period the parents were not seen. Occasionally one finds a bird which will sit close. The situation and structure of the nest may vary as also the colour of the eggs. A pair of birds observed on June 7th had built a very neat nest of fine grass closely woven together and attached to two large leaves about two feet from the ground. Four eggs had been laid, of a pink ground colour with irregular spots varying from red to purplish black. A second nest found on June 16th was very untidy and loosely built of coarse grass entirely unlined, slung between two leaves about five feet from the ground. The ground colour of the eggs was bright blue, with markings similar to the first clutch.

LESSER SWAMP WARBLER (*Calamornis jacksoni*, Neum.).

The Swamp Warblers are not easy to observe at close range on account of their habitat and their shy nature. They are quite common in patches of reeds growing out in the water on the edge of Lake Victoria, but they seldom come inland even to the swampy areas. They are noisy birds, and it is by their full notes that one detects their presence. The nest, in structure and situation, closely resembles that of the European Reed Warbler, and is a deep cup suspended between three or four reed stems about three feet above the water level. Several nests were found within a few feet of each other. Both birds share in incubating and if disturbed they hop off but remain in the vicinity and

return in a few minutes. Two eggs are laid, whitish in ground colour and closely speckled with grey. Sometimes they have a greenish tinge.

ELGON GOLDEN WARBLER (*Eremomela elegans elgonensis*, van Som.).

These birds are fairly common in the open scrub and acacia country along the southern shore of the Kavirondo Gulf, but are generally very shy and therefore not often seen. During the breeding season particularly, it is extremely difficult to observe the bird at close range until the eggs are hatched, as the parent leaves the nest at the slightest disturbance, and may not return for an hour or more. Later when the young are nearly fledged both parents may generally be seen nearby. It is probable that during incubation, both birds sit, but only the male has actually been taken on the nest. The only eggs of this species that have been found are bright blue-green, with a zone of brown spots towards the large end. This nest was first seen on May 18th when it contained one egg. On the 20th no more eggs had been laid and the single egg was found to be slightly incubated. Another nest found on June 18th contained only one young, and it seems that the clutch must be very small.

The nest consists of a shallow cup composed of mosses, leaf fragments, and thin twigs, the whole being bound together with cobwebs. It is situated in a fork or suspended between twigs, about six feet from the ground, in some bush.

JACKSON'S SHORT-TAILED WARBLER (*Sylvietta whytii jacksoni*, Sharpe).

These birds are occasionally found nesting in South Kavirondo, though on the whole they do not seem to be common. The nest which is situated from two to eight feet up consists of a very deep cup with one lip elongated and built in between a fork or suspended from the end of a branched twig, and being covered with bits of bark and leaf fragments, looks very like an old disused nest or a mere collection of debris. The eggs are rather large in proportion to the size of the bird, white in ground colour with irregular brown markings. During incubation the parent sits close and is often difficult to see on the nest as the bird always sits head towards the top with the beak held vertically upward.

SPOTTED-TAIL BUSH CHAT (*Erythropygia ruficauda vansomereni*, Selater).

These birds are not often seen in South Kavirondo, though they must be plentiful. They frequent the clumps of mixed shrubs and keep to the undergrowth. They have a most pleasant song.

During the nesting season the birds are very shy and it is difficult to make close observations of their habits. The nest, consisting of a deep cup built of grass, is situated almost on the ground in some thick shrub. Two eggs are laid, not unlike those of the Rattler Warbler, but considerably larger, white in ground colour spotted with brown and red.

MEDIUM GREY FLYCATCHER (*Bradornis griseus griseus*, Reichw.)

This species is abundant in South Kavirondo, frequenting the open bush and thorn country. The birds are not at all shy and may be approached easily. During incubation only the male has been observed at the nest where he sits very close and sometimes one may almost touch him before he slips off.

The nest is a shallow cup composed of rootlets loosely woven together, and generally placed at the top of a stunted bush. One or two eggs are laid, of a uniform pale olive green.

LONG-TAILED RUFOUS-BELLIED SWALLOW (*Hirundo gordonii neumanni*, Rehw.).

This bird very closely resembles Emin's Swallow but may be distinguished by the length of the fine outer-tail feathers.

The nests of the two species are almost alike both being built of mud with a long tunnel entrance, and lined with grass and feathers. Two nests of Gordon's Swallow were found to contain three eggs, slightly incubated. The eggs are white. One nest was placed under an arch formed by the junction of two ant-hills, the second was in a culvert. When disturbed the birds leave the nest at once and may remain away for some considerable time.

RUFOUS-CAPPED FINCH-LARK (*Eremopteryx leucoparia*, Fisch., Reichw.).

Finch-larks are very plentiful in South Kavirondo, especially on the low-lying grass lands near the shore. The chief nesting period appears to be May and June, when large numbers of the birds were taken in snares by the natives. The nest is situated on the ground, generally in the open without any cover, and consists of a shallow scrape lined with grass. The eggs, two to three in number, are creamy white closely spotted with light brown. During the incubation period the bird is rather shy and leaves the nest at once when approached, flying off for some distance, to return some time after accompanied by its mate. Both parents have been observed on the nest but the male only relieves the female for short intervals.

CHESTNUT SPARROW (*Sorella emini emini*, Reichw.).

Several pairs of these birds were found nesting in a colony of Speke's Weavers in June. When building, some of the birds utilise disused nests of the weaver birds, merely adding a lining of feathers. The majority, however, build new nests, very often robbing the weavers' nests for material, but sometimes they collect fresh grasses. In the latter case the material chosen is fine grass stems so that the nests are much neater structures than those of the coarse grasses previously used by the weavers.

The nests are domed and reached by a rather elongate entrance tube, and in the only colony found were suspended from the end of branches of a eucalyptus tree, at a considerable height from the ground. Three to four eggs are laid, of a pale-green ground with dark greenish markings mainly at the larger end.

KAVIRONDO BLACK-FACED BISHOP (*Euplectes orix wertheri*, Reichw.).

These birds nest in great numbers in the reed-beds of the swamps near Lake Victoria. Though not in colonies, several nests may be found in a single swamp. They sometimes make use of growing maize, or even bushes at some little distance from water, three or four feet off the ground or from the water level.

The materials used are fine grasses neatly woven together, and leaving an entrance at the side towards the top. Nests have been found containing from four to seven eggs. As a large clutch shows two distinct degrees of incubation, it appears possible that the nests are used by more than one bird. It remains to be proved that females lay indiscriminately in any suitable nest, also whether when two hens make use of a single nest, both take part in incubation. The eggs are usually of a uniform bright blue, though some show minute black spots which readily wash off.

RED-SHOULDERED BISHOP (*Urobrachia axillaris media*, Sharpe.).

Large numbers of these birds may be found nesting from April to mid-July in the swampy ground on the shores of Lake Victoria.

So plentiful are these nests that they can be said to be in colonies, nevertheless they are difficult to find being placed in thick grass just above water-level. The nest itself is semi-cup shaped but a hood is made over it by weaving the overhead grasses together. Two or three eggs are laid which may show some slight variation in ground colour, being either brown or olive green rather heavily spotted with dark brown and black.

The females are very shy, much more so than the males, and try to keep out of sight in the thick grass as much as possible. They undertake most of the incubating, though the males sometimes sit

for short intervals. A nest found on June 17th was of the usual type and a female obtained from it, but the three eggs are, however, more like those of *E. o. wertheri*.

WEAVERS: *Hyphantornis castanops*, Shelley.
Hyphantornis dimidiatus, Ant. Salvad.
Hyphantornis jacksoni, Shelley.

It is extremely difficult to distinguish between these species in the field. One of course refers to females. When nesting there seems to be little segregation of the species, for one will frequently find all three nesting in the same colony. As a rule, the colonies are in Ambatch trees or in the papyrus bordering on the lake. The eggs of *H. castanops* are commonly of a pale greenish-blue with small purple or brown spots but those of the other two species may show almost any variation from uniformly coloured eggs to some heavily spotted.

On the whole, those of *H. jacksoni* are less uniform and more spotted than *H. dimidiatus*. Some examples of clutches taken from a colony of *H. dimidiatus* may be of interest:

One uniform dark olive green, two paler green with dark green spots, three pale green with few large purple spots, five pale green with close spotting of purple and brown, six plain white, seven dark chocolate, eight uniform light red-brown.