

THE CENTRAL AFRICAN STONE-CURLEW

(Edicnemus vermiculatus)

BY R. VAN SOMEREN.

Sunday again in the Gwamba whose solitudes are indeed far removed from the sound of church bells ; but a brilliant morning tempts one out in a canoe on to the placid lake to try to probe further into Nature's mysteries, which lead one to Nature's God.

Slowly the canoe glides through the water, the beauty of the morning filling one with a deep sense of enjoyment of the mere fact of living and being able to appreciate the peaceful beauties of the scene.

The whole shore seems alive with birds ; nimble sandpipers continuously bobbing their heads ; flocks of dainty ring plovers chasing each other across the sands, now picking up a tasty morsel, now dodging the wavelets which roll murmuringly up the beach ; while the weaver birds as usual seem to be the embodiment of restless energy, as they fly back and forwards at their work of nest building—almost an unending task, as at times they appear most fastidious as to the form of their nests and continually keep adding or altering, the while some more mischievous or lazier bird slyly pulls pieces from his neighbour's structure amid loud protests, and a ceaseless merry chatter is kept up, all absorbed in their various tasks of hanging the dainty nests to the slender twigs of the ambatch overhanging the water often merely a few inches above the surface.

Suddenly by a small stream the stealthy movements of a pair of stone-curlews arrest one's attention, so one steps ashore and casts around for the nest, the while the birds move uneasily up and down the opposite bank of the stream. A low call from a native announces a find, and one is delighted to see the nest, a mere depression in the sand and lined with driftwood and containing two handsomely marked stone-coloured eggs splashed with rich brown, the nest being constructed by some reeds close to the stream and quite inconspicuous, so closely does it match the surroundings in colour.



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A plan of action is quickly formed, a screen of reeds built a few feet from the nest conceals the camera placed low down behind them and, as it is the writer's custom wherever possible to hide with the camera so as to facilitate plate-changing and also the better to study the sitter close at hand, a shallow trench is scooped in the sand in which the observer lies down, his head concealed by the camera and its cloth, while the canoe-men quickly cover his legs and body with sand and then go off in the canoe further along, so as to reassure the bird.

A more comfortable hiding place it would be hard to find, as the soft sand accommodates itself to all one's bony points and soon a plaintive whistle announces the bird's return. Cautiously peering under the camera one is delighted to find the female, after a quiet inspection of the structure, seem convinced that there was nothing to fear and so boldly walk up to her eggs at which she seems to gaze pensively for a few seconds. Finding all in order she sat down till the click of the shutter sent her across the stream once more, where her mate was waiting, thus giving the photographer time to change the plate and reset the shutter. So bold is the bird that several plates are exposed in quick succession, each showing the bird in a different attitude but, since our editor strictly limits the number of illustrations, I can show only one which is most characteristic of this bird. Latterly the bird did not move off even for the click of the shutter, but having taken enough photos the photographer settled down to watch the bird on the nest, as it settled into its usual position facing the camera. How cautiously at first she had approached, and while her more timid mate kept running up and down the bank of the stream uttering uneasy cries as if cautioning his mate against her too great temerity. However, quite unheeding she walks up to the nest and, after a glance at the camera as if to reassure herself, she gazes at the eggs for a few moments, then with a quick motion she sidles breast first on to the eggs and shuffles around till a comfortable position is found.

One has a splendid opportunity of watching the bird and noting its curiously shaped head with its eyes apparently bulging out of its head. How large too they seem with their great circles of pale yellow stripes staring solemnly at one,

and one is struck with the beautiful way in which the buff colour of the bird matches its surroundings although the bird sits straight up and does not appear to let its head sink down on to its body as if wearied. Any stray passing insects are quickly snapped up as she sits on as if pleased at posing before the camera.

So absorbed is one in the entrancing study that one forgets the surroundings till a curious scraping noise and a feeling of weight startles one, and, cautiously looking round, one is horrified to see the ugly snout of a loathsome crocodile scarcely five feet away. The creature had evidently just left the lake, and not noticing the presence of a human being was intent on crossing the sandy beach and entering the stream near which doubtless it had its nest. To do this it had to cross over the part under which the writer's feet were buried, hence the feeling of weight. One's feelings can scarcely be imagined and one's blood seems to run cold as the reptile serenely continued its way to the stream. One's first thought was for the revolver, always carried handily in this crocodile-infested region, more for the sake of scaring the beasts than doing any damage. A rapid shot at the reptile almost within reach of the outstretched arm, a hurried struggle across the sand and the reptile plunged into the stream while the photographer leapt hurriedly up, thankful for nothing worse than a thorough fright. No more thoughts of photos, so one removed one egg as a specimen (it has always been my practice not to take a whole clutch if the bird has been good enough to allow one to get photos, and then only if it is a new specimen, as mere 'collecting' cannot be too strongly deprecated).

On subsequent occasions one often passed the spot and could see the bird still faithfully performing its task, till one day we were fortunate enough to find the young one recently hatched out, and looking not unlike a young curlew, as at home, in its markings, but it was too nimble to allow one to take its picture.

The natives have apparently no name for this bird though it is fairly common in this part. I questioned, in vain, numbers of the folk who used to fish this part regularly. It was a lake-shore bird, they said, and that apparently was the extent of their knowledge.



CURLEW ON NEST.



EGGS IN NEST.

One day after questioning a group of fishers, I said: 'Supposing now you wished to tell your wives about this bird which you see every day, how would you describe it?' Said they: 'Why should we tell our wives? It is not eatable, and haven't they eyes to see for themselves?' After this I concluded that further inquiry was useless.

In a following article I trust to be able to give some idea as to methods and apparatus for natural-history photography in the hope that some may be induced to take up this fascinating method of nature study, and produce valuable records of the fauna and even flora of the land we live in.

MIMICRY IN EAST AFRICAN BUTTERFLIES

WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO DANAINÉ MODELS.

BY THE REV. K. ST. AUBYN ROGERS

The name Mimicry is used in a special sense in Entomology. It has been generally accepted as the term for certain interesting resemblances between different insects which cannot be accounted for on the grounds of affinity. Very shortly after the introduction of the natural system of classification by Linnaeus, it was found that very striking resemblances existed between butterflies especially belonging to genera by no means closely allied, and that in many cases these resemblances were confined to the female sex. These resemblances exist in most, if not all, classes of insects, and for many years received no adequate explanation.

In 1859 Darwin's 'Origin of Species' appeared, and one of the first results of the stimulus thus exerted upon all students of Natural History was a Paper by Bates in which these puzzling resemblances received a most ingenious explanation.

Bates collected for many years on the Amazon where the cases of Mimicry are the most numerous and the most remarkable in the world. On his return home he began to study his collection in the light of the new theory of descent by modification under the influence of Natural Selection discovered by Darwin and Wallace.