

No. XIV.—OCCURRENCE OF THE DESERT LARK (*ALAEMON DESERTORUM*) IN THE PUNJAB.

I am not aware that the occurrence and breeding of the Desert Lark has been reported from the Punjab. Neither in the Fauna of India, Birds, nor in Hume and Oates' "Nests and Eggs of Indian Birds" is the Punjab mentioned. The following may therefore be of interest.

On the 18th current, accompanied by my wife, I was looking in the desert country west of this place for possible nests of the Spotted Sandgrouse, when my wife called my attention to a curious nest that she had just found. It was like nothing that I had ever seen before, and there was no bird on, or near, it. It was late in the afternoon and we waited as long as we could afford to do, but no bird came, though there was one egg in the nest. We left and returned two days later.

On this occasion I found a bird sitting. Our approach was not very quietly made and the bird got up. I felt sure that it was the Desert Lark, and so it proved, after full investigation, to be. There were now three eggs in the nest, which was placed in the middle of a vast expanse of perfectly bare, hard, dry *pat* under a small, bare, naked branch which had got stuck in the ground on some occasion when there was rain. There was the "layer of small branches," or twigs, mentioned by Lt. Francis in "Nests and Eggs", about a foot in diameter; it did not however raise the nest above the ground so much as make a fringe all round the nest. There was also the deep cup, lined in this case with wool and a little fine grass. The nest was indeed "very conspicuous," though the odds against any human being finding it in this great desert space were long. I let the sitting bird run away in order to use to the full the time at my disposal for observation. Her Plover-like appearance (I take it this was the female, though, unfortunately, the underparts were, later, too damaged for certain identification of sex of the dead bird) and china-white, long, legs struck me at once. Once off the nest, the bird was wary, and her behaviour on this occasion was unlike that of Lt. Francis' bird, so after following for a bit, I decided to wait at a distance till she should return. I then became aware of a loud melodious call, something like "tee, tee, tee" followed by a trill reminiscent to one long absent from England of the trill of the Nightingale. I looked round and saw another and similar bird, evidently the mate of the one I had disturbed. At times he ran, and once I saw him climb into the air for about 30 feet and almost *tumble* down again, the white, grey and brown of the upper wing and the silvery wing-lining being very conspicuous in these aerial movements. The call was repeated several times, but out of one corner of my eye I was looking at the nest, and the original bird was now returning. I followed her and this time, my approach being more cautious, she let me get within six or eight yards of the nest, seeming to hope that she would escape notice. Rather reluctantly she left, and I had no difficulty in shooting her.

On examination, the specimen I secured measures 8.5" with a wing of a little less than 4.5." I note that the "Fauna" says the females are much smaller than the males, and that the maximum length given is 11". My specimen seems paler than normal, the outer tail-feathers and the primaries being very much more brown than black.

The eggs in this clutch vary rather in markings, one being more profusely speckled, and with the speckles lighter in colour, than the other two. The colour is as described in "Nests and Eggs."

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DERA NAWAB, BHAWALPUR STATE, PUNJAB,
20th April 1922.



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