

SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE INCUBATION HABITS OF THE
HERMIT THRUSH (*Hylocichla guttata faxoni*)

by

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INTRODUCTION

The study covered a period of nine days from July 24 to August during which time the incubating pair of Hermit Thrushes (*Hylochichla guttata faxoni*) were observed for sixteen hours. The nest was located about one mile south of Douglass Lake, Cheboygan County, Michigan, and was observed from a ground blind placed eight feet from the nest.

I am indebted to Dr. O. S. Pettingill, Dr. Theodore Nelson, and Mr. Ernest Edwards for assistance in making this study.

ENVIRONMENT

The area in which the nest was located was comparatively dry and had at one time been burned over. The association in evidence was mainly Aspen (*Populus*) and Pine (*Pinus*). Ground cover was fern and blueberry (*vaccinium*).

Within the vicinity of the nest were seen ground squirrels, deer, Ovenbird, Chipping Sparrow, Nighthawk, Hairy Woodpecker, Robin, and Red-eyed Vireo. None of these vertebrates appeared to have any direct relationships with the Hermit Thrush.

NEST

The nest was located on the ground beneath a tent-like tangle of vaccinium and surrounded by vaccinium and a few ferns. Four young Aspens and a large Pine were in the immediate vicinity and were used constantly by the bird in approaching the nest. Inside diameter of the nest was three and one half inches, outside diameter, five and one half inches, and depth two inches. The materials were mainly pine needles, plant stems, and the bark of hardwoods, the pine needles being used almost completely for lining.

EGGS

Three unspeckled eggs of a deep, blue-green color, about one inch long, were found within the nest.

INCUBATION

Incubation had already commenced when the nest was found on July 23, 1947, by Dr. O. S. Pettingill.

(1) Activities of the male:

The male was usually heard singing to the north of the nest in the early morning and often through the later morning hours until noon, but never in the vicinity of the nest. The song was heard coming from the same general

direction at all times, but seemed to vary from time to time as to exact locality. Unless the wind caused the wide variation often heard, I may assume that the territory of the Hermit Thrush is of a considerable size.

The typically clear bell-like song of the male Hermit was heard very often while the female was on the nest, but was most repetitive and insistent when the female had just left the nest or when the female had just returned to the nest. At times the male visited the nest with the female and the pair would hop about from branch to branch chucking softly all the while. The male was never observed near the nest for more than fifteen minutes at one time,

and at no time was he observed incubating or feeding the female on the nest. Altogether the bird seemed little interested in the nest of his partner; on the other hand, the function of the loud singing in the distance seemed to be an attempt to keep predators from finding the incubating female.

(2) Activities of incubating bird:

As the male is always heard singing at some time during incubation attentiveness, it is assumed that the female alone is responsible for incubation. Her approach to the nest is always a cautious one, fifteen minutes or more usually elapsing before she finally settles on the nest. During this time she hops nervously from one perch to

another, peering about anxiously at each stop, and elevating the tail slowly to about a sixty degree angle. When finally settling on the nest, the bird drops to the ground, looks about anxiously once more, sometimes waiting motionless for as long as two minutes, then hops quickly to the nest and settles over it. Many times the birds is so apprehensive over some danger (perhaps myself) that she leaves again within one to five minutes. While brooding the bird habitually sat with her right side to the blind and the primaries crossed over the tail which came up and out to one side. After settling on the nest the bird is very quiet and seems to lose all signs of fear, often staying in the same position for thirty minutes or more.

Upon leaving the nest the bird normally hops on the ground for about two feet and then flies away. When flushed, however, she flies off immediately (but does not flush easily). Toward the beginning of the study she did not flush until the intruder had come to within ten feet and at one time did not flush at all while I entered the blind. Toward the end of incubation she seemed to become more and more wary of intrusion and flushed when fifty feet or more away.

(3) Incubation rhythms:

Because of difficulty in observing the nest for an extended period and the great wariness of this bird, an

accurate account of the incubation rhythm cannot be given. Only twice was the bird observed incubation when she was not disturbed in some way either by some unknown predator or by my presence in the blind. For the times noted, attentiveness was sixty minutes and fifty minutes; inattentiveness sixty minutes and sixty-five minutes respectively. The second record was taken on a day decidedly warmer than the first. Because there are only two records, these may well be affected by some external factors and therefore inaccurate.

DISCUSSION

The limited number of hours spent at the nest and the restlessness of the bird during most of this time prevented me from reaching any conclusions regarding incubating rhythm. I believe that the bird was afraid to sit on the nest while I was present in the blind, since several times I left the blind when the bird refused to sit on the nest for a prolonged period, and returned to find her incubating and not ready to flush. It seems to me that she does not want to give away the secret as to the whereabouts of the nest when she knows that someone is watching, but relies upon hiding and protective coloration to prevent it from

being seen. It probably knows that the chances of discovery are less if it remains frozen than if it flushes, making the position of the nesting site obvious.

SUMMARY

- (1) Singing territory of male maintained outside of nesting area.
- (2) Male does not incubate.
- (3) Female is cautious when settling on and leaving nest.