

vesper sparrow

See Robt. A. Black on Junco

1928

A vesper Sparrow's Tragedy.

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During the construction of the bird house I was  
in the habit of putting out a few seeds for the  
birds. One day I noticed a vesper sparrow sitting  
on the edge of the house. I thought it would be the  
same as the one I had seen before. I was  
amused to find that it was a different bird.  
I did not associate my presence with the bird and  
it did not seem to be disturbed in the least.

1931

## A vesper sparrow's Tragedy.

While strolling thru the woods a short distance above the Douglass Lake Biological Station I saw for the first time the vesper sparrow's nest. It had been discovered earlier in the day by a sharp-eyed, insect-hunting entomologist. The nest was made in a cup shape depression in the sandy soil sparsely surrounded by tall grass and carefully hidden under a low bush honeysuckle shrub. The surrounding clearing was rather densely covered with bush honeysuckle, sumac and other low shrubs. The nest was constructed of twigs, coarse and fine grasses and smoothly but scantily lined with fine grasses. It was with accurate precision that the parent had made the nest large enough to comfortably hold the three precious eggs - ovate, dull-buffy ones with large dark marks and scrubs more or less confined to the larger end.

With the view of observing the incubation of the eggs, I decided to make a blind to conceal myself from the keen eyes of the rather timid and shy builders of the nest. That the mother bird might not be unduly alarmed by the sudden erection of the new structure, I returned late in the evening with material for the blind and left it in a conspicuous place near the nest. The following evening I constructed a tent-like blind four feet north of the nest, in such a position that it would be possible to look directly into the nest and also have the parent bird in full view during the time she would be sitting on the eggs. As soon as the structure was completed I left the scene of my activities in order that the bird would not associate my presence with the blind and possibly desert her nest. Unfortunately during the night there was a wind-storm of such proportions that the blind was blown to the ground, which necessitated rebuilding. As a result it was not until the evening of July 17 that I had the opportunity of concealing myself in the blind and awaiting the return of the bird to her nest. Hitherto each time I had approached, the parent bird had flown from the nest dropping down into the shrubbery a short

distance to the west of the nest. Almost immediately after my disappearance into the shelter the bird returned with much twittering. Although she had always departed toward the west she returned from the east and entered her nest from that side, an entrance which I found, as time went on, to be her preference. Only once did she enter from the west during incubation of her eggs. When she entered she took her favorite position with her head turned slightly north-west. For sometime she seemed unaware of my presence and dozed sleepily after arranging the eggs. Several times she aroused, turned to the east but each time soon reverted to her favorite position. As voices of persons walking nearby became audible, the parent bird rose up in the nest, looked nervously to the right of the blind and glided off the nest toward the west. Almost immediately she returned, chirping as she cautiously hopped along stopping long enough to pick an occasional morsel from the ground.

During the two hours I continued to sit nearby she appeared suspicious but finally settled down and seemed content. As darkness fell I left the drowsy little occupant to herself and her eggs.

As I visited the nest each day it was interesting to see the trim little sparrow hopping toward her nest calling chip, chip, chip as she foraged along on <sup>practically</sup> the bare ground which surrounded the nest in a semi-circle for several feet toward the west, south and east. She was a grayish-brown bird about six inches long and finely streaked with dusky, showing a bay patch on her shoulders. As she hopped along her under-parts showed whitish with narrow streaks of brownish-black on the breast and sides. The dark, moderately long tail often showed white outer tail feathers as she hurriedly flew from the nest when I came up too suddenly or when <sup>for</sup> some other reason she was obliged to leave suddenly.

During the eleven days I was able to observe the behavior of the bird during incubation of the eggs her actions were much the same. As time went on she seemed to become accustomed to my many daily visits and remained on the nest until I lifted the flap of the blind to enter or leave. Although I might stir in

the blind and even on several occasions coughed, it seemed to make no difference in the behavior of the bird. Instead of flying from the nest as she had done during my first visits she would run along on the ground into the shrubbery several feet away and after a varying number of minutes come chipping and picking her way over the bare ground to the honeysuckle bush.

Several days were quite warm and the afternoon sun could beam down on the bird as she sat unshaded and panting.

Only the female seemed to show any interest in the three dainty eggs in the nest and it was always she who would be found on the nest during the incubation period. Although the sexes of the vesper sparrow are similar in appearance I concluded that it was always the same bird on the nest because of her peculiar little mannerisms on leaving and returning. Only twice during the twelve days of observation did the male bird display any evidence whatever that he had any concern in the affairs. Once he sat nearby and sang his sweet plaintive song.

During the late afternoon of July 24 I was rewarded for my vigilance by the arrival of the first nestling. From 4:15 to 5:15 the parent behaved very much as usual but seemed much concerned about the eggs and spent considerable time poking them around under her. At 5:22 she arose in the nest and began picking at the shell, part of which she ate, the other half she snatched up hurriedly and carried mouse-like into some bushes about twenty-five feet away. Immediately she returned to her newly hatched baby and continued her picking. Several times she rather roughly pulled the little bird up in the nest sufficiently high for me to get a good view. Alternately for the next twenty minutes the mother would pick and shake the newly emerged bird and then snuggle down on the nest. At 5:45 the nervous little mother slipped from her nest and flew noisily into the tree over my head and set up a nervous chipping which continued for several minutes.

I left the blind for half an hour at supper time to return at 6:30. The parent bird ran as I returned to the blind but in three minutes came back to her nest in the usual manner. She stopped momentarily to view the new object then hopped into the nest after settling it in order.

It was a restless little mother that occupied the nest for the following two hours. Once during that interval a Blue jay flirted noisily by and finally alighted on the tree limb above my blind, much to the concern of the vesper sparrow, who dropped low over her treasures. Time and again the new mother would look under herself and nestle down, other times she would stand up in the nest and vigorously shake her little bird, a shaking which seemed far too energetic for the blind, naked little one with only a bit of grayish down in patches on the body. Several times the mother bird flew into the tree overhead as if to look down and view her young one from a more lofty perch. The time in the tree was spent in loud chirping.

When the newly hatched birdling was two hours old I could see it tossing in the nest and holding its little mouth agape. The mother bird returned to her nest and looked questioningly at the occupant and again departed, this time to pick along on the ground. After foraging about for several minutes she returned to find the little open mouth still reaching skyward. After standing at the entrance she seemed to regurgitate a morsel of food which she placed into the little mouth, the first meal, at the age of two hours and twenty-five minutes. At intervals of about a minute the little mother would rise up and look down at her new baby. As darkness made further observation for the evening impossible I departed.

I immediately after breakfast the following morning I returned to my blind to see what developments had been wrought during the night. A second arrival occupied the nest. The dampness of the down led me to believe that it had only a short time before emerged from the shell. There were no traces of the shell in the nest. The mother sparrow was unusually shy and nervous at every sound whether in the blind or outside. Several times she went to the nest, looked into the upturned mouths and then snuggled down on her little nestlings. Several times she flew, chirping, into the tree limb overhead, twice she was frightened from the nest by persons passing nearby.

after two hours of watching, I observed the parent bird come "chipping" along the ground at the same time carrying what seemed to be a green fly-like insect. She hopped onto the side of the nest, looked questioningly at each upturned mouth, then tried the insect in the mouth of the older bird finding it too large, took it out nibbled it a bit and tried in the younger bird's mouth, only with results similar to the first. After further nibbling the mother thrust it down the throat of the elder. A few minutes later the bird I conclude was the male flitted noisily between the blind and the nest and stood on a fallen tree a few feet distant where he could look into the nest. From there he mounted into the tree overhanging the nest. Several times the mother bird returned with small insects which each time she gave to the older bird, only looking down the throat of the younger but never attempting a second feeding. After watching the busy, nervous little mother for three hours, I left to return again at 4:15 in the afternoon.

A tragedy had occurred. During my absence a third bird had arrived but it as well as the other two lay lifeless in the nest. Closer observation revealed that they were covered with tiny red ants. The frantic little mother who had cautiously stolen from the nest at my arrival returned to view the little ones. She seemed unable to comprehend what was wrong. Momentarily she would sit and snuggle her nestlings then rise up and pick ants, then pull at the lifeless little birds as if to arouse them. Occasionally she would stand on the edge of the nest, looking nervously bewildered with mouth agape. Several times she hurried off a few feet from the nest only to hurry back and continue her vigorous picking of ants. The whole attitude was one of questioning despair.

After fifty-five minutes of such activity she hurried from the nest but returned almost immediately, hurriedly snatched up one of the little lifeless forms and flew rapidly into the shrubbery toward the south. Immediately she returned to her battle with the ants, but in despair after thirty-five minutes more of rushing to and fro, flew into the tree

toward the left of the blind, flew down again to take another look at the two lifeless young, then off to the south, not to return during the remainder of my stay in the blind.

When I left for the night, I noted the position of the little birds in the nest. The following morning upon again viewing the nest, I found that a second little one had been carried away. Several days later the miniature skeleton of the last little occupant still remained in the nest, a few ants still crawling about. Neither of the parent birds was seen after the mother deserted the nest.

The ground which surrounds the nest is rather thickly spotted with ant hills, four within twenty-one inches of the nest.

It is not unusual for tragic events to occur in bird life but a horde of voracious ants is a formidable enemy against which it is impossible to cope.