

A Vesper Sparrow's Nest

Several different evenings when I was picking blueberries on the hill behind the biological station at Douglas Lake I flushed a Vesper Sparrow from the ground. The bird always flew from about the same locality but never exactly the same place, and although I searched each time I was unable to find a nest. On July 19, 1931 I was walking along more rapidly than usual and when the bird flew up again I was able to see the exact position from which it flew. By a little searching I found the nest about three feet from this spot.

The nest was made of fine grasses and sunk flush with the ground against a very small sumac (*Rhus borealis*). It was a round nest, slightly wider than deep, and very scantily lined with finer grasses. There was so little material composing the bottom of the structure that the sand could be seen through from above. In the nest were four eggs marked with spots and scratches of reddish-brown, purplish-brown, and a little black on a background of grayish-white. They were more heavily marked about the larger end.

The sparrows seemed little alarmed by the daily visits I made to the nest. The bird which was incubating the eggs did not leave until I was within a few feet of it, and then it ran off a few feet before flying. As long as I remained near the nest it chipped a scolding note from the nearby bushes. On July 22 I found that two of the eggs had hatched and one had disappeared leaving no trace. The nest, the young birds, and the unhatched egg did not appear to have been disturbed in any way. The next morning I went out early in hopes of seeing the other egg hatch, but as it had hatched during the night I was not able to find out how the adults disposed of the shell. According to Forbush they are eaten. Later in the morning I put up a blind which excited the adults greatly. They chipped continuously and excitedly, flying from bush to bush but always just out of

sight. When I left they followed me part of the way down the path toward camp still chipping. However, by afternoon they paid little more attention to the blind and fed the young twice during an hour while I watched from the blind.

On July 25 during twenty minutes in the afternoon one of the adults fed the young five times. It collected insects from around the blind and one time alighted on one of the tent ropes. It made no sound on returning to the nest, but the young birds responded by opening their mouths when it approached. Sometimes they did not respond until it had touched the side of the nest, but more often they began to stretch up and open their mouths when the adult was running along the ground toward them. It usually approached from the side farthest from the blind by running along the ground and slipping under the lower leaves of the sumac. After feeding it usually sat facing the blind. When it left the nest it came toward the blind. The two adults were not present at the same time, but when some people walked along laughing and talking, a bird gave several warning chips from the bushes and the one on the nest became restless.

On July 26 both of the parents were present and fed the young. They both came toward the nest along the usual path, and as they both had the same markings and colorings, I was not able to tell one sex from the other. They differed little in their approach to the nest, the feeding of the young, or in leaving the nest. However, one did all of the hovering of the young during the time that I watched and I shall assume this one to be the female. After feeding the young the adults examined the nest very carefully and either ate or carried off the excretia. The female more often ate it as she could then remain on the nest. It was a very hot morning and she stood over the nest panting with her mouth open. Every once in a while she looked into the nest and seemed to be rearranging the birds or pulling at the grass of the nest. When the male arrived with food the female left

immediately. Before she returned the male fed the young by trying first one after the other until he discovered the hungriest (probably by throat reflex), then left carrying the excretia if there was any. The female usually returned very soon carrying a grasshopper or some other insect. She also tried the young one after another before she fed one, and after feeding and examining the nest she again assumed her position over it.

Her usual position in relation to the blind was thus:-

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The only sound that either of the adults made was a chipping which seemed to be a means of communication between them and not a stimulus for the young. The male did not sing or, if he did, it was from a distance too great for me to hear him from the nest.

blind

In the evening on the same day I banded and measured one of the young birds and secured the following information:-

Downy young with feather tracts showing.

Length	55mm
Bill length	6mm
Bill--eye	10.5
Bill--nostril	4
Gape	12
Eye	3
Extent	76
Wing right	23
Primary	8
Wing--body	35
Leg--body	45
Tarsus	18
Tarsus--toe	34
Foot	16

The next day when I went out to continue my observation all of the birds had disappeared. Again the nest showed no signs of having been disturbed so it is likely that the same thing which took the egg came back for the young birds. It may have been a snake, as a snake is one of the few things which could take them and leave no signs. All nests which are under observation are more liable to attack from birds enemies for many have discovered that by following man they are led to food. For this reason I was careful to stand as far from the nest as possible when I took out the bird, but in spite of this, I may have led some enemy to the nest.