

NESTING HABITS OF THE HERMIT THRUSH

E. W. Hight 1934

I. Site of the Nest

Three nests of the Hermit Thrush (*Hylóichla guttata faxoni*) have come under my observation this season in the matter of location and site of nest. All of them were situated on the ground. The first was located in North Fishtail on the border of aspen growth surrounded by bracken fern and wintergreen, about a foot from the track of an old road. This area was dry and open with no shade directly over the nest. The second was east of the Gorge, about a quarter of a mile south of the Pellston road. Here too the area was dry, sparsely covered with aspen and a few scattered pines. Under a sweet fern bush with club mosses and wintergreen overhanging the edge, the nest had been built. The third nest, about a foot from the track on the well traveled Reese's Bog trail, fulfilled the specifications of Roberts and Forbush in being on the edge of a densely wooded area, built on a clump of damp sphagnum. It was under a small cedar, completely hidden until a branch was moved. The bird and mammalian population of each region was varied. About North Fishtail, vireos, oven birds, robins, king birds, flickers, brown thrashers were seen or heard. Along the bog trail the winter wren, cedar waxwings, purple finches, chickadees, robins red squirrels, and chipmunks were seen. But the Gorge area was one of the most deserted areas I've visited. I passed a robin's stand on the way down the path, but he could not be heard from the hermit's nest. One day I heard an oven bird. At dusk many night hawks zoomed. But that was all. A trap line for shrews in the vicinity did yield a few shrews and about two field mice a week. This was a real hermitage.

II. Construction and Materials of Nest

All three of these nests were built in much the same fashion. In each case a depression had been made in the decaying wood and leaves of the humus, directly upon the roots of a growing plant, and several layers of dry bark strips (not birch) and dried weeds and large grasses formed the base and outer rim. Then came layers of fine grasses and a layer of dry brown pine needles were curved into alignment to form the inner lining of the nest. The result in each case was a deep well rimmed cup having these dimensions:

Outside diameter	$4\frac{1}{2}$ "	Inside diameter	3"
" depth	4"	" depth	$2\frac{1}{2}$ "

The first nest had been abandoned by the time I learned of it about a week after its discovery on July 12, when it had contained four greenish blue eggs.

The second nest was shown to me on July 21, three days after the clutch of four greenish blue eggs was completed. As it was raining heavily, and as we had flushed the bird in locating the nest, we withdrew hastily so that the bird could return to cover the eggs before they might become chilled.

The next day a ground blind was erected about eight feet from the nest. It was necessary to remove a little of the bracken so that a clear view could be had of the nest but care was used not to expose it unduly. The Hermit remained in the lower branches of the nearby aspen during the erection. After that, regular observations of the nest were begun. It was never possible to get into the blind without sending her off with a whirr of wings.

The first day she waited an hour and fifty minutes before returning but thereafter the time became shortened each day until she would return within twenty minutes of being disturbed, during the incubation period.

Her method of approach to the nest was always carried out in the same way. She would flutter from tree to tree in the lower branches of the sparsely foliated aspens, eying the blind and uttering a soft chuck chuck, and cocking her head to listen between notes. Her tail would jerk up and slowly lower to position. Presently she would hop down upon the ground and with a series of stiff-legged running movements which rustled the dried leaves, much like those of the robin, she would finally reach the rim of the nest and settle herself upon the eggs, always facing the blind. When the eggs were rolled and cuddled to her satisfaction, by making an eighth turn to the left or right, she would freeze in position and become invisible. I have stared at her for many minutes, and so well matched were the shadows and her light breast, the dried leaves and the dark spots upon her breast, and the dried grasses of the nest and her olive brown shoulders and wings, that I was almost certain that she had vanished until I caught the high light of her large dark eye. She was always listening--tensely.

III. Hatching

Three eggs were hatched on Sunday afternoon, August 5 or Monday August 6, after 12 days of incubation. This is the normal term. An all day trip on Monday prevented any observation until 7 P.M.

Monday night. The fourth egg was in the nest that night but had disappeared by the next morning when I returned for weights and measurements.

The nest at Reese's was found several days later and shown to me after the young had hatched.

IV. Appearance and Development of the Young

The youngsters had the usual ungainly appearance of the young altricial with large head with gaping orange lined mouth, bulbous yoke sac with the prominent umbilical scar, and thin helpless wings and legs. The dark bluish natal down was 8-14 mm. long on the feather tracts of head and back. The bird to be weighed and measured was designated by painting the toenails and the tip of the beak with red fingernail polish.

In measuring the birds I always made it a practice to take all the dimensions first that could be determined with a minimum of stretching and handling, i.e. to leave the length and extent until the last. During that time the pan of the balance scale was being warmed inside my jacket so that the little bird was usually much less disturbed in weighing than others had been that were placed upon a cold pan. This continued to be the case even when the youngster was a week or more old and strong enough to be fairly active.

The details of growth of two birds, one from the Gorge nest, the other from Reese's Bog are well indicated on the chart.

V. Care of the Young

After the eggs were hatched, the Hermit at the Gorge became bolder in making herself seen, and heard but more wary in approaching the nest. It was her custom to disappear silently at my approach, for about half an hour. She returned to a low branch of an aspen after circling the blind, a branch from which she could watch me through a small crack in the flap. Never after that would she return to the nest when I was there alone. But apparently she could not count up to three, for one day I took two people with me to the blind. We all entered and shortly the two departed. In ten minutes she was back, with a bright green larva, and approaching the nest from the side near the blind, she alighted upon the rim. She fed the bird nearest her. Then picking up a fecal sac in her beak, she held it there until she had fluttered to an aspen branch. There she swallowed it. Four times she returned silently to feed the young at 5-10 minute intervals while I waited with bated breath. At last, in looking at the crack in the blind--no more than an inch--she sensed my presence and eying me with alarm and uttering her warning note, she continued to denounce me for 15 minutes. Thus I gave up that observation and left the blind. This care continued and the young grew and developed rapidly for nine days. On the tenth day I found the nest empty but the mother was calling near the nest. I thought the young had been destroyed but I was assured that if this had been the case, there would have been only silence about the nest. The young birds, barely able to stand alone the previous day had been coaxed from the nest by the worried parent, and though I searched the vicinity, I was unable to find any trace of them.

Reference has been repeatedly made to the mother bird. If the

male hermit ever assisted in the care, I was not able to distinguish him. Never was he heard to sing near the nest, but only at a great distance in the later period of the nesting period, in the early morning--seldom after 6 A.M. and then only for short periods of interrupted phrases.

Thus the Gorge nest fledged three young two days before the time set by Forbush for their departure.

The nest at Reese's hatched all three of its eggs on August 7th. These gained and grew there at the edge of the trail, in a dry warm nest on top of the damp sphagnum. On August 10 when I visited the nest at 5:30 A.M. the chickadees, robins and red squirrels were making a great deal of noise but the nest was warm and the birds safe. At 7:30 P.M. when I returned for weights and measurements, the nest was cold and two birds had been removed from the nest. The third was dead and cold, with its shoulder chewed as if by ants. The structure of the nest was not disturbed.

Thus of eleven eggs known of, three grew up to leave the nest, though being only 10 days old they may not have survived long.



Hermit Thrush Nest and Young. 8 Days Old.
Photo by Frank Hinds

Bird	Hermit Thrush. Above Gorge.								Hermit Thrush Rees's Bog Trail.								
	7-30	7-31	8-1	8-2	8-3	8-4	8-5	8-6	8-7	8-3	8-4	8-5	8-6	8-7	8-8	8-9	8-10
Weather																	
Weight	6.89	8.87	12.74	12.73	17.56	27.45	24.64	27.72									
Length		50.	56.	64.	73.	79.	85.	92.									
Tail		-	-	1.	1.5	4.	5.75	7.									
Bill		7.6	8	8.5	9.	10.5	10.5	11.									
Bill-eye		13.	13.4	14.	14.5	15.	15.	15.5									
Bill-gape	9.7.	10.7	12.1	14.5	16.5	18.	18.5	19.									
Bill-nostril		3.7	4.	4.5	5.	6.	6.5	7.									
Eyediam		-	3.4	4.	4.25	5.	5	5.									
Extent		52.	71.	93.	115.	120	140.	164.									
Wing ht.		16.5	18	20.	20	20	22	24									
Primary	Sheathed. 0 unshathed.	0	3.75 0	9.5 0	20. 0	24.5 2.	24. 7.										
Tarsus-toe		30.	34.	37.	41.	42.5	47.	48.									

hatched but not grown to me until 8-5

nest cold

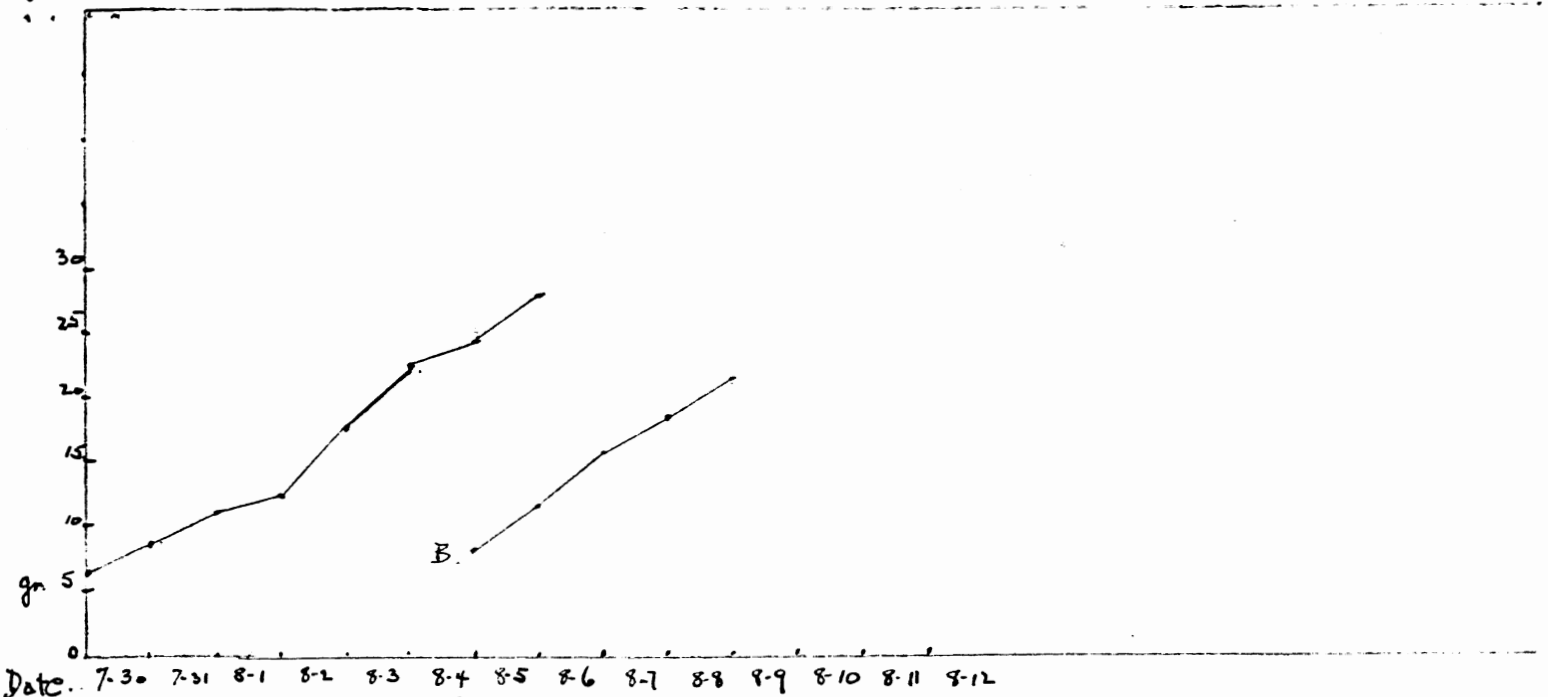
Appearance of feathers.

- 7-31 natal down - back 14 mm. head 8 mm. blue black.
- 8-1 feather track show through the skin.
- 8-3. Follicles have pierced skin.
- 8-4. Erupted follicles increased in length.
- 8-5. Feathers beginning to unshathe. color showing; brownish on back. whitish on sides.

Appearance of feathers.

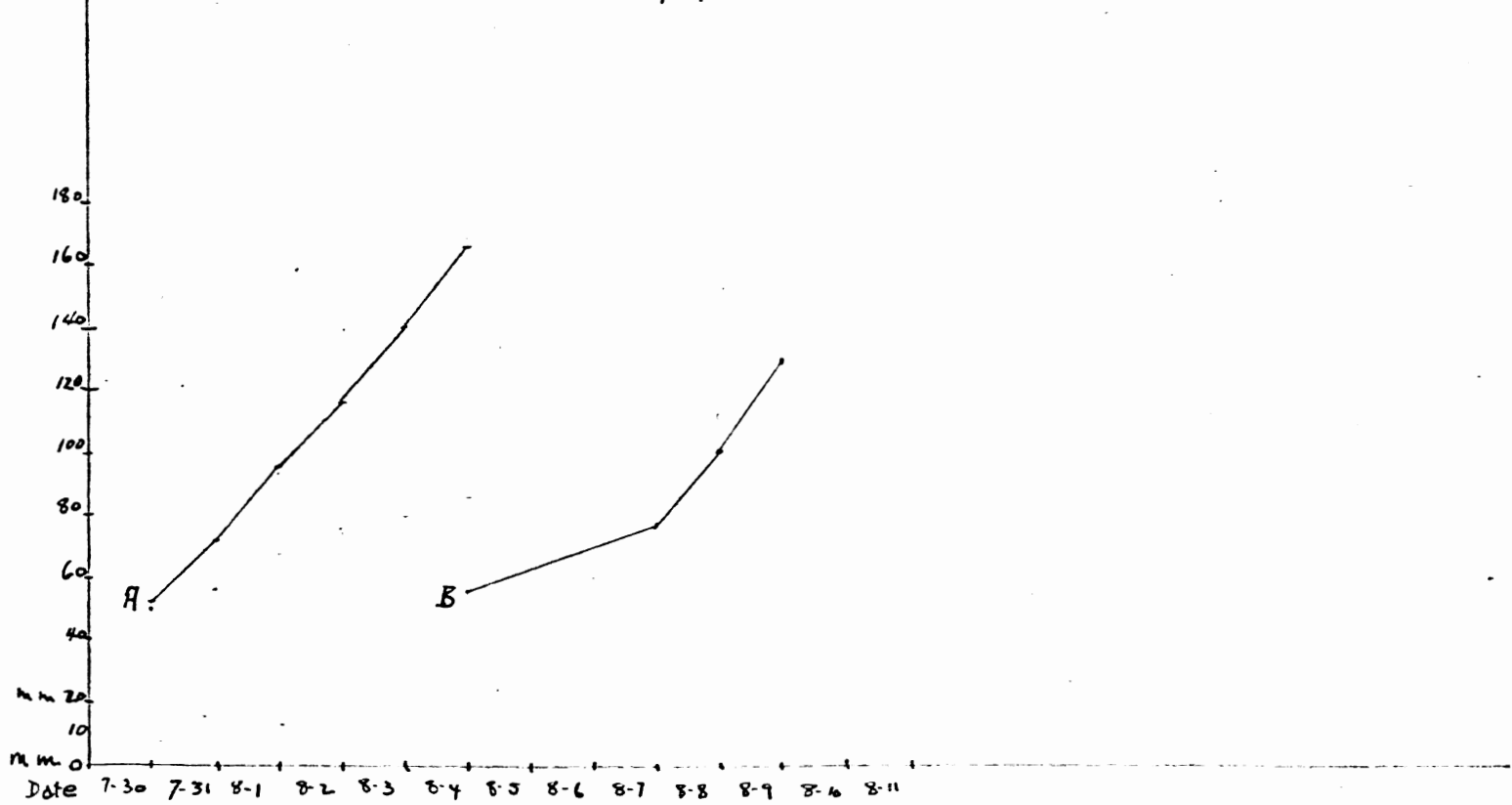
- 8-5. natal down blue black, 8-10mm long. feather tracks show blue through skin
- 8-7. Sheaths of feather tracks have pierced skin
- 8-9. Small quantity of natal down present. Tip of feathers escaping from sheaths are rich buffy color. Sides of breast white.

Increase in Weight of Young Hermit Thrushes.



A. Young bird at Gorge } weight recorded on second day after hatching.
 B " " " Reeses.

Increase in Extent of young hermit thrushes.



Extent not measured first day of observation.