

Unusual Nesting Site of the Least Bittern, at Camden, N. J.

BY JULIAN K. POTTER.

It is a strange fact that one interested in the study of birds may travel the same beaten paths about his home time after time, and yet fail to discover all the bird secrets in his particular neighborhood. This is the lure that calls one afield at every opportunity, though the path may be as familiar as the city street which is followed to business every day.

I had often traversed the soggy path around the old mud hole, completely choked up with button-bushes, arrow-head lilies, and other water-loving plants, before discovering that it was the summer retreat of that charming little denizen of our marshes, the Least Bittern. Often in early spring I had surprised the bird, hunting along the edges of the pool; and had watched it as with frightened squawk it flapped its way to a more secure retreat farther from the shore. As for finding a nest in such a place, I had never given it a thought, for the reason that I always believed that a rank growth of cat-tails was necessary for the home site of this species. Cat-tails were entirely lacking in this mud-hole, so of course no Bitterns nested there;—insufficient knowledge, gleaned from numerous books.

My surprise may well be imagined, when on May 10, 1916, in a tour of investigation about the pond, I noticed a male Least Bittern, bill pointing up, sitting on a nest situated in a button-bush eighteen inches above the water. By means of an old boat that had been conveniently left in the pond, I found that the nest contained five eggs. The following day near the opposite side of the pond from the first nest, a female Least Bittern was seen carrying a stick in her bill. She made her way to a bunch of arrow-head lilies, and placed the stick among the



FEMALE LEAST BITTERN ON HER NEST.



YOUNG LEAST BITTERNS, ONE WEEK OLD.



NEST AND EGGS OF LEAST BITTERN.

leaves. Afterward I discovered that this nest rested on a branch of a button-bush, running through the base of the plant. Two days later both Bitterns were seen about this nest, (the nest in the button-bush meanwhile having been destroyed), and the male Bittern evidently brought something and fed the female while she was on the nest. She accepted the food, and then started to busy herself by pulling the tops of the leaves together above the nest to form an arch after the manner of the Rails. It did not work in this case, however, and she only succeeded in tearing the leaf tips. On May 18, the nest contained five eggs, a complete set. On this day another nest was discovered in a button-bush three feet from the water, containing four eggs. This was probably a second nest built by the birds whose nest I had first found, as it contained a short set and two of the eggs failed to hatch.

From the 18th of May I devoted most of my time to the arrow-head lily nest, as I had found this nest as it was being built. The nests were all constructed of piled sticks pointing toward the center like the spokes of a wheel. The female Bittern attended to most of the household duties, although the male came in for his share. He did not stick to his work as faithfully as the female, but left the nest when approached. The female could not be forced to leave the nest during all the time she was sitting. She simply would not budge, and had to be lifted from the nest in order to see what was taking place beneath her. At all times when approached she assumed a serpent-like attitude, stretching her neck up and swaying her head back and forth; closer approach caused her to draw in her head close to her body, spread her wings, and ruffle up her feathers, making her body appear twice the normal size. Sometimes she made fierce thrusts at the intruder, accompanied by loud squawks. She really presented a very formidable appearance. In fact a snake-loving friend whom I took with me on one occasion refused to put his hand within reach of her bill, saying, "She looks as if she would pick your eyes out." (This from one who takes delight in hunting rattlesnakes.) I found that these fierce looks and serpent-like attitudes were all bluff, and that even her pick was a weak affair, not equaling the pick of a set-

ting hen. Gradually she became used to my presence, and during the latter part of the incubation period, I was able to get some photographs of her in almost natural positions; in fact she became an ideal subject for photography. The male kept very much out of sight during the incubation period, and I only saw him when he happened to be on the nest at my approach. His soft low notes were often heard, although I could never see him utter his klo-o-o klo-o klo klo klo, dove-like in character, starting low and getting more rapid toward the end. I had often heard the love song of the Least Bittern before, but never until this spring was I sure what bird was the author of these cooing notes. On May 30, I visited the nest late in the afternoon, and found on lifting the female, that one of the eggs was pipped, and the next day three very funny youngsters had made their appearance. The Bittern evidently starts to set as soon as the first egg is laid. I was unable to visit the nest again until June 6, and then found that a great change had come over the young. All five assumed the bittern-like pose of their parents, and with one accord greeted my approach with weak croaks, accompanied by wobbly thrusts at my hand. Their efforts in this direction could hardly be felt. Yet their fierce looks were quite awe-inspiring, and would frighten away some enemies. The female Bittern was not in evidence, nor was she seen again. The male bird was on hand and for the first time seemed very much disturbed. He croaked his disapproval from a nearby bush. I never saw a bird go through so many grotesque contortions and movements. I lifted one of the young from the nest, and he actually looked as if he would twist himself apart. He was evidently unable to stand the muscular effort, for he soon quieted down and contented himself by uttering protesting croaks.

The young bird, now a week old, could cling to a branch by means of its feet, assisted by its wings. It could also very nearly hold itself suspended by placing its bill over a branch. On June 9, when I again visited the nest, it was empty. One dead young bird lay in the ooze beside the nest. It looked like foul-play, and it may be just possible that the other young birds had left the nest, and were scrambling about among the

bushes, although none were seen. The dead bird had feathers just breaking from their sheaths.

Meanwhile the young birds in the button-bush nest had hatched on June 8. On June 10, I went away on a trip, and left the Bitterns in the care of Mr. J. Fletcher Street, who photographed the young on that date. On the following Saturday, June 17, when he again approached the nest to take pictures, he found it empty, but was quite certain that he saw something, probably a young bird, leave the nest as he approached.

This fact, coupled with my observations, would seem to indicate that the young Bitterns left the nest when about ten days old, and before they were able to fly.