THE BREEDING OF THE LITTLE RINGED PLOVER
IN ENGLAND IN 1944

BY
M. D. ENGLAND, E. O. HÖHN, E. G. PEDLER AND B. W. TUCKER.

(Plates 1-4).

In 1938 a pair of Little Ringed Plovers (Charadrius dubius curonicus) successfully reared a brood at one of the reservoirs near Tring, Hertfordshire and the event was very fully recorded by R. C. B. Ledlie and E. G. B. Pedler in British Birds, Vol. xxxii, pp. 90-102. In the subsequent six years the species was not seen at Tring, though birds were reported on passage in spring in Sussex (1939), Norfolk (1940), Kent (two, 1942), and Cambridgeshire (1942, 1943), and one in Berkshire in July 1943. In 1944, however, the breeding of no less than three pairs was proved in Southern England, two at Tring and one in Middlesex. Such an occurrence in the case of a species of which prior to 1938 only about a dozen examples had been recorded in Britain is certainly astonishing, even though the Little Ringed Plover does breed regularly just across the Channel. But especially curious is the fact that one of the Tring pairs bred in exactly the same locality as in 1938, although after a lapse of six years it is hardly conceivable that the birds (or even one of them) were the same as in 1938 or even the young of the original pair. Indeed the latter possibility may be considered definitely disproved, for the 1938 young were ringed and neither of the 1944 birds bore a ring. Even granted that the locality is one very well suited to the habits of the species and at the same time particularly well-watched, it seems very singular that two different pairs of a bird so rare as a breeder in Britain, in two seasons separated by so considerable a gap, should have selected the same place to nest in out of—presumably—a not inconsiderable number of possible sites. It is intriguing, but probably unprofitable, to speculate on possible explanations of this, but most ornithologists will recall somewhat analogous cases of particular breeding sites deserted by a species and re-occupied after a lapse of years by different individuals, though not obviously more suitable than others available. It should, however, be added that a special attraction to the birds, though not obvious, may nevertheless exist.

It may be remarked, however, that the third pair in 1944 bred in a partly flooded gravel-pit, and since such places are certainly less regularly watched by ornithologists than reservoirs it is possible that pairs have bred in other gravel-pits or similar sites in southern England in previous years and escaped notice. Whether this is likely to have been the case and whether in fact the species is actually in process of extending its range or whether the events of the past season must be regarded as merely an abnormal incident due to some chance or accident of migration are questions on which light
will be thrown by observation in future years. It may be suggested that ornithologists in southern England would do well to pay attention in May and June to old gravel-pits containing pools, but not completely flooded, and other possible breeding places, and in this connexion it may be useful to quote my description of the habitat of the species from The Handbook of British Birds, which reads as follows:

"Markedly more a fresh-water bird than Ringed Plover, frequenting sand and gravel banks on rivers or borders of lakes and when found breeding on coast usually at the mouth of a river or stream; also breeds by ponds and pools (sometimes quite small) with gravelly, sandy or rubbly waste ground, or occasionally merely dried mud, adjacent, and sometimes in disused sand or gravel pits."

It is noteworthy that two passage birds have been reported to us in the late summer from other not very far distant localities. Mr. H. Money-Coutts, who saw a Little Ringed Plover at Ham Fields Sewage Farm, near Windsor, on July 8th, 1943 (antea, Vol. xxxvii, p. 180), saw one there again on July 19th, 1944, and has supplied full and conclusive details of identification, while another was observed at the Brent Reservoir, Middlesex, by Mr. T. Bispham on August 3rd and Mr. W. J. L. Sladen on August 9th. Ham Fields is not many miles from the Middlesex breeding place now recorded and it is possibly significant that the bird observed there in 1943 was a young one. The 1944 bird, though in essentially adult plumage, had the orbital ring and white line above the black eye-band rather dull and was thought to be probably a bird of the previous year.

A number of ornithologists have contributed observations on the three pairs, especially on No. 1 pair at Tring, but it has been thought best to treat the separate reports on each as sections of a single paper covering the whole subject of the breeding of the Little Ringed Plover in England in 1944. B.W.T.

THE FIRST PAIR AT TRING

by

E. G. PEDLER AND B. W. TUCKER.

The birds were first observed at 10.45 a.m. (D.S.T.) on May 15th by Pedler at the same reservoir where breeding took place in 1938, and in the course of this and subsequent days he was able to observe them closely.

The water level was very low, as in 1938, and probably even lower than then, and the whole ground was almost covered with vegetation, but with several more or less bare, stony patches. The birds appeared to have taken possession of a certain belt of stony ground, to which they returned at intervals and made scrapes. One bird so engaged on the afternoon of the 15th was watched repeatedly going down on its breast, kicking up small stones from behind it, making sweeps from side to side with the breast, and
spreading the tail fan-wise. On another occasion on the same day both birds were seen to do this together. It was observed that they used small natural depressions, entering them and excavating a few of the small stones. Both birds kept strictly together; on three occasions the female spread her tail high in the air and once the male came and settled under it, remaining there for a few seconds.* At 8.10 p.m. coition was observed, the male afterwards flying away for about 50 yards, while the female remained where she was and preened herself. Prior to coition the male puffed out his breast feathers and stamped his feet sharply, holding the head high, as described in the case of the 1938 pair (p. 93), while the female waited in the usual crouching position. On May 16th, at 8 a.m., coition was again observed on the same area, to which the birds returned for this purpose, as well as to display and scrape. The preliminary behaviour was the same as before.

The diagnostic characters of the species were well seen, the wings being sandy brown, showing no wing-bar in flight, the bills black or dark brown, and the yellow orbital ring conspicuous, especially in the male. The female's breast band was narrower than that of the male.

On May 17th, a cold and windy day, one of the birds was seen to bathe at the water's edge, afterwards drying itself in the wind. In the late afternoon, from 6.20 to 6.35, the female on the nesting area appeared to be picking up small stones and throwing them now on one side and now on the other, but eventually flew off to the water's edge calling "pic, pic, pic." This was the only occasion on which the recorder heard either bird call during a week's observation. The flight on this occasion was gliding, with slow wing-beats, recalling the wing action of a Greenfinch in the display flight. The pebble-throwing was observed on numerous occasions at the site which had evidently been selected for nesting; this was also the area in which coition was observed.

On May 18th the female was seen on one occasion to spread her tail, showing the white outer feathers, the male about 15 yards away taking no apparent notice. On this date she was also watched picking up small stones and putting them down beside her while sitting on the ground, evidently in one of the scrapes. The male was seen behaving similarly, but throwing them to one side and the other with jerks of the head.

On May 19th, from 11 a.m. to 12 p.m. and from 3.30 to 4.30 p.m. no birds were present at the nesting site, but soon afterwards one of them alighted there, accompanied by a Dunlin. The Dunlin flew away and the Plover approached a growing tuft and sat for about three minutes, during which the mate came and walked

* This agrees closely with the co-called "symbolic nest-relief" ceremony described by J. E. Sluiters (Ardea, 1938, pp. 130-141) and in the Ringed Plover by H. Laven (Beitr. Fortpfl.-biol. Vog., 1938, pp. 49-54, 90-95) but these observers agree in describing the bird which creeps under the other's tail as the female.—B.W.T.
round the sitting bird and then flew away. After the sitting bird had gone, off the recorder approached the spot and found two eggs in a hollow lined with small stones all of about the same size and a few pieces of small stick. From 7.12 to 8.25 p.m. the bird sat on the eggs. On three occasions, at 7.27, 7.41 and 8.18, she stood up and appeared to be arranging them with her bill. At 8.25 she stood up and moved away from the nest, stretching the wings high above her, then flew to the water’s edge and had not returned at 9.30.

On May 20th a Mallard drake was seen walking towards the nest, on which the female was sitting. The male ran first on one side of the intruder and then on the other in an agitated manner, but failed to divert him, but when he was within a few feet of the sitting bird she rose from the eggs and ran towards him, with tail fanned and depressed, touching the ground. When the duck appeared almost treading on the eggs she actually pecked him and made him jump forward and quicken his speed. He moved well away off the nesting area. The Plovers quickly recovered from their anxiety and within ten minutes coition took place, in the manner already described.

At 7 p.m. on May 21st Pedler visited the nest in order to show it to Double, the keeper; there were then three eggs. On May 22nd he left Tring and had to discontinue his observations.

On May 27th R. H. Ryall visited the locality and saw both birds. The distinctive characteristics, including the pale yellowish flesh-coloured legs, were well seen and the typical “tee-u” (or “pee-o”) note heard. On the 28th C. B. Ashby and Miss H. M. Knapp were at the reservoir and found the nest, which now contained four eggs. They noted that the small white stones with which it was lined were about a quarter or three-eighths of an inch across. Earlier in the day a mild form of display was observed, the birds running after one another with fluffed-out feathers and once lifting the outstretched wings high above the back.

On May 30th Ryall again visited the reservoir and has kindly placed his notes at our disposal. At 2.10 p.m. he observed a nest-relief. The relieving bird alighted some distance away and ran in a rather halting and circuitous manner to the nest. As it approached the sitting bird got up and, stepping away in a semi-crouching attitude, made a little display by extending the flank-feathers and twice fanning out the tail. It then ran a short distance and flew away to another reservoir. Another change-over took place at 4.15. On this occasion the returning bird, believed to be the male, flew up and settled about 18 inches from the nest and the sitting mate ran off with no display. Only once was the bird not sitting observed to return for a few minutes to the nesting area, or indeed to the same reservoir, without relieving its mate. Mandibulation of small stones round the nest was observed, as recorded by Pedler.
On June 10th Pedler re-visited Tring. At 11.20 the male was sitting, but after a few minutes he got up and walked a foot or so away, bobbing his head, picked up something, and returned to sit. At 11.30 a change-over took place. The relieved bird walked slowly away from the eggs with head bent low, while the mate alighted on the ground, went straight to the nest, and settled down. The other then flew away. At 4.10, when the male was again on the nest, another relief took place. He walked and ran some yards from the eggs, then stopped and stretched his wings straight above his head, before flying away to the water's edge. On the ground the female passed him hurriedly, went straight to the eggs and settled on them.

On June 11th, B. W. Tucker, with Dr. F. K. Boston and G. H. Spray, visited Tring to see the birds, as did also Ryall and Ashby and R. S. R. Fitter. Both birds were well seen and all the distinctive characters noted, including the distinctive "tee-u" note when the sitting bird was flushed. At 2 p.m. a nest-relief took place. It was accomplished unobtrusively with no ceremonial. On this occasion the relieved bird flew to the water's edge and stopped there for a few minutes before flying away from the reservoir. The eggs were also examined. They were typical of the species, notably smaller than Ringed Plover's, with stone-coloured ground fairly evenly marked with rather fine dark brown spots and here and there faint mauvish markings.

Subsequently Double reported that there were two chicks hatched on June 15th. On June 16th one of the remaining eggs had gone and was presumed to have hatched. Double has recently assured us that he afterwards saw three chicks together at the nest, but if does not appear that a third chick was ever seen for certain by anyone else, and evidently it came to grief: it may have been killed by some predator soon after hatching. On the 17th the parents and two young were seen by Ryall. One adult, believed to be the female, stayed with them and the other now kept fairly near. The chicks ran about with short intervals of being brooded by the attendant adult. Sometimes this took place at the nest and sometimes the young merely ran under the parent where she happened to stand. The remaining egg was quite warm to the hand, as though the bird had just been brooding it, but it subsequently proved to be addled and was taken by Double, by whom it was handed to the Tring Museum, where it provides permanent proof of the record.

The further history of the young is unfortunately not so clearly documented. On July 10th Ryall saw the adults, but failed to find the young and gathered that no one at Tring had seen them recently. However, the keeper, Double, who did good work in keeping a watch on the nest, assures us that he is convinced that the parent birds (probably disturbed by fishing, which began on June 16th), succeeded after a time in leading the young across the causeway to the adjacent reservoir. He saw both adults near the boathouse
here, "squealing and fluttering about" and behaving in a manner which could leave no reasonable doubt that they had the young ones there. Later he saw four birds on the wing, so that it seems to be fairly well established that the two young were reared, though the lack of complete proof is regrettable.

THE SECOND PAIR AT TRING

BY

M. D. ENGLAND.

On May 13th, at Wilstone Reservoir, Tring, I saw four Ringed Plovers which I believed to be Little Ringed Plovers (*Charadrius dubius curonicus*), but as I neither saw them fly nor heard their call identification had to remain uncertain. It was not until over five weeks later that I saw any more of them on this reservoir, but in the meantime, on June 11th, Messrs. B. W. Tucker and R. H. Ryall, in company with two other observers, Dr. Boston and Mr. Spray, had visited the place and seen a pair of Little Ringed Plovers there. They were fully identified, but although they were watched for some time and indulged in a little mild display and chasing, they showed no evidence of having a nest. In the light of the subsequent observations, however, it can be said, since the first egg was hatched on July 5th and the shortest recorded incubation period is 24 days, that incubation must actually have commenced on June 11th at the latest. The birds were watched again by Mr. Ryall a week later, on June 17th, when they were equally successful in concealing the fact that they were nesting. On June 22nd I found a single Little Ringed Plover feeding on the mud. During a considerable time that this bird was under observation it several times settled down and brooded in one or other of two depressions or scrapes which proved to contain nothing but a stone and two rather egg-like lumps of mud respectively. However, eventually, while it was sitting, another flew over calling, and this one led me to a different part of the reservoir where, after a very long search and much watching from various hides, a nest was found with four eggs.

It was on sandy shingle, and the eggs rested on very small pebbles and a few broken shells. It may be significant that it was within a few inches of a rusty broken tin half buried in the mud, recalling the Greenshank's frequent nesting near some conspicuous stone or other object. I should have liked to experiment by moving the tin, but experiments are out of place on a bird as rare as this.

Ten feet away were the remains of a wooden breakwater, and it seemed possible that with care some rather distant photographs might be obtained from a hide built behind this. Ordinary bird-photography tactics were of course out of the question, both from the point of view of attracting undesirable attention and of scaring the bird. Accordingly it was decided that nothing more was permissible than a cloth over the head of the photographer crouched on the ground in an angle of the breakwater. This was not only
almost invisible from a distance, but could be taken down instantly on the approach of strangers.

An assistant was constantly on the watch, and everyone from bathers and anglers to obvious ornithologists was treated with suspicion. I have to record my gratitude to Mr. A. H. Bishop, of the Natural History Museum, for acting as watcher during the photography, and for becoming expert at removing hides in a hurry. The keeper, Mr. Double, very kindly prevented angling in the vicinity, and in fact constantly patrolled the area, and it is largely owing to his help that the eggs hatched in a very public place.

The notes which follow have, for the sake of brevity, been compiled as additions to, or in some cases because of differences from, the very complete report by Ledlie and Pedler (l.c.) on the 1938 pair. The differences, where they exist, are, I believe, due in large part to the fact that favourable circumstances made it possible for this pair to be watched almost continuously while in the vicinity of the nest, from a distance varying from 7 to 10 feet, and many of the things seen, and even more the things heard, could not have been otherwise recorded.

**Plumage and Sexing.**—After a few days at close quarters I was able to distinguish the birds apart, and even to make up my mind which was which sex, but in view of the very great danger of false assumption in birds such as these, the word "presumed" should be understood in all references to sex which follow. There were two obvious plumage differences, one vocal difference, and several distinguishing habits. The cock had black ear-coverts, whereas the hen had brown. This seems to coincide satisfactorily with the note in *The Handbook* that "some females have black patch on ear-coverts smaller and more or less intermixed with drab-brown and sometimes black feathers are more or less absent." The black bands on breast and forehead were roughly the same width in both birds, but each had irregular white feathers along the edges which were sufficiently different to tell the birds apart.

**Voice and Display.**—The call "pee-u" was used for many purposes and varied from a soft piping very similar to a Bullfinch to an urgent shrill call in immediate danger. The young began using a wheezy form of it at about three weeks old. The hen, when "injury-feigning," chattered in a way which was very noticeably like a Little Tern. A different form of this occurred during copulation. "Injury-feigning" consisted of running in a crouched attitude, and grovelling in the sand with one or both wings fluttering and the tail spread, chattering all the time. If the "releaser" of this performance did not play its part, i.e. stood still instead of following, the display turned into an elaborate and self-conscious preening.

Nest-relief was accompanied by calls heard at no other times, except on occasions when one or other bird came up to relieve but after display the original sitter returned. The cock flew to within
20 feet of the nest and called very softly "quoyp, quoyp." The hen replied from the nest "quip" almost inaudibly. The cock then approached by short runs calling "quoyp, quoyp, quoy-royp," at the end of each run picking up small white pebbles and throwing them over his shoulder. The hen would then leave the eggs, and, running away from (see Plate 4) the direction in which he was approaching, call (not always) "quip, quip quip-pip-pip," and also throw pebbles. She then turned in a wide semicircle (c. 6 ft. diam.) and ran towards him, the two passing each other several times behind the nest, going in opposite directions in a series of runs with much stone throwing. One bird returned to the eggs, throwing as it came, and the other ran away, also throwing, until at about 25 feet it took to flight. The intensity of the stone-throwing increased towards the nest, and it ceased at the circumference of, roughly, a 25 foot circle around it. (Owing to the breakwater this was an incomplete circle). A single bird, returning to the nest after a disturbance, often threw pebbles or picked them up and dropped them, and once only this was seen when the hen was guarding young 50 yards from the nest site. The fixity of the route followed to the nest was remarkable.

If the hen was relieving the cock at the nest, she still called "quip" and he responded with "quoy-royp," showing a noticeable vocal difference. When the young hatched, the "quoyp" turned gradually to the familiar "quip-pip-pip-pip" used all the time during the fledging period.

When one bird was brooding three young about ten feet from the nest, and the other incubating the remaining egg, they still changed places, but without ceremony. The incubating bird rose and flew the few feet to the young, and the other ran to the egg.

Sundry Notes.—The sitting bird depended on sight rather than hearing when sensing danger. Noises in the hide did not affect them in the least, but the slightest movement of the cloth by the wind caused suspicion. The warning calls of the Redshank and Lapwing registered danger, and the sitter would stand up and look round, but since the breakwater hid the Redshank’s area, incubation was usually resumed immediately. Swifts catching flies low over the nest caused a good deal of alarm, but all small birds on the ground were driven viciously away. When suspicious, a bird always left the nest at a crouching run, similar to that of hiaticula.

The eggs hatched as follows: one, July 5th, c. 5 p.m. (D.S.T.); two, July 6th, c. 7 a.m.; one July 8th, 9.40 p.m. This gives a gap of about 77 hours between first and last.

Although the young were led away from the nest almost immediately they were dry, they were constantly brought back, and the site was used as a "rendezvous" for at least a week after.

It was observed that after the young hatched the parents often flew conspicuously higher in the air than they had done previously. All four young were ringed.
It is deserving of note that although we have no absolute proof, there is strong suspicion that three birds, two hens and one cock, were present all the time.* In addition to the bird sitting on “oddments” mentioned above, an odd bird was seen by several observers at some distance at a time when both cock and hen were known to be near the nest. On the day when one bird was brooding three young and the other incubating one egg, the incubating bird suddenly flew behind the hide and started calls which were quite new to me (a variant on the Little Tern chatter). I groped for a hole behind me and found one just in time to see the finish of coition between two birds. This cannot be taken as absolute proof, as it is just possible that in the moment when I was groping for a hole the bird brooding young flew round behind me (she was back on them when I turned round again). If so, coition occurs after young have hatched—if not, the cock was practising bigamy.

At a fortnight old one adult only was in attendance on the young, which were still at the reservoir on August 23rd, feeding in the company of Common and Green Sandpipers, Dunlin and other small waders. At least one young bird was still present on September 10th, but had gone by September 16th.

THE MIDDLESEX PAIR

BY

E. O. HÖHN, B.Sc.

On June 4th, 1944, my wife and I visited a group of three gravel pits in the Ashford district of Middlesex for the first time. At the largest pit, the area of which I estimate at about \(\frac{1}{4}\) square mile water surface, we saw one and later two Ringed Plovers. I thought on seeing the first that it was a belated migratory Ringed Plover (Charadrius hiaticula), but noticed at once the absence of a white wing-bar in flight. When seen on the ground absence of white on wing was confirmed and the beak was seen to show no yellow, whereas the legs were pale orange. Further confirmation of the identity of these birds as Little Ringed Plovers (Ch. dubius curonicus) was afforded by their call, a monosyllabic “pioo” and distinct from the Ringed Plover’s disyllabic “pooep.”

Both birds confined themselves to a broad-based peninsula which projects into the waters of the pit. The base of this area consists of about one acre of gravel, while the southern shore is flat and sandy. We noticed that the birds or at least one of them returned repeatedly to the gravel area and when disturbed here flew about in wide sweeps, anxiously calling. This behaviour suggested nesting, but careful search failed to reveal a nest.

*It should perhaps be noted that after nest-relief in the case of the other pair the relieved bird generally flew right away and, at least when I saw it, went in the direction of the other reservoir.—B.W.T.
On June 11th we made another visit and again found both birds on the gravel bed, to which they returned repeatedly when flushed by any disturbance. Finally on June 17th the pair was seen now on the sandy shore, from which both flew up to circle round, calling even more anxiously than before. By watching the birds on their return to ground, through binoculars at a distance of about 20 yards, I saw at least one young bird, apparently only a few days old, on two occasions. When I approached it made for cover among the nearby herbage, where I was unable to find it. The adults, however, returned to the spot where I had last seen the young when it reappeared on the first occasion; though it did not come into view when I watched the returning parents the second time. When apparently calling for the young both birds used a softer call which I would render as "trrru" (u pronounced as in French).

It was thus definitely established that the pair had nested, and it seems probable that the nest was located on the gravel bed. In order to remove any possible question as to correct identification, Mr. R. S. R. Fitter visited the spot with me on July 2nd (at my request) and on this occasion we saw five Little Ringed Plovers, all able to fly. On a later visit on July 8th by myself, under better conditions of visibility, I saw that of the five, three were young birds. Hence the pair had successfully reared three young. The birds must have left soon after, as on July 17th only one adult and one young were seen, while on July 26th none were to be found.

Previous records of the Little Ringed Plover in Middlesex (Glegg, *History of the Birds of Middlesex*) are two, obtained in August 1864. In view of the other cases of breeding at Tring and the possibility that a definite attempt at colonization is taking place, it may be mentioned that there are also a number of other gravel pits in this western area of Middlesex which may be equally suitable for this species, and it is possible that a search of these next spring might reveal other nesting pairs.

I am indebted to the manager of the company which works this particular pit, for permission to explore it.
**Little Ringed Plover.**
The female settling on eggs.
*(Photographed by M. D. England.)*
LITTLE RINGED PLOVER.
The male about to sit.
(Photographed by M. D. England.)
LITTLE RINGED PLOVER.
Male standing, female sitting.
(Photographed by M. D. England.)
LITTLE RINGED PLOVER.

Nest-relief. Male approaching from the right, female running off in same direction.

(Photographed by M. D. England.)