

Irene took this to Journal July 15-43
I took 3 neg. July 14.

THE KILLDEER IN OUR GRAIN FIELD

by

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Who in the greater part of our country, whether interested in birds or not, could have missed seeing and hearing the plump and conspicuously marked little Killdeer? With dull brown back, chest crossed by two black bands, the upper one clear around the neck, forehead, collar, and under parts white, front of crown black, rump and sides of tail ochraceous yellow, this little plover is found along the beaches, in green pastures, in the dull furrows of plowed fields, and even at home on lawns. But no matter where he is, you will know that there is a pond or trickle of water nearby.

We had met Killdeers almost everywhere except around our own home. Lo and behold, this summer we noticed a Killdeer creeping out of our grain field into the vegetable garden where a little stream of water flowed between two rows. This happened almost daily until we began to surmise it wasn't only a passing visit. It takes something more than eyes to find a Killdeer's nest. But miracles do happen, and by using the field-glasses and watching every step of the way for fear of crushing the eggs, we found the needle in the haystack. There was no nest, four eggs in a little hollow in the dry ground, surrounded by a wall of green stalks.

Since the mother wouldn't come back when we put the camera and tripod near the nest, we had to set up the green umbrella blind, attach a long string to the camera, and then sit in concealment and wait. She got used to this arrangement and we secured a series of snaps of her at the nest.

It looked as if the eggs were near hatching. We waited and watched for seven days to get pictures of the young the minute they emerged from the shells, for that was our only chance. On the eighth day when we went out to field, there was no mother bird around, no sound of her appealing notes - and there were no eggs in the nest. We had seen a crow roaming over the fields and had suspected him of mischief, and we were right. We found the shells of two eggs, one about ten feet from the nest, and the other about forty feet away

amidst the grain. There were gouges in the shells where the black villain had picked into the eggs.

Killdeer nesting habits are as plentiful and erratic as their wanderings, but there is one requirement that the birds insist upon, a wide expanse where he or she can see anything that approaches and sneak away, putting on a sob-sister performance to divert attention from the nest. Even when you reach the spot that you marked absolutely accurately as the nest site, you stand dumbfounded, staring down at nothing that looks like a nest and eggs.

In the meantime, the parent bird is flapping along on the ground nearby with every bone broken, wailing in piteous tones for you to come to her rescue. The nest must be very close. You fairly bore your eyes into the ground, and all at once the eggs almost bite you close to the toe of your shoe. There they lie, four of them, a dingy putty color marked with such a bold camouflaged pattern of brown and black splotches that you feel foolish. But don't take your eyes off them or you will have to hunt another fifteen minutes to find them again.

A graveled yard or roadway is so alluring to Killdeers as a nesting place that it just can't be turned down. Driving into the yard of the P Ranch up the Blitzen Valley one day, a Killdeer flew out from under the car wheels. There was no mistake about it. We stopped short and backed the car up a little, then stepped out gingerly and scanned every inch of the ground in front. Nothing there but plain dirty gravel. When the foreman came up he laughed. "There's the nest three feet in front of you. But you wouldn't hit it unless you got off the wheel tracks." Sure enough, square in the middle of the road where a blind man could see them were the four eggs with the small ends pointed to the center, looking like a four-leafed clover.

Another time we visited a big electrical station on a main highway. The large yard was an expanse of level gravel from end to end, studded with tall towers and machinery, the air full of high-powered wires. From the plant came the high humming sound of whirring motors. The whole place was surrounded

by a ten-foot heavy-mesh wire fence. At the main gate an officer in uniform stood on guard. Our pass let us in and a watchman accompanied us out into the yard. We went carefully across the gravel as he showed us one nest after another of the Killdeer encampment, that evidently thought this well protected graveled floor had been made for their benefit. It was late in the season for nesting Killdeers, and there were a number of empty, bare little hollows. But soon we had inspected some six or eight that were still occupied with two to four eggs.

The aggrieved parents, used to people, trucks, cars, and what-not entering the yard, however didn't approve the personal inspection for anybody but outsiders, and set up a chorus of high-pitched cries. The nests were placed helter-skelter everywhere, and neither the driver of a machine or a person on foot could have been blamed for flattening the whole contents of one or more nests. In one corner of the yard where it was a little shady, some wild grass had grown up. It would have been a safe area for ground nests, but do you think one Killdeer pair would build their home there? No sir, they all had one idea. The open gravel was the only place for Killdeers.

When the chicks hatched, almost before they were dry the parents led them off between the fence wires into a big field of high wild grass where insect food would be plentiful. The long-legged babies with innocent, round, black eyes teetered along, bobbing their ridiculous feather-duster tails. They resembled kewpies in play suits.

The most spectacular courtship performances of the Killdeer take place in the air, the nuptial flight, but those that occur on the ground are worth watching, too. Dr. Gabrielson gives us a picture of one display where "the male had taken his station some distance from the female and at intervals whirled rapidly about, uttering a curious stuttering note as he did so. Every few seconds the female advanced a few steps toward the male, but when he stopped to observe the effect of this display she quickly turned her back and appeared perfectly indifferent. This was repeated several times until the female suddenly flew away."

The Killdeer is a good American citizen and loves his country, for members of his family are scattered over most of the states of the Union. He is an indifferent migrant, usually first to arrive in the spring and the last to leave in the fall. His range is about as temperamental as his nesting habits, for he breeds over most of temperate North America and over-laps into British Columbia, Manitoba, and Newfoundland, and migrates south to the West Indies, Central America, and northern South America. And there is no telling where else he might turn up, perhaps over in England to test their welcome and water supply. He is an abundant resident of every part of Oregon and a summer resident of every county.

The list of good deeds of the Killdeer for the farmer is far ahead of most birds of the shores and fields. His diet is known to take in mosquitoes, fever ticks which spread the dreaded Texas fever among cattle, certain flies that are destructive to wheat and grass, the clover-root beetle, cotton weevils, corn borers, wire-worms, and others. He should always be welcome and safe in your grain field or garden.