A NOTE ON THE TECHNIQUES OF BIRD PHOTOGRAPHY

By M. F. SOPER and G. J. H. MOON

With an Introduction by the President

Many members of the Society have acquired a deep resentment of the bird photographer who regards his or her picture as of paramount importance, regardless of the welfare of the bird and its nestlings. Many cases of desertion and disaster through the actions of bird photographers have become common knowledge: disasters to Gull and Tern colonies, and desertion or predation in the case of Banded Rail, Pigeon, Harrier, Morepork, Silvereye and Fantail are some that come to mind; and how many other cases must go unrecorded! Unnecessary disturbance of Gull and Tern colonies, and remaining too long in the area so that chicks and eggs become destroyed by the sun, have been the cause of severe losses in these species; and the opening up of nests by removing essential cover, the continued use of flash at close quarters, and the improper use of hides, have been causes of desertion or predation in many individual nesting species.

The subject of disturbance of birds by photographers came up for discussion when M. F. Soper, G. J. H. Moon and I were together on Hen Island in November, 1965. These two experienced and highly skilled bird photographers thereupon agreed to produce an article pointing out some of the pitfalls in their art. In this they endeavour to show that bird photography is, or should be, an attitude of mind: they do not attempt in a few pages to instruct the reader in the art, but rightly point out that a study of one of the quoted standard works on the subject is essential. — A.B.

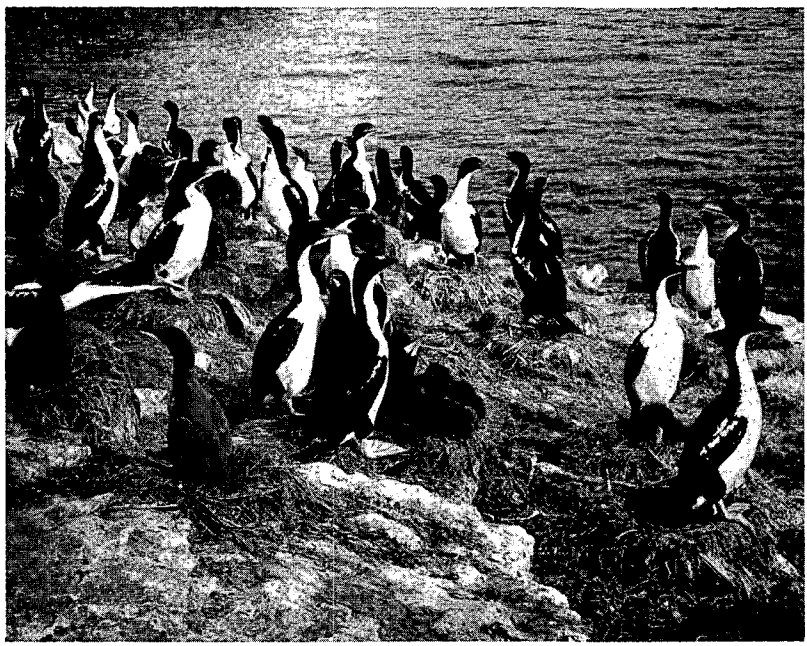
Bird photography today has been revolutionised for the amateur. Modern refinements of camera design, the increased speeds of colour films and, above all, the development of light-weight, transistorised, electronic flash units have combined to make easy what once was difficult: no longer is bird photography the back-breaking, time-consuming province of a few enthusiasts. In itself this is admirable. Anything that aids or entices us to explore and become aware of our wild-life heritage is to be applauded. Unfortunately it is becoming increasingly evident that nesting birds are being subjected to more interference than they will tolerate. This is rarely due — at least, so we hope — to calculated impatience on the part of photographers hungry for quick results but rather to thoughtlessness and carelessness, and an ignorance of what can and can not safely be attempted. Paradoxical though it may seem it is possible in these days of automatic cameras and trade-processed film to undertake photography knowing nothing of the mechanical aspects of photography at all. What is causing concern is that some people behave as though it were possible to take bird photographs knowing nothing of the mechanics of bird-photography either — which is disastrous.

The basic principles of bird photography were laid down many years ago. They have been well and truly tried and they have altered little since their inception. In essence they are to upset the bird's daily

life as little as possible and so to arrange matters that the bird comes or is enticed to a stationary camera. Compliance with the first ensures that at all times the bird is behaving naturally; with the second that the results, when obtained, are as artistically pleasing as the photographer can make them.

Bird photographs today are taken by people who range, in their extremes, from ornithologists who use cameras to photographers who use birds. By and large the best bird photographs are obtained by those with a foot in each camp. The extremists tend either to have trouble with exposure and focus, composition and design, or, if "pure" photographers, to produce technically perfect results of unhappy birds. The point to be made, I think, is that bird photography is a technique in its own right — and should be an obsession. It should not — as it is in danger of becoming — be the Sunday afternoon pastime, in a gull colony, of a camera owner looking for something "unusual."

Most bird photographs of course are taken at nests. Not only is there then the added interest of the young but there is the simple fact that by and large photographs at nests are the easiest to obtain. But birds can be photographed at many places and the tendency today is to make greater use of feeding tables, water holes, food supplies, roosts, high tide resting-places and baits in an endeavour to portray as many aspects of a bird's daily life as possible.



[M. F. Soper

VII — King Shags at Duffer's Reef, Cook Strait.

No matter where the photography is planned some method of concealment will generally be necessary, and for this purpose a "hide" is used. A hide is any structure in which the photographer can conceal himself and his equipment. Hides may be made of materials at hand or they may be prefabricated. The latter is the more satisfactory, for prefabricated hides are easily and rapidly erected, easily transported and always available. They allow also the incorporation of various refinements to make the hours inside them more comfortable. But whatever their construction, they must be rigid and they must be "light proof."

Most hides are between three and four feet square and about six feet high. Naturally no bird is going to ignore the sudden appearance of a structure of these dimensions, and for this reason the hide must *never* in the first instance be erected close to or right on top of a nest. It is true that provided the hide does not flap in the wind, some birds, after an initial period of suspicion, will return apparently unconcerned, but these birds are few.

Whenever a hide is erected you *must*, one or two hours later, go back and check that the birds are not still disturbed by it; or if the nest is in the open, e.g. dotterel or stilt, observe the bird from a distance with binoculars. If the hide has not been placed too close to the nest, such birds will return to the nest within ten minutes or so. If they are unduly disturbed, the hide *must* be removed, or moved much further away. This is an absolute rule. It is not so essential if the hide is being used at, say, a high tide roost for in that case desertion of the roost and the use of another merely upsets the photographic plans, but it is mandatory in the case of a hide at a nest. Once you decide to use a nest to obtain photographs then you assume responsibility for the continued welfare of that bird and its young.

Most New Zealand birds will accept a hide readily, but there are a number that won't — notorious amongst them being the Harrier, Bittern, Herons and Shoveller, with others such as the Pukeko and Kingfisher that can be difficult — so it is necessary, always, to be distrustful. Were I erecting a hide at the nest of a Pukeko for example I would put it in the first instance at least twenty paces away and then over the next three or four days gradually move it closer by halving the distance each day.

Never assume that a bird will accept a hide. If there is but the slightest doubt — and there will always be when a species is first being done — erect the hide in the first instance at a distance; then move it closer when the effect has been observed.

At this point I would refute the belief that bird photographers need the patience of Job. Patience they do not need; what they need is *time*. Time to erect hides. Time to return and check that all is well. Time to move the hides closer. Time to return and check yet again . . . . and so on. If a photographer ever finds it necessary to wait long hours in a hide for a bird to return to its nest then there is something radically wrong with his "hide." Exceptions do occur with such birds as herons with older chicks, which visit to feed perhaps only at intevals of four or five hours.

Camouflage of a hide is seldom necessary — not, at least, from the point of view of the bird, though it may be useful to disguise it from the curious eyes of passers by. All the bird is concerned with

is the sudden appearance of a bulky object, camouflaged or not. Nevertheless, if camouflage material is readily available I always use it as it helps overcome the problem of wind. Wind can be a curse. Infinite pains must be taken to ensure that the hide does not flap: guy-ropes from each corner, stones around the bottom, uprights driven firmly into the ground, a weight on the roof, branches stuffed behind ropes encircling the canvas — all these, plus any other measures that present themselves, need to be taken. Never forget that New Zealand is a land of wind and that the calm present when the hide is erected is unlikly to persist.

Having had the hide in its final position accepted by the bird the next stage is its occupancy. At this stage it is often advisable — and in some instances essential — to have a second person accompany you to the hide with the view, after you are quite settled, of ostentatiously leaving the area and so deluding the birds into assuming that the coast is again clear. It is, for example, obviously quite futile to trudge laden with equipment across a wide, open river bed to a hide at an oystercatcher's nest and to expect the oystercatcher to return unconcerned when, after much ducking in and out, you finally get settled. What is not so readily realised is that many bush and scrub birds are equally as interested spectators of your antics and equally as aware of the fact

[G. J. H. Moon

VIII — Sharp-tailed Sandpipers at Miranda, Autumn 1966 Breeding dress, indicated by increased spotting on breast and flanks, is assumed before they leave for Siberia.

that you have disappeared into the hide and not yet emerged. Once established in the hide do not forget that the hide structure will need pulling tight again to prevent flapping. This is extremely difficult to do single handed from the inside of the hide and is, indeed, one of the most useful services an assistant can do for you.

Most nests will need a certain amount of "tidying up" — "gardening" is the term generally employed. In the case of ground nests such as those of stilts and oystercatchers this is generally simply a matter of removing a few distracting white stones and straws from the *background;* a quite harmless procedure. In the case of nests situated in dense cover, however, the matter is not so simple. There is a very real danger here of converting "tidying up" into "opening up," and of doing so much that the bird deserts. The guiding principle is to do as little as possible. Many nests are impossible to garden and if it appears that much will need doing the nest should not be attempted. Quite apart from the risk of desertion, of attracting predators, and of letting in so much sunlight that the chicks literally cook, it needs to be remembered that photographs at over-gardened nests are not only scientifically false but also aesthetically displeasing in that the gardening is always evident to the trained observer. The more I do bird photography the more I become aware how important these aspects are. I now rearely "garden" at all. I much prefer to continue nest-finding till a nest is discovered that does not require interfering with.

The photographer's conduct in the hide calls for little comment. Obviously silence is essential — at least till he has discovered what liberties he can take, and obviously there must be no visible movement (which means that the hide must be pulled tight and that the camera must be on a tripod — *not* held in the hand!) His method of leaving the hide however, requires mention. If further sittings are envisaged it will be wise to prearrange for someone to return after a given lapse of time. Obviously were the photographer suddenly to appear from the rear of the hide he could run the very real risk of demolishing all that confidence on the part of the bird which, over the previous few days, he had been so carefully building up. He could well undo a week's work.

One of the major changes in the technique of bird photography over the last few years has been the use of electronic flash. The flash is used not so much to stop action — indeed the units commercially available in New Zealand today are too slow for this — but to provide light. For this purpose electronic flash is a boon; such a boon in fact that it is in danger of being abused. The temptation is to use flash all the time, even when not really necessary. Not only does one then obtain a number of very artificial-looking results — for flash has to be very well handled indeed if it is to simulate natural lighting — but it produces the temptation to "flash" the bird every time it arrives at the nest. The bird is given no respite. It takes very little of this to produce photographs which, though technically perfect, are obviously of unhappy birds.

If flash is to be used not only do the birds have to be accustomed to the presence of the hide but they have also to be accustomed to the presence of the flash reflectors. Flash can rarely be used on the spur of the moment. Like all aspects of bird photography flash requires care and time and planning.

So much, if very briefly, for the technical aspect of bird photography. But there is much more to bird photography than mere technique. Bird photography is a complex mixture of art, science, aesthetics, trophy-hunting, "escapism," and the desire to communicate, to mention a few of the more obvious ingredients. Above all it is something that requires honesty of presentation, scientific accuracy and a sympathetic regard for its subject matter. Without these the final photograph will satisfy neither its author nor its audience. It is not sufficient to be knowledgeable about photography (and it is against such, I suspect, that O.S.N.Z. members rail most), nor is it sufficient to be knowledgeable about birds; (indeed, in my experience, the supposed ornithologically knowledgeable person is often a greater menace than his more photographically minded counterpart); to undertake the photography of birds it is necessary to be knowledgeable about "bird photography," a skill in its own right and something that has to be learnt.

For those wishing o pursue the subject there are a number of books available. Particularly recommended are:—

"Bird Photography as a Hobby" Eric Hosking and Cyril Newberry.

"Bird Photography" G. K. Yeates.

"Bird Photography" John Warham.

In my opinion, one or other of these books is as essential to the bird photographer as is his camera, tripod, binoculars and hide.

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SHORT NOTE

ROYAL SPOONBILLS AT MATATA LAGOON, BAY OF PLENTY

On 12/6/66, having learned of the presence at the above wild life sanctuary of three 'white herons,' we sallied forth from Rotorua to investigate the occurrence.

For a number of years there has been a paucity of *Egretta alba* in this region. Our party included two members of the O.S.N.Z., Wally Broun, his wife, Margaret, Max Black and wife, Muriel. Almost immediately on arrival we spotted two large white birds, which at first glance we took to be herons. They were feeding in the water along the opposite shore, just below the bridge. Their manner of feeding was quite unlike that of the heron tribe and more akin to that of Spoonbills *(P. regia)*, and that is just what they proved to be.

As we watched them through 7 x 50 binoculars a Great White Egret came "out of the blue" and joined the Spoonbills. It also started to feed in the typical manner of its kind. The mode of stance adopted by both species whilst feeding is apparently diagnostic. In the case of *E. alba* the body slopes downward at an angle of c. 45°, but with *Platalea* the body stand is horizontal. However, the Spoonbill while at rest does assume a more heron-like attitude, as we have observed in the Manawatu Estuary at Foxton Beach.

This is not the first record of the Royal Spoonbill from the Bay of Plenty. In 1961, two were reported from east of Opotiki (*Notornis* 9, 240).

— W. J. BROUN
— M. J. S. BLACK