

A STUDY OF THE HOME LIFE OF THE ALDER
FLYCATCHER (*EMPIDONAX TRAILLI TRAILLI*).¹

BY HENRY MOUSLEY.

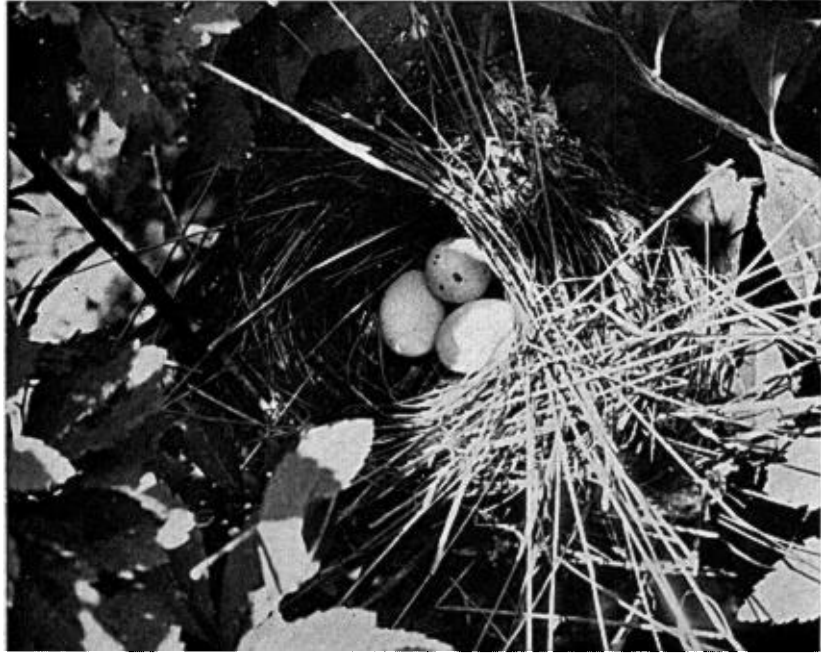
(Plates XIV-XV.)

IN my "Birds of Hatley," which appeared in the 'Auk'² of January 1916, I ventured the remark, that it is only by nest hunting that one can gain any adequate idea of the abundance or otherwise of this species, as the bird is most secretive, and one rarely gets a good view of it in the open, which remarks I feel sure will be endorsed by most field ornithologists, although, few of them can agree as to the exact rendering of the song and call notes of this small Flycatcher, except, that they are unlike those of any other member of the family. In the present study, with one exception only, I heard nothing but an almost incessantly repeated soft, measured, and subdued "pip," the exception to this note being a soft whispered whistle, "pip-weet," "pip-weet," rendered on two occasions only, after the young had left the nest. In using the word secretive, I did not wish to imply that the bird was particularly shy, but rather, that its general mode of life low down in the undergrowth, made it appear as though it was so, but at the nest its behaviour, I think, certainly warrants the use of the word shy, at least, that has been my experience, as will be seen later.

The present study was begun on June 30 of this year (1930), and carried on with more or less ill luck until July 18. I arrived at Hatley on June 29, staying at the little bungalow I had occupied for so many years previously. In front of this, and just across the road, there was a field with a sharp declivity on one side and rise on the other. In the natural hollow thus formed ran a small trout stream, encompassed by a belt of alders 200 yards in length and sixty yards in width, amongst which was an abundance of spiræa bushes (*Spiræa latifolia*) in the forks of which the nests of this small Flycatcher were found, not only now, but in previous years as well. The first nest was located early on the morning of June 30, con-

¹ Read before the American Ornithologists' Union, Salem, Mass., October, 22, 1930.

² Auk, Vol. XXXIII, 1916, No. 1, p. 72.



LEFT.—NEST AND EGGS OF THE ALDER FLYCATCHER (*Empidonax traillii traillii*).
RIGHT.—FEMALE ABOUT TO FEED YOUNG.

taining four eggs, upon which the female was sitting, but she slipped off before I could get a view of her, the nest being two feet six inches above the ground in a spiræa bush. The second nest was found later on in the day, seventy-five yards south of the other, and contained one egg, the female in this case not being on the nest, which was situated two feet above the ground, also, in a spiræa bush. Two days later, or on July 2, this nest contained three eggs (when I photographed it, as being a good example of what the late John Farley calls the "stringing" down or projecting in various directions of the long narrow grasses), an egg having been laid each day before 8.30 a.m., and the following day, it contained four eggs. July 5, three of the four eggs in nest No. 1 hatched out, the remaining one being addled. The young at this stage, although blind, were covered with patches of dark brown down. It was at this juncture that my troubles began, for having obtained photographs of the three young birds and addled egg, which latter I then removed, I set the camera for taking pictures of the parents feeding the young, hiding myself in the surrounding herbage fifteen feet from the nest, whilst operating the shutter by means of a long release. It was half an hour before either of the parents ventured near the nest, and then it was another one and one half hours before one of them—no doubt the female—ventured to feed the young. It had been a long and tedious wait, listening to the incessant 'pip', 'pip,' of the birds, as they flitted restlessly in the bushes, ever and anon buoying my hopes up by a near approach to the nest, always, however, to be doomed to disappointment, until suddenly and unexpectedly, as Farley describes it in his interesting paper in 'The Auk,'¹ of October, 1901, the female—presumably—appeared on the edge of the nest, and without taking any chances, I released the shutter and obtained my first picture of a parent at the nest with food, which, possibly, may be the first of its kind to be portrayed. Apparently, Herbert K. Job² was the first to obtain pictures of this Flycatcher from life, either in 1907, or 1908, but these were of the female incubating, since which time I have been unable to find any other study giving pictures of the parents at the nest, either with food, or feeding the young. After securing this picture,

¹ Auk, Vol. XVIII, 1901, No. 4, pp. 347-355.

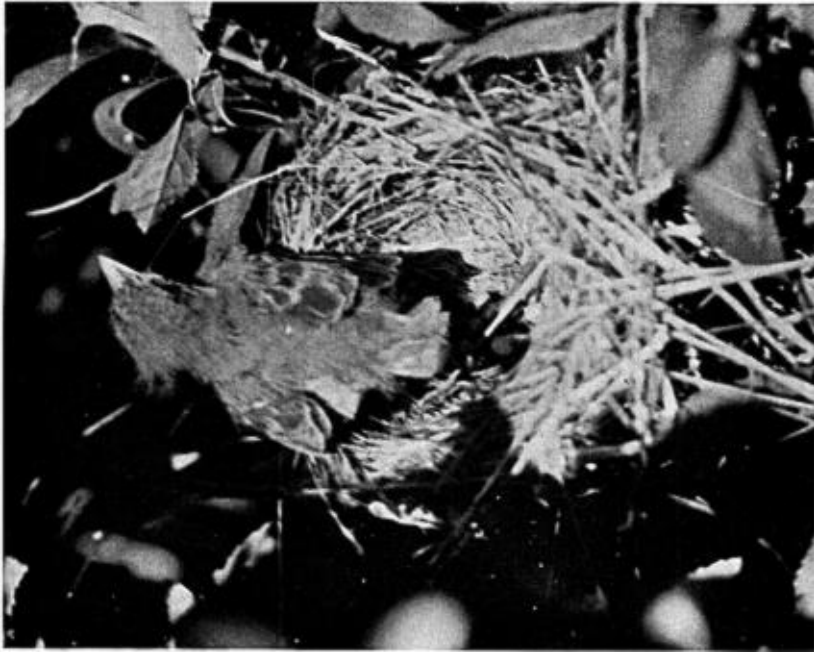
² The Sport of Bird Study, 1908, p. 137.

and in view of the long absence of the parents from the nest and the tender age of the young, I decided to suspend operations for the day and wait until the morrow. As ill luck would have it, the morrow turned out badly, for it rained heavily and I was unable to visit the nest. On the following day, however (July 7), I spent three hours with the birds in the morning, the eyes of the young now appearing through long narrow horizontal slits. It was a long time after setting up the camera before the parents ventured near the nest, and when they did so, their shyness was even more exasperating than before. Time and again I would see the twigs quiver as one of them alighted near the nest, but venture on they would not, until at last, almost beside myself with the strain of three hours intensive watching, I lowered my eyes for an instant, and when I raised them again, it was to see one of the parents on the edge of the nest with its beak full of very small insects. It had come in the twinkling of an eye, and in a like twinkling I released the shutter, as I was afraid to delay an instant, in case it might slip off again before feeding the young, in which case, I would get no picture at all, as my time was more than up for returning home to Montreal. So far, things had not gone too badly, for I certainly had two pictures of a parent at the nest, and as I purposed returning in about a week's time, had prospects of others, not only at this nest, but at nest No. 2, also, which now contained four eggs, upon which the female had been sitting for three or four days. This was not to be, however, for on returning to Hatley on the evening of July 14, and visiting nest No. 1, the next morning, one young bird immediately left, not, on the thirteenth day after hatching, as did those recorded by Miss Cordelia Stanwood¹ in the 'Journal of the Maine Ornithological Society' for March 1910, but on the eleventh day. Having caught and replaced this youngster in the nest, it almost immediately left, before I had time to get a picture, and this it did again on being captured and replaced a second time. As the two remaining ones were asleep, and not wishing to spoil my chance of getting pictures of them, I let the other go, and never saw it again. The young were now similar in colouring to their parents, only, browner above, slightly more yellow below, with ochraceous buff wing bars. Scarcely had the other two been

¹ Jour. Maine Ornith. Soc., XII, 1910, No. 1, pp. 3-5.

photographed, however, than one of them woke up and made off also, leaving it to the last one to afford me the opportunity of obtaining some of the best pictures of the series, before it too left the nest. It was during this period of watching that the soft whispered whistle note, "pip-whee," "pip-whee," was given on two occasions, soon after the first bird had left the nest for the second time, otherwise, all that I heard as before, was the almost continuous 'pip,' 'pip,' of both parents as they flitted about, now in the alders, and then in the dense undergrowth, rarely giving me a good view of them. After the last bird had left, I took a look at the inside of the nest which was particularly clean, except, for the remains of one small beetle (*Corymbites aeripennis*) and about eighteen little stones, which I afterwards found out belonged to the fruit of the Red Osier Dogwood (*Cornus stolonifera*) which the birds had evidently been feeding to their young, as the shrub was growing on both sides of the gully. The abrupt departure of these young birds was not the only disappointment in store for me, for upon visiting nest No. 2, it was nowhere to be seen, having been taken, no doubt by a boy from a neighbouring farm, who must have seen me photographing it on my previous visit, for another nest and eggs belonging to a Kingbird, had also vanished, the two having been photographed about the same time. It just seemed as if my study was at an end, until I suddenly remembered the title of a previous paper, "A Study of Subsequent Nestings after the Loss of the First,"¹ so why not look for the second nesting of this unfortunate little Flycatcher. This I proceeded to do, but it was late in the afternoon before I located it, about 120 yards north of the first venture, and 45 yards north of the nest that the young had vacated earlier in the day. As before, it was in a small spiræa bush, two feet three inches above the ground, amongst some dead twigs and a clump of the Interrupted Fern (*Osmunda Claytoniana*), and at the time contained three eggs, similar in size and markings to those of the first set, the bird slipping off on my near approach. It was just five o'clock when I found this nest, and at that fatal hour, over fifty years experience with birds went to the winds, for I foolishly took a photograph of it, a thing which of course I should never have done, looking to the fact that the birds had already been robbed of their first nest and

¹ Auk, Vol. XXXIV, 1917. No. 4, pp. 381-393.



YOUNG ALDER FLYCATCHER ABOUT TO LEAVE THE NEST ON ELEVENTH DAY AFTER HATCHING.



set of eggs, which naturally should have called for greater caution on my part as to any lingering at, or interference with this second home; the more especially so, as one link in the chain of the reproductive cycle—that of egg laying—was on the wane, whilst the other, that of incubating, had only just commenced. Looking back on the event, there really was no immediate hurry for a photograph of this nest and eggs, and I should have waited until the incubating cycle was nearer its zenith, when it is questionable whether the birds would have deserted as they did at the present juncture. In years gone by, I can call to mind several instances of this species forsaking its nest merely from being flushed off it—apparently. The data obtained from this second nesting agrees very well with that recorded in my “Subsequent Nestings,” the time occupied in building a new nest and laying a second set of eggs being ten days approximately, as against eleven, the second nest being in a similar situation to the first, whilst the eggs were of the same colour, shape, and markings as those of the first set, the distance of the nests from one another being 120 yards as against 66 yards the average distance as it worked out of the fourteen nests recorded in the above study. The favourite nesting site round Hatley is in the forks of a spiræa bush, only once have I found a nest in an alder tree, twice in nut bushes, and once in a wild gooseberry bush. The average dimensions of eleven measured examples are as follows, viz.: outside diameter $3\frac{1}{2}$, inside 2 inches, outside depth $3\frac{1}{2}$, inside $1\frac{1}{2}$ inches. Like Farley, I have never seen a nest set snugly down into a crotch, it being always suspended and anchored by spiders’ silk to the fork or independent twigs helping to form its support. This characteristic is well exemplified in some beautiful examples I presented to our National Museum at Ottawa several years ago when residing at Hatley, the general outside construction consisting of somewhat coarse dry grasses—some of which often hang down six or even twelve inches—the lining consisting of the same material, only very fine, with the addition sometimes of a few long horse hairs, one of which in the present instance measured 29 inches in length. In some cases the nests are quite slovenly, reminding one of a certain type of the Indigo Bunting, in others they are thick walled, deeply cupped, and compactly put together, as well as being much larger than the other type. The average size of ten

sets of eggs—most of which are in the above museum—is .71 x .53, whilst the average number in a set—in my experience—is three, the markings varying from very fine spots indeed, to quite bold ones, which often form an open ring round the larger end. The earliest date I have ever found a complete set, is June 14th, whilst the latest, is July 21st. In one instance, as already recorded in the 'Auk,'¹ the complete clutch consisted of two eggs only, such a small set having previously been recorded by Dr. Coues only, so far as I am aware. In conclusion, although so imperfect, it is hoped that the present study may have brought out points of interest to some, in the home life of these very unobtrusive and little seen flycatchers.

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¹ Auk, Vol. XXXIII, 1916. No. 1, p. 72.