

Remarkable Nesting Site of the Black-fronted Dotterel

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Communicated by J. NEIL McGILP, R.A.O.U., Adelaide

A pair of Black-fronted Dotterels (*Charadrius melanops*) created a stir in the Adelaide station yard by selecting a nesting site between two rails of a track which is used many times during the day for shunting purposes. The nest, which was merely a hollow four inches across amongst some stones forming the ballast, was almost in the middle of the track, being two feet from the outside rail of the curve, and a ring of stones surrounded the nest. Two eggs were laid. The site, as selected above, was about 200 yards from the Torrens Lake, which is situated in the centre of Adelaide and contains fresh water.

The eggs were first seen on November 30, 1931, and the Dotterels sat continuously up to December 16. Workmen were constantly passing the spot and trains were regularly shunted over the particular track, chiefly in the daytime. Other shunting operations were carried on all day on adjacent lines. In fact, one line was only five yards from the nest, others eight, thirteen and seventeen yards away. The sitting bird would only leave the eggs when a train came on the nearest track, all of which were parallel to the one where the nest was placed.

Very little opportunity was obtained for watching the bird at night time, but Mr. F. C. White, who was on duty on Tuesday, December 14, saw the bird leave the nest during the night when a train approached on the line where it was sitting, and run a little distance away. Keeping watch while the train was moving he eventually saw the Dotterel return to its eggs when the train had cleared the hatching site. This occurred at 9 p.m. when there was a quarter moon and there were also a number of electric lights burning close by. The bird did the wounded wing trick on this occasion.

The Dotterel feigned being wounded on a number of occasions and I personally saw the trick performed at least six times. On Wednesday, December 9, I approached the nest and the bird got off and ran seven or eight yards away. It then went on another yard and did the wounded bird trick by spreading out its wings and alternately extending them with an irregular motion. I had not moved but the Dotterel went on another yard and repeated the performance. Then, as I did not make any movement at all, the bird, as if to make sure of my seeing its apparent plight, held up one wing fully extended in the air and drew it up and down several times. It then did the same with the other wing and used them alternately in this manner for some seconds.

On my moving away from the nest the Dotterel quickly resumed its interrupted sitting.

The next day I observed the bird do exactly the same thing when I got near enough to the nesting site. This time it quickly gave the distress signals and spread out its tail feathers in a fan shape. When doing the wounded bird act, the bird consistently turned its back to the observer. This is contrary to the usual practice of other birds.

On December 4 I saw a train being shunted over the track where the nest was situated. The carriages were preceding the engine and as the first carriage came close the bird stood up, ruffled its feathers and opened its mouth at the oncoming vehicle. It waited until the last moment before leaving the nest and then ran just clear of the line and returned to its eggs as soon as the train had passed.

Again on December 11 I observed a train approach the nest. When the engine was within six feet of it the bird opened its beak and lifted its wings. As the speed of the train was about ten miles per hour the bird only had about three seconds to get clear of the line before the engine reached the site. When the train had passed, the Dotterel lost no time in regaining its nest. A few minutes after this incident I passed within twenty feet of the spot when the bird stood up and was ready to run away if I came any closer. Moving engines and carriages were able to get closer to the bird than human beings before it left the nest.

A very interesting observation was made by Mr. H. Hartshorne on the same day. He saw a train shunting over the particular track and when three carriages had passed over the nesting place the train stopped with several carriages that had not yet passed over it. The Dotterel was then seen to run out from under the carriages to some little distance away. On this occasion the carriages were being pushed by the engine, which was, of course, at the rear. When the full train had moved on the bird soon regained its treasures—it must have been on the nest when the first three carriages passed over the spot.

Some employees saw a train moving towards the nest on December 12. The engine was drawing the vehicles and the bird waited until the last moment before giving way to the approaching danger. Before doing so, however, it raised its wings as if to defy the engine. Then, quickly jumping on to the line, it ran off while the train passed by, but lost no time in returning.

The Dotterel was by then becoming less afraid of moving cars and locomotives, and stationary cars certainly presented less terrors as the following incident will show. The bird was seen on the nest before a train moved, carriages first, over the line where it was situated. The nest was vacated when the cars got close, the bird being well away from the line. The train was stopped with one carriage

over the eggs but the Dotterel resumed its sitting nevertheless. For ten minutes the vehicles were standing there but as soon as they started to move again the bird ran clear of the track. It was only a few seconds in returning to its charge when the obstacle was removed.

Some of the most interesting incidents observed were those connected with the birds changing guard. Mr. J. Sutton, R.A.O.U., visited the spot with me on December 2 and while we were watching from a distance we saw what was evidently the male bird fly down near the nest and when it was within two feet of it the sitting bird left the eggs, ran a little distance and then flew off towards Torrens Lake. The relieving Dotterel immediately took a turn at sitting. This happened at 1.40 p.m. and the bird returned at 2.15 p.m., when the change over was again made. The male then flew away, also in the direction of the lake.

Nine days later we were both watching proceedings from a distance when the relieving bird arrived at 1.23 p.m. As we were only about twenty feet from the nest this bird would not go close to its mate but it did so as soon as we moved off to about twice the distance. The sitting bird then flew away about twenty feet and alighted. In that space of time the other bird had taken up its position on the eggs, so the female, apparently observing this, then arose again and was soon out of sight. On this occasion the "lunch hour" was only fifteen minutes as the female arrived again and resumed its duties after only a short respite. On another occasion two such changes were seen to take place in the space of half an hour.

Although it was known that the sitting parent would remain on the nest while carriages were being shunted over it, on no occasion was the bird seen to stay there while an engine was taken over it. Mr. J. Neil McGilp, R.A.O.U., who saw the site, was of the opinion that even the passage of a locomotive over the track would not frighten the bird away when once the young ones were hatched out. In fact, arrangements were made to divert all shunting from the line where the eggs were situated for the last few days of hatching until the young birds and parents had taken their departure. Tragedy occurred, however. The eggs were seen in the nest by a workman early in the morning of December 16; but a little later, when Mr. A. A. Wilkinson, who had the birds and eggs under daily observation, passed the site, he made the distressing discovery that they were missing. The eggs had mysteriously disappeared and not a trace of them could be found. The mother bird was running about excitedly near the spot. It remained in the vicinity until about 11 a.m., after which it was not seen again. Very extensive and thorough search failed to elicit the fate of the eggs. It was extremely disappointing to all concerned after so much interest had been taken in the proceedings.