

British Birds: A study of the home life of the Osprey

Many of you will be aware that BirdGuides recently published the first 100 years of *British Birds* on interactive DVD-ROM. This particular paper was published in June 1907, the very first edition of *BB*. Roger Riddington, current editor of *BB* writes, "It contains the very first photograph of a bird in *British Birds* and, even though it is of a bird (an Osprey) in the USA (an indication even then that *BB* would not be parochial), I think it is remarkable - it's of the bird in flight, coming into its nest - and it's pin sharp!! Which is surely absolutely extraordinary for the era."

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Fiona Barclay, BirdGuides.

British Birds

It is perhaps fitting that the first number of *British Birds* should contain an account of a bird which, as a breeding species in these islands, is reduced to a solitary pair or so. Of such is the heritage of the modern ornithologist! What trap and gun have not attained, the collector's zeal has accomplished.

In America, however, where the accompanying photographs were obtained, the Osprey is looked upon, not as a marauder and a robber, but as a welcome guest. All through the Northern States this species is found breeding in colonies. In the state of New Jersey Ospreys are protected by law to such an extent that they flourish exceedingly. Here there are no mistaken ideas about the preservation of trout, and the Fish Hawk, as the bird is popularly called, is ungrudgingly allowed to take his toll from the seas. Though there is no essential difference between the New World species and our own, yet our American cousins have dubbed it *P. haliaetus carolinensis*.

The colony I visited in July, 1903, is situated on an island not a hundred miles from New York City. Though perhaps there is far more romance in watching a pair tending their young on some solitary Highland loch, as so beautifully described in St. John's "Tour in Sutherland," yet to see some 300 pairs of these lovely birds congregating in one spot to breed is an awe-inspiring sight. Our island was some seven miles in length, yet all the nests were crowded into an area some two and a half miles long at the southern end.

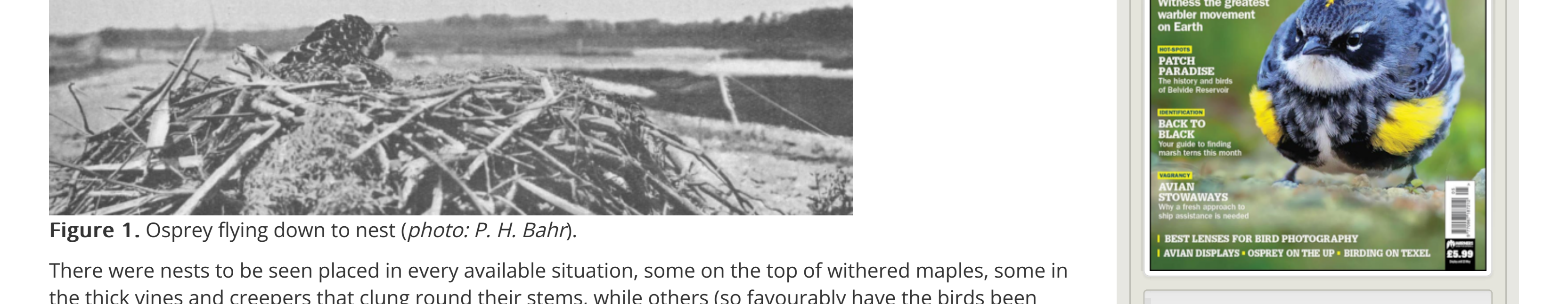


Figure 1. Osprey flying down to nest (photo: P. H. Bahr).

There were nests and were placed in every available situation, some on the top of withered baples, some in the thick vines and creepers that clung round their stems, while others (so favourably have the birds been protected) were placed flat upon the ground, more especially on the beach, where the piles of sticks rose, in one instance at least, to some five feet in height. The favourite situation for ground-nests was a narrow strip of beach separated from the rest of the island by a stretch of marsh (vide Fig. 1). Here we counted no less than four nests in half a mile or so. One nest, presumably inhabited the year before, was built upon the top of a shed.

The most picturesque situation perhaps was occupied by a nest upon a rock out at sea (vide Fig. 2). This nest fitted in with the classical descriptions. It contained three ferocious young, and was intolerable to the human nose on account of the decomposing fish by which it was surrounded. In building its nest nothing seems to come amiss to the Osprey, and the amount of flotsam and jetsam collected by one pair would make many a waggon-load. The large nest aforementioned might have been the work of a lifetime, and had been occupied probably many years. It contained besides sticks and bundles of seaweed, fragments of many a wreck, a pheasant's skeleton, a wheel of a child's mail-cart, and even then the bird did not stop to add such unconsidered trifles as corks of bottles. Nor does the building of the home appear to cease when the young are hatched, for often we observed the proud parent of three well-grown young come sailing along with a large bough dangling from its talons. The lining of the nest is made of seaweeds, and often a layer of cow-dung is added. Of the latter a large herd of semi-wild cattle on the island provided a plentiful supply.

As is well known, on the outskirts of its abode, the Osprey is not too proud to take in lodgers, and in the tree-nests was no uncommon sight to see three or four untidy structures of the Purple Grackle (*Quiscalus quiscula*), nor is the ubiquitous English Sparrow to be denied, for several pairs were to be seen in company with the Grackles, chirruping familiarly as in any London slum.

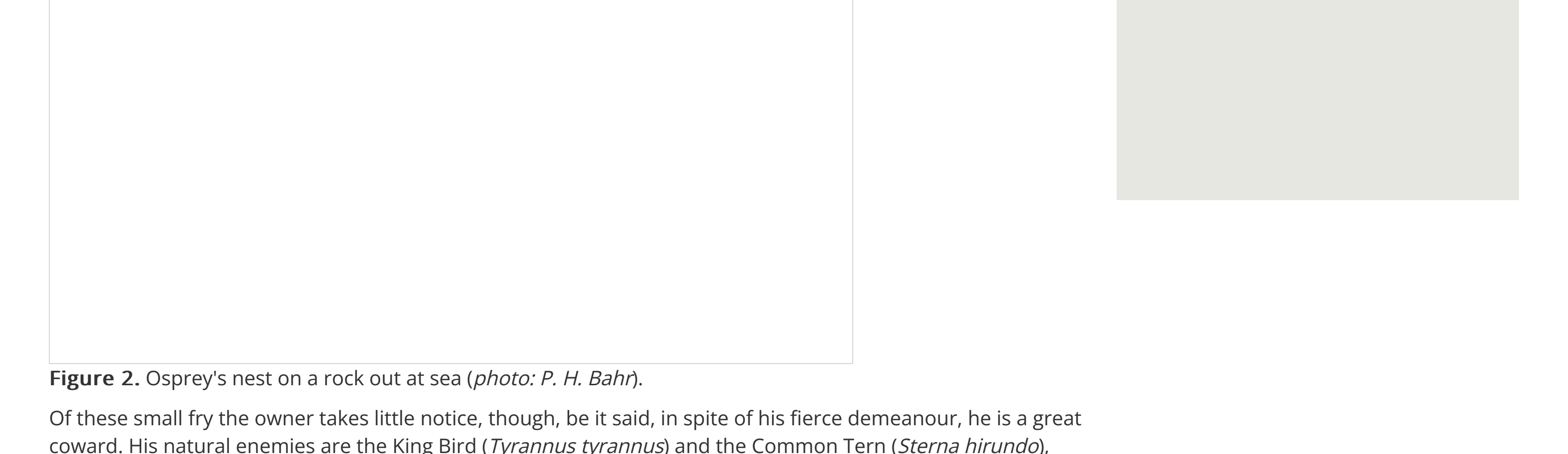


Figure 2. Osprey's nest on a rock out at sea (photo: P. H. Bahr).

Of these small fry the owner takes little notice, though, be it said, in spite of his fierce demeanour, he is a great coward. His natural enemies are the King Bird (*Tyrannus tyrannus*) and the Common Tern (*Sterna hirundo*), which, in parts of the island, made his life hardly worth living, pestering and bustling him wherever he dared to stir. The King Bird, in spite of its being about one quarter the size and one-tenth the weight of the Osprey, fully maintained its reputation of a tyrant. One bird in particular caused us great amusement. It so happened that he had taken a very particular liking to a withered bough, a perch of vantage whence to survey the world. It also happened that this bough was situated in the vicinity of an Osprey's nest, and no sooner did the Osprey dare to settle on this disputed territory than down would swoop his small tormentor, and he would have to "git."

With birds of prey, however, the Osprey is not so lenient, and on that account the Pheasants, turned down some fifty years ago, have, under his protection, thriven inordinately well.

Being purely a fish-eater, the most important part of the Osprey's day's work consists in soaring over the deep searching for his finny prey. The evenings and the early mornings are the favourite times for this pursuit. Then we would often observe some four or five circling round together, often at no great height above the water. One would make his mark, the great wings would close, and down on to the water with a resounding splash the bird would drop and disappear from view, to rise a second or so later with a silver fish, often, as we remarked with some surprise, of no great size. Then, shaking the spray off his plumage, he would slowly wend his way home.

No hurry to deliver the result of the catch was evinced, and a bird would sail round for hours in an aimless sort of way with the fish grasped firmly by both feet round the middle, the head and tail dangling downwards. The head of the fish, we noticed, was always carried foremost, as offering least resistance to the air. Small fish would be carried in one foot (vide Fig. 3), and I observed a bird on one occasion change a fish from one foot to the other during flight. If the fish being carried happened to be a large one it seemed that it would be a difficult matter for the bird to settle on a telegraph post (a favourite perch). This was, however, managed in a perfectly simple way. The right foot, which was being held behind the left, was suddenly brought forward and grasped the post at the same time as the left, carrying the fish, was brought on top with quite an audible smack, and thus the bird managed to balance itself upon the fish, and again upon its support.

The Osprey is not always fortunate in his fishing, and failures are many. He does not always manage to "strike" in time, and often emerges from a plunge empty-handed.

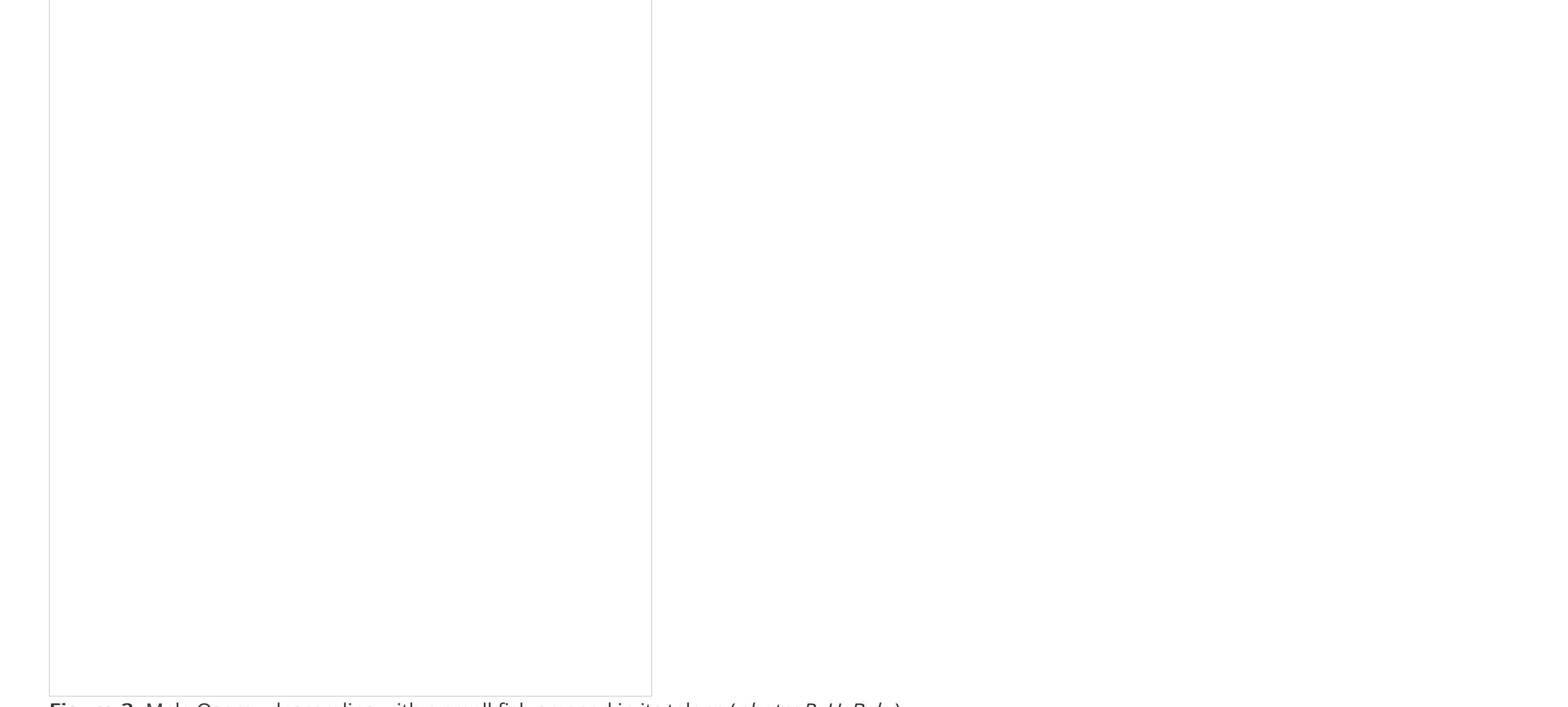


Figure 3. Male Osprey descending with a small fish grasped in its talons (photo: P. H. Bahr).

While lying in bed in our hut, on the edge of an inlet of the sea, I could, in the early mornings, hear the Ospreys plunging quite close; splash after splash resounded, one about every two minutes. But they were not always so friendly disposed towards one another; for often did they find cause for altercation, and would soar high, striking at each other with their talons, uttering cries of anger till, honour satisfied, they would peaceably return to their fishing.

A favourite way of getting a meal was that of visiting the fishermen's nets, where quantities of fish were imprisoned, and a plentiful meal assured with the minimum amount of trouble. When thus engaged the birds did not trouble to soar, but would merely fly along the surface of the water and snatch at the fish as they rose.

The chief prey of the Osprey appeared to be the "white fish," so called by the fishermen, and a smaller species with a large head. The largest fish I ever saw being carried by an Osprey was a flatfish, which, although partially eaten, weighed at least three pounds. The captor, exasperated by my presence near its nest, eventually let the fish drop, and it narrowly missed my head.

By means of an umbrella enveloped in green cloth, my companion, Mr. C. G. Abbott, was enabled to study the home life of this noble bird at a distance of some twelve feet. It took, however, two of us to deceive completely the anxious parent. One would fasten the other into the structure we politely termed a tent, and then walk ostentatiously away. Having once discovered that danger lurked inside the tent, the bird would refuse to return for the rest of the day, and it was useless to persevere.

A much more rapid and certain way of obtaining photographs was to lie partly concealed and watch, at a short range, through field glasses. Then, so familiar were they with the sight of man, that the Ospreys would return to their nests when we were hardly a hundred yards away. When the heat on the beach became unbearable we would retire into the sea, and from that cool resort were enabled to pull the string attached to the camera, and so take many of our best photographs.

Often would we observe the old bird; also evidently overcome by the heat, flap out to sea and dangle her legs and tail, and sometimes the tips of her wings, in the water, then, returning, she would spread this cool and grateful shade over her young. We could not, however, obtain any trustworthy evidence that water was "sprinkled" over the young.

On our approach to the nest the birds would evince great nervousness and would ascend and hover high over our heads, uttering a note like "killy, killy, killy," at the same time flapping their wings and dangling their legs in characteristic fashion. On no occasion were they at all ferocious and when they did swoop it was a very feeble pretence, in contradistinction to what has been elsewhere written.*

Some of the notes uttered struck us as being infantile for so large a bird, and reminded us strongly of a lost chicken calling for the brood-hen. When angered, however, the bird gives vent to a penetrating shriek sounding like "kee-kee-kee-kee-ich-ich-ich" the last part of which is uttered as if a bone were being coughed out of the throat. Again, when carrying a fish they would call, very appropriately, "fish, fish, fish".

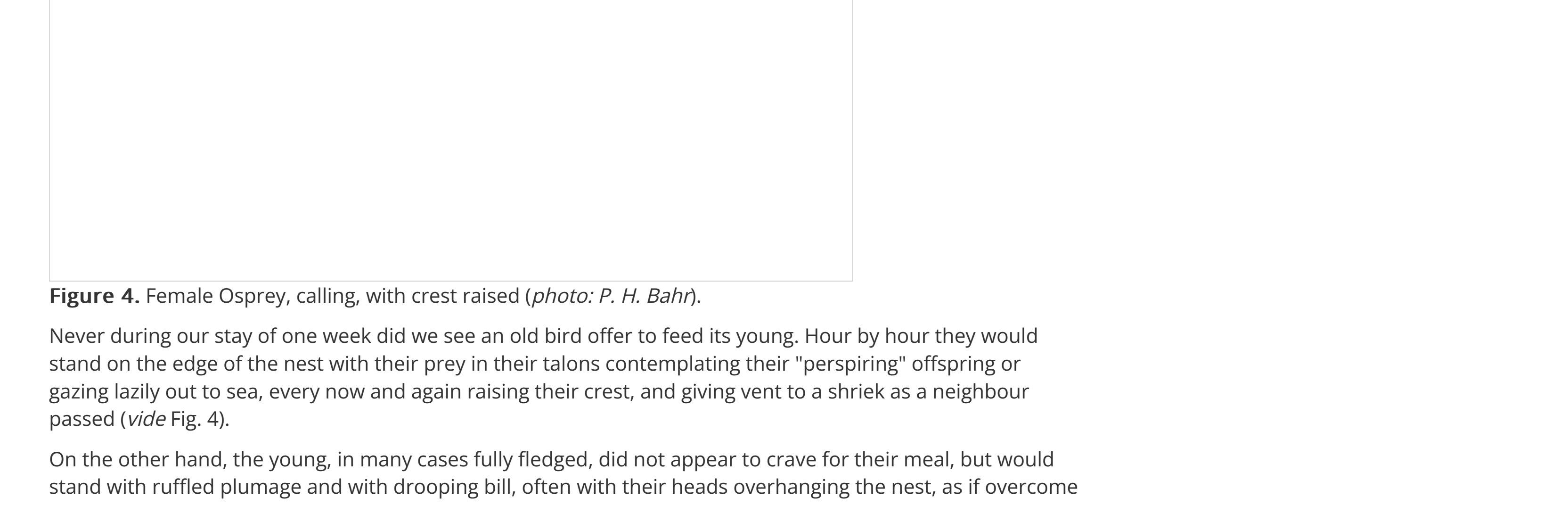


Figure 4. Female Osprey, calling, with crest raised (photo: P. H. Bahr).

Never during our stay of one week did we see an old bird offer to feed its young. Hour by hour they would stand on the edge of the nest with their prey in their talons contemplating their "perspiring" offspring or gazing lazily out to sea, every now and again raising their crest, and giving vent to a shriek as a neighbour passed (vide Fig. 4).

On the other hand, the young, in many cases fully fledged, did not appear to crave for their meal, but would stand with ruffled plumage and with drooping bill, often with their heads overhanging the nest, as if overcome by the heat. Totally unlike those on an islet in some Highland loch, of which we read as eagerly scanning the horizon for the advent of their meal.

Indeed, the most lethargic of creatures they appeared, save when we approached close or tried to handle them. Then they would assume the most absurd attitudes, such as one would hardly credit. They would be transformed into regular spit-fires, with every feather standing on end, their wings and tail raised and head lowered, and in every other possible ridiculous attitude. In spite of this show when we did lift them out of the nest they offered no resistance, nor did they attempt to peck, but merely scratched our hands in their frantic endeavours to obtain a foothold.

In many instances the young appeared to rely on their undoubted protective coloration for concealment, surely a rare trait amongst the *Raptores*. The fact remains that when lying spread out on their nest, they were apparently difficult to distinguish from their surroundings. The two shown squatting in Fig. 5 were a marked instance of this. They had evidently fallen out of their tree-nest when comparatively young, and judging from the amount of sticks and seaweed round them it seemed as if the old birds had attempted to build a new nest for them on the ground, indisputable is it that the structure bore a resemblance to a nest.

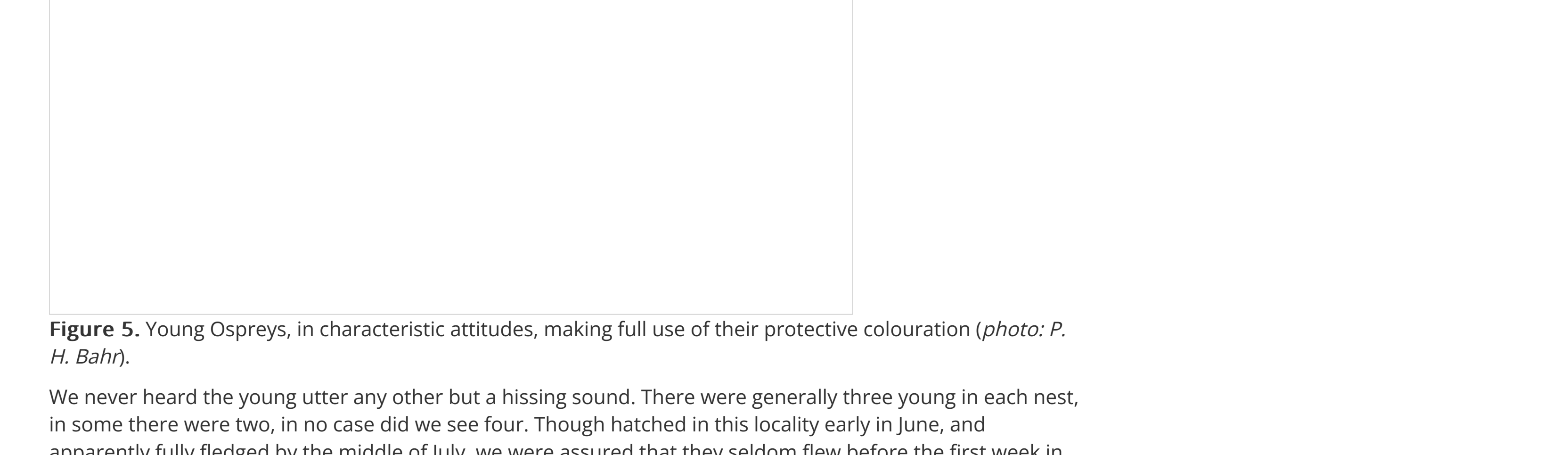


Figure 5. Young Ospreys, in characteristic attitudes, making full use of their protective colouration (photo: P. H. Bahr).

We never heard the young utter any other but a hissing sound. There were generally three young in each nest, in some there were two, in no case did we see four. Though hatched in this locality early in June, and apparently fully fledged by the middle of July, we were assured that they seldom flew before the first week in August, and as confirmation of this fact we saw many young with fully formed wings yet incapable of flight.

Of the eggs we saw but little. I remember finding three beautifully marked specimens, two in one tree-nest, which, by the way, though situated high among comparatively slender branches, was so firmly constructed that I was able to sit in it. Of these eggs I shall ever bear a lasting remembrance, for long exposure to the hot rays of the sun had rendered them somewhat "high", a fact which was emphasized when one exploded in my hand, and the contents were discharged all over my face. The New World eggs have a peculiar rancid, almost Fulmar-like odour, a fact pointed out to me by Professor Newton, and thus may be distinguished from those taken in Europe.

In addition to the Osprey on this island there were many other species replete with interest, which do not come under the category of British birds.

In conclusion I must, as ever, express my great indebtedness to my friend and companion, C. G. Abbott, well known in New York ornithological circles, of whose notes, a model of their kind, I have made full use.

* Vide Newton, "Diet. Birds," p. 662, and Nuttall, "Birds of United States," New edit., 1903, p. 30.

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Written by: P. H. Bahr, B.A., M.B.O.T.J.

Related Species

Osprey *Pandion haliaetus*

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