

The Male Flicker's Part in Incubation

By Alexander F. Skutch

RECENTLY I watched two nests of the Northern Flicker. Both were high up in dead trees, so far decayed that they seemed unsafe to climb, and I did not attempt to learn the number of eggs nor how many days were required to hatch them. What I wanted particularly to determine was the part taken by each sex in the incubation of the eggs, and whether the male or the female kept them warm during the night. At both nests it was the regular duty of the male to sit on the eggs during the hours of darkness.

The female occupied the nest during the late afternoon, and her mate came to relieve her as night approached. In clear weather, the males of both pairs delayed their arrival until a little after seven o'clock in the evening, when the last nearly horizontal rays of the setting sun filtered between the trunks of the flat woodland where the nests were located. The latest time of the arrival of the male which I recorded was 7.23. One evening I found one of the males looking out from his high doorway as early as 6.40, but he took three brief recesses, during which he called much, before he finally settled down in the nest for the night at 7.13. On a dark and rainy afternoon the male came to replace his partner at 6.22.

During the early morning hours, when their feathered neighbors, less

burdened with domestic cares, sang their cheerful morning songs and hurried about for their breakfasts, the male Flickers continued to sit quietly in their holes and warm their eggs, without breaking their fast. As the sun rose higher and the day became warmer, they climbed up to look out of their doorways with increasing frequency. At one of the nests, before which I began to watch at daybreak, the female did not appear to take her turn on the eggs until 8.35, four and a half hours after the Robins had announced the return of day with their dawn chorus. During all this time, the male Flicker stuck patiently to his task of keeping the eggs warm, with only a single brief recess of two minutes' duration. At the second nest, at least on the morning of my watch, the female was even less considerate of her mate. As the hours dragged by and still she failed to appear, the bird in the nest became increasingly impatient of the long delay. First he climbed out and clung to the trunk beside the entrance, where he carefully preened himself, spreading his wings and revealing the beautiful yellow shafts of the feathers as he carefully put them in order. His toilet complete, he crawled back into the hole, but as the day wore on the preenings became increasingly frequent. Time and again he leaned out of the



entrance for a look. A few minutes past 8 he came to his mate for the morning. But she did not come to his ringing *wick-a-b*. Soon after this he flew to a neighboring tree where he clung while he called *fee-ab*, then came back to his eggs. As he became more and hungrier, he called more for his undivided attention. He left the nest for breakfast but he never remained