



American Avocet

R. E. Ge

AN UNUSUAL AMERICAN AVOCET NEST

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On June 1, 1972, W. W. Smith and I explored a small island in Goosequill Lake, Alberta (30 miles SE of Red Deer). One end of this island consisted of a low, rocky spit with scant vegetation and white, salt-saturated soil. Here we found two American Avocet nests, one with seven eggs and one with eight eggs. Both clutches were comprised of two distinct types of eggs. The seven-egg clutch had three eggs different from the other four while the eight-egg clutch had four eggs different from the other four.

When we visited the island again on June 15, the nest and egg tally was substantially different. The nest of

seven eggs was the same. The egg nest was radically altered. At this location I discovered two nests of four eggs each (Fig. 1). Each "clutch" consisted of two dark toned eggs and two light toned eggs. Another nest had only a single egg. Two nests had four eggs, one with a clutch of similar eggs but the other had two eggs different from the remainder. A sixth nest had five eggs, of one type and two of another.

These observations indicate that two Avocets each laid their normal complement of four eggs in a common nest.^{1 2} A dispute then resulted and the eggs were divided between the two birds. It is unknown if



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1. Split clutch of American Avocet. Goosequill Lake, Alberta, June 15, 1972.

s rather than two birds were in-
ed. The outcome of this nest is
known.

ne observations also suggest a sur-
ng lack of nest fidelity on the part
ying females. Standard references
r to four eggs as being the normal
ch but it is not evident that all four
in an avocet nest are laid by only
bird. Gibson, in calculating the
ch size of American Avocets, ex-
ed nests with six or more eggs
n his data because he found two
nct types of eggs in such nests.²
observations reported above plus
y other avocet nests seen by
elf indicate that even four and
egg nests may be the product of
birds.

ch an unusual nest is but an ex-
ne example of highly interesting
aviour on the part of colonial
ets. Gibson's work showed that
n sexes incubate and defend
ories, although incubating birds
not leave the nest to defend the
territory from other avocets.² The
hanism by which territory is
ted in the formation of com-

posite nests is not known. Equally in-
triguing is the prospect that unpaired
females may be involved in these
nests. Gibson observed opportunistic
copulations by birds outside the pair
bond and eggs resulting from these
could well be deposited in existing
nests. Gibson also found that eight-
egg clutches had a lower hatching
success than smaller clutches. He at-
tributed this to the inability of birds to
adequately cover such clutches with
the brood patch. This lowered success
could also be at least partially explain-
ed by the four possible "parents" of
such a nest indulging in extensive
squabbling over incubation duties.
Prairie naturalists have the opportuni-
ty to make highly interesting
behavioural observations at local
colonies.

¹BENT, A. C. 1927. Life histories of North
American shore birds (Part 1). Smith-
sonian Inst. U.S. Nat. Mus. Bull. 142
(Dover edition, 1962)

²GIBSON, F. 1971. The breeding biology of
the American Avocet (*Recurvirostra
americana*) in central Oregon. Condor
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