

“After this the Cuckoo stood a minute or two, feeling back with its wings, as if to make sure that the Pipit was fairly overboard, and then subsided into the bottom of the nest.

“As it was getting late, and the Cuckoo did not immediately set to work on the other nestling, I replaced the ejected one, and went home. On returning next day, both nestlings were found dead and cold, out of the nest. I replaced one of them; but the Cuckoo made no effort to get under and eject it, but settled itself contentedly on the top of it. All this I find accords accurately with Jenner’s description of what he saw. But what struck me most was this: The Cuckoo was perfectly naked, without a vestige of a feather, or even a hint of future feathers; its eyes were not yet opened, and its neck seemed too weak to support the weight of its head. The Pipits had well-developed quills on the wings and back, and had bright eyes, partially open; yet they seemed quite helpless under the manipulations of the Cuckoo, which looked a much less developed creature. The Cuckoo’s legs, however, seemed very muscular, and it appeared to feel about with its wings, which were absolutely featherless, as with hands, the ‘spurious wing’ (unusually large in proportion) looking like a spread-out thumb. The most singular thing of all was the direct purpose with which the blind little monster made for the open side of the nest, the only part where it could throw its burthen down the bank. I think all the spectators felt the sort of horror and awe at the apparent inadequacy of the creature’s intelligence to its acts that one might have felt at seeing a toothless hag raise a ghost by an incantation. It was horribly ‘uncanny’ and ‘grewsome.’”

A few words more on this subject. My friend Mr. Noble, of Park Place, Henley-on-Thames, wrote to me thus on the 4th of May, 1871:—

“Mrs. Noble told me this morning that a Wagtail had built a nest in our dining-room balcony; on going thither I found the nest in a corner quite exposed, with three eggs in it, one much larger than the others; the two smaller ones were of a greenish colour with minute spots, the larger of a deeper green and more largely blotched. Can this be a Cuckoo’s?”

On Sunday, May the 21st, I saw this nest with four young birds, three lying by the side of the nest, from which they had evidently been but recently thrown, as they were plump and fresh. Allowing, therefore, that the Wagtail had laid a third egg on the 15th of May, and thirteen or fourteen days for the hatching of these birds, they must have been ejected in about three days after exclusion. On the 31st of the same month Mr. Noble again wrote:—“The Cuckoo is nearly fledged; he rises in the nest in the most hideous way, extending his neck like a serpent.”

Were we in possession of similar positive evidence of the means by which the Cuckoo’s egg is deposited in the dome-shaped nest of the Wren and in those of other birds, as we now have of those by which the young of the foster-parents are ejected, the history of the breeding-habits of this remarkable bird would be complete.