



As the male thrush lands with food for his young, his mate departs simultaneously beneath him.

Opposite: The male Hermit arrives with a beak full of caterpillars for his young charges.

maroon blotches. In addition, this nest was on the ground, and I had yet to find a Swainson's Thrush nest that wasn't in a bush or a tree. Checking my books at home confirmed my discovery—only the fourth such nest to be reported in over a hundred years of Yukon birding!

Two days later, I checked the nest to find four tiny young and one hatching egg. Although I was eager to begin shooting immediately, I knew that it would be wiser to wait a couple of days. On June 7, I began my set-up, which included placing my lights at an optimal distance for photography (four, five, and six feet away). Once my lights were in place and my blind was erected, I sat back and began to observe at close range how these thrushes reared their young.

I found early on that the female did all of the brooding, while the

male, resplendent in his coy rusts and browns, would drop in with food for both her and the young. Through the first few sessions I was able to take numerous full-frame shots of the female brooding, interspersed with several shots of the male bringing in caterpillars, spiders, and other small arthropods for the young to eat. As with other birds I had observed, the female would beg when the male came in, and I was able to get a few shots of them together in this posture.

One major disadvantage of photographing a nest built against a cutbank was the difficulty in placing a backlight behind it. There simply was no way to position the strobe so that I could light the birds from behind while they were at the nest. However, this situational disadvantage turned out to be a considerable aid. Because the thrushes had access to only one side, I was able to get great shots of the parents in flight, both to and from the nest. Moreover, the previously ineffective backlight now served to illuminate the birds very nicely because, in flight, they were a little distance from the nest. Satisfied



with this discovery, I concentrated on getting crisp, focused flight shots.

Pulling focus for a flying bird, even with a depth of field of f 22, is no easy task. I still had to essentially guess where the bird was likely to be in the frame when I took photos of it in flight. I found myself developing a small routine whenever I saw the birds approach the nest. I would prepare my initial focus on the side of the nest to capture the parent with its beak full of food, snap a couple of quick shots, and then I would hastily pull focus and adjust my zoom as the bird readied for departure. For this last frame I would only get one fleeting chance—leaving me with quite a few shots of birds' tails, out-of-position birds in flight, out-of-focus birds at the side of the nest about to take off, and, occasionally, nothing at all in the frame but a nest full of satisfied young.

However, I persevered and was eventually rewarded with some spectacular shots of the Hermits. One of my favourites is of the male coming in to land as the female departs beneath him. A few other pictures show off the beautiful cream-coloured band in the thrushes' wings as they fly off. I shifted the blind's position several times, trying to find the optimal angle for photography. Each day became a new challenge for me as I strove to top the results of the day before.

I was impressed by the vast amounts of caterpillars the Hermits were able to capture, and in one of my shots—a rather comical portrait—the male brought in a huge mouthful of bright green caterpillars and then deadpanned to the camera as if to say with a shrug, "What?" Spiders also proved a popular item with the young and were greedily devoured amidst clamours for more. It was no surprise that the babies grew rapidly with the amount of insect and arachnid protein they were receiving.

I was also interested in watching the Hermits as they approached the nest and foraged nearby. Inured to the blind and my presence by now, the thrushes would alight on a branch about 30 yards away and