

photograph a couple of plover species that I had found nesting in the area. It was a warm and sunny day, and my subjects were very co-operative. By 5 P.M. I decided to pack things up, satisfied with my photos. On my way back to Dawson, I stopped at kilometre 91 on the advice of a fellow birder who told me that there were many pairs of Least Sandpipers and Semi-palmated Plovers there. Sure enough, the habitat was ideal, and I saw a host of tiny shorebirds darting about in alarm at my approach. Several small streams converged into a larger waterway that coursed through gravel beds with plenty of low plant growth.

John Eriksson, a fellow photographer, was there already with his camera trying to capture some of these elusive birds on film. As we spoke briefly, he told me he had seen a Spotted Sandpiper flush in the area and that pairs of Arctic Terns were around, but he had been unable to locate nests for either species.

I was able to find the sandpiper nest almost immediately, but I had no time to look for the terns, as I had to travel back to Dawson to perform that evening. Since the area looked like a Mecca for small shorebirds, I made a mental note to return as soon as I could.

Four days later I made the long drive out to the same area, intending to thoroughly scout it out. If there were birds nesting there I was going to find them. It was very sunny and warm once again, and I saw quite a few birds—Common Redpolls, Lesser Yellowlegs, Semi-palmated Plovers, Least Sandpipers, Spotted Sandpipers, White-crowned Sparrows, and American Tree Sparrows were all there in abundance.

By early afternoon I had found a tiny pair of newly hatched Least Sandpiper young; a detailed search on my hands and knees had enabled me to spot them huddled at the base of a tiny willow bush. As I examined them closely, I noticed a white shape hovering over one of the streamlets a couple of hundred yards away. It was an Arctic Tern, fishing, and I knew that there had to be a nest in the area. I left

the baby sandpipers beneath their bush and resumed my trek.

I scanned the area carefully with my binoculars and saw another tern on the ground. I made a very careful mental note of the vegetation in the area so I could remember it on close approach. I then headed straight for the bird, eyes unwavering, hoping for her flush to reveal eggs.

When she did flush, I was about 50 yards away. With a burst of powerful wings and an indignant squawk, she rose almost straight up and hovered for a moment before moving off. I continued my beeline to the spot and arrived to find two eggs and some loosely arranged twigs. The eggs were a dark olive brown with chocolate splotches on them, and I noted that they each had a slightly different shape.

The nest was on a tiny peninsula amid two small stream tributaries. Small fish were abundant, which made this area an Arctic Tern utopia. I didn't have long to examine the eggs—which weren't pipped—as the aggressive terns began to dive-bomb me at once. When I was attacked, it was from behind, and the hovering terns made calculated strikes at my head with their beaks and claws. They descended upon me repeatedly, silent until they struck. A harsh and jarring croak punctuated each swoop. The first blow, although it didn't draw blood, was very painful. After that I withdrew, and it was a harrowing experience trying to navigate the rocky ground while keeping my head to the sky to watch for incoming flurries of beaks and legs, but I managed to flail my arms wildly enough to keep both birds at bay until I got out of range.

Fortunately, I had marked the spot with a bit of visible pink surveyor's tape just before the onslaught. Thus, I knew where to return. I spent the remainder of the day photographing a pair of American Golden Plovers in relative peacefulness, but my mind wandered often to thoughts of how I might safely survive a set-up session with the vigilant terns.

As June 26 dawned sunny and cool, I hatched



a plan to photograph the terns and headed up the Dempster yet again. As a series of preludes to the main event, I photographed my American Golden Plover pair one final time, a Wilson's Snipe on its nest, and then an agitated Whimbrel. By 4 P.M. I had managed to lug my equipment out to the tern nest, ready for their assault.

To figure out a strategy to defend myself against the Arctic Terns, I had come up with a crude but nonetheless effective method: I wore a milk crate on my head. It didn't stop the birds from attacking me repeatedly—and always from behind—but it allowed me to get my lights set up without a scratch. Once done, I retreated to the safety of the blind to watch.

I watched the terns for an hour and a half. They both stayed in the area but refused to come to the nest. Knowing what this meant—they

Sheltered by its parent's warm feathers, this young tern will leave the nest soon after hatching.