

# THE MIGRANT

A QUARTERLY JOURNAL  
DEVOTED TO TENNESSEE BIRDS

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## THE BLACK VULTURE—A BIRD OF THE SOUTH

By COMPTON CROOK, JR.

There is no better known bird in all our wide Southland than the Black Vulture, or Black Buzzard, as he is more commonly called. And yet, contradictorily, there is probably no bird so little known.

Let the reader recall any familiar landscape south of Virginia, and see if he can complete it without at least one Vulture wheeling in slow circles here in the blue sky. Probably he cannot. Without the bird the picture will be incomplete, unfinished.

The Black Vulture may almost be listed as a permanent resident in the Nashville region and Middle Tennessee. Almost, but not quite. For, while there are records of the bird for every month in the year, they are far from abundant for the midwinter season. Unless the month of January is unusually mild, the Vultures will disappear from over our hills for several weeks, having drifted southward to escape the more severe weather.

But not later than the second week in February they are back again, usually arriving before their well-known relatives, the Turkey Vultures. The Turkey, having a range extending much farther north than the Black, probably has a somewhat more definite migration, as the more venturesome of his race may nest as far north as New Jersey or New York.

The Black Vulture seems to pick out its nesting site early, regardless of the time the eggs are actually laid. This apparent tendency may be due to the fact that a pair will return year after year to the same nesting site, if they are not disturbed during the nesting season.

The earliest nesting date for the Nashville region is February 28; the latest date for a nest containing fresh eggs, May 4. But the time when the great majority of the birds are assuming home cares is the first two weeks in April. However, nests may be found throughout the month.

Disdaining the heights which his wonderful flying equipment allows him to conquer with such graceful ease, the Buzzard elects to nest near or on the ground. In the wooded ravines of Middle Tennessee a hollow stump, hollow log, or a low cavity in a standing tree is chosen. The writer has seen a nest in a cavity thirty feet from the ground, but this is unusual. Caves in the limestone escarpments along rivers and streams are also very common nesting sites in Middle Tennessee.

No nest is built; the two large bluish-white eggs, splotched with several shades of brown, being laid on the bare floor of the cavity or cave.

The Vulture, being a meat-eating bird that does not kill its own prey, is usually not very highly regarded because of that fact. And yet even the Bald Eagle is in times of stress a carrion eater.

The Vulture feeds its young by regurgitating partially digested food from its crop. But, should this seem repulsive, it must be remembered that the well-liked Mourning Dove and the tiny Ruby-throated Hummingbird feed by the same method.

It may be seen that a study of the habits of the Buzzard may well compare favorably in interest with a study of any other bird. Watch him as he rocks

on his wings so high in the air as to appear little more than a speck against a cloud. His keen telescopic eyes are interpreting every detail of the landscape below him. Perhaps he is following with interest the course of a Turkey Vulture cruising low up and down the valleys. Should the Turkey find food, the Black will lose no time in dropping down for a share.

As this is written it is time for the Black Vulture to begin to nest. A pair of them in some great bare tree, going through their awkward, ridiculous courting antics, will furnish amusement and at the same time arouse speculation as to the possible location of the home site. By the time the nest is found the Vulture will no longer be considered the leper, the "unclean" of the bird world, but will have assumed his proper place as an interesting character in his own right.

Nashville, Tenn., March 1, 1931.



## ABOUT NESTING BOXES

By A. F. GANIER

Much misdirected effort has been wasted in the incorrect construction and improper placing of nesting boxes for birds. A nest box should be, in design and situation, a close approximation of the cavity the bird would naturally find in the open. Such a site is usually a natural cavity or one excavated by a Woodpecker or Chickadee. Such cavities are usually in a dead or partly dead tree or in a post or pole, from which it is apparent that the usual situation is an open one, rather than under leafy shade. Open situations, too, are preferred because of protection from small Hawks that might be lurking near, and because in sunny situations the frequently damp cavities dry out more quickly after rains. With the above in mind it is a good rule to place practically all nest boxes on a post or pole, from seven to fifteen feet above the ground and neither too close to trees or to where people are in the habit of walking or working. Equally important is the matter of design. Most boxes are too large. Except for Martins, they should have but one compartment. A bird will balk at carrying double the ordinary amount of nest material in order to fill a big box, or to fill it up to the proper level. A Bluebird will not nest in a shallow box, nor will a Wren nest in a deep one. The blueprint plan accompanying this article shows the most successful style for the cavity nesting species named on the plan, for the reason that it approximates a cavity excavated by a Woodpecker. The removable top makes it easy to inspect and clean out as soon as the young leave. If Flickers or Owls are expected to use this box it should be provided with an inch of coarse sawdust.

The House Wren does not nest in Tennessee, but the more attractive Bewicks and Carolina Wrens takes its place. To attract them, nail a small box about twelve inches long, five inches wide and from five to seven inches deep on the back porch within four inches of the ceiling. The top should be entirely open. This box may be placed in an open shed or outbuilding and similarly located. A rafter plate in an outbuilding is acceptable to them, provided a short board or two is placed against the sides to hold the nest in place.

Another good Wren box is the "attic entrance type," shown in Farm Bulletin 609, since it combines privacy, compactness and cleanability. Wren boxes should be placed out of reach of children and cats. House Sparrows usurp many of our nest boxes and about the only way to keep them down is by the use of a small shotgun. The same treatment is recommended for stray cats, or else these prowlers may be trapped. In U. S. Farm Bulletin 1456, "Homes for Birds," will be found other plans and information.

## HAWKS AND OWLS

By H. P. JAMS

All huntsmen and most sportsmen will go out of their way to kill a bird of the Hawk or Owl family. It has been handed down that they are 'vermin' and that they destroy the game the hunters desire to kill. This is a mistaken idea, as the Hawk and Owl families, taken as a whole, are our friends and are highly beneficial birds. A bird is deemed beneficial or harmful according to its food habits. The larger and slower Hawks and Owls feed on field rats, mice, snakes, gophers, chipmunks and other enemies of the ground nesting game birds.

In Pennsylvania (and you can't talk long about good game laws without bringing in Pennsylvania) some years ago, to protect the game, they put a bounty on the heads of all Hawks and Owls. The rodents increased and the game decreased and the State soon found out its mistake. Special laws were passed to protect the beneficial Hawks and they made haste to import as many Hawks as they could get.

In south Georgia are some big hunting preserves owned by Northern capitalists who gave their wardens instructions to kill or trap the overabundant Marsh Hawks (the Marsh Hawk being a large, low-flying bird with a white patch on its rump). Then the Quail on the preserves began to decrease and the owners imported some Mexican Bob White, but to no avail. Finally, the owners chipped in and had the Government send an expert from the Biological Survey to conduct an investigation. His report was very simple—since the destruction of the Hawks the Cotton Rats and the Black Snakes had increased in such numbers that it was just impossible for any ground-nesting birds to hatch. Needless to say, the Marsh Hawks live in peace in that section now.

The outlaws of the Hawk family, which has put the whole tribe in bad, are the Goshawk, a Northern species that doesn't come here; the Sharp-shinned Hawk, which is too scarce to count; and the Coopers Hawk. The latter is the worst offender of all, and if the huntsmen could be sure of its identity it would be well to destroy it. But the chances are five to one that the huntsmen would kill one of the beneficial Hawks, as the Coopers Hawk, though rather common, is very shy and cunning and it is very seldom that one gets within shooting range. On the other hand, the good Hawks are rather sluggish and perch in exposed places.

The Coopers Hawk—"Chicken Hawk," or "Blue Darter," as it is sometimes called—is a medium-sized bird of bluish color. It has pointed wings and a rather long tail. It is swift in flight and likes the shelter of the woodlands.

The Hawks that should be protected are the Red-Tailed, Red-Shouldered, Marsh and Broad-Winged, which are all slower and larger than the Coopers Hawk, and our little Sparrow Hawk, which feeds largely on grasshoppers and mice.

The three species of large Owls in this section are the Great Horned, Barn and Barred. The Great Horned, or "Hoot Owl," is the outlaw of this group. His name will identify him, as he has "ears" or "horns". He is very destructive to wild life. Before you shoot, however, be sure to see his ears, as both the Barn Owl (sometimes called "monkey-faced") and the Barred Owl are highly beneficial. The status of our little Screech Owl is doubtful. He eats lots of mice and beetles, but is not averse to song birds. I would not want many at my place.

Remember, that in the good old days, when game was abundant, Hawks and Owls were even more abundant. So if you want to help the cause of conservation never kill a Hawk or Owl unless you are absolutely sure of its identity.

Knoxville, Tenn., February, 1931.

## CHRISTMAS CENSUS—1930

	Nashville.	Memphis.	Knoxville.
Double-crested Cormorant	5	—	—
Mallard Duck	105	20	1
Black Duck	47	—	—
Lesser Scaup Duck	45	25	—
Ring-necked Duck	110	10	—
Old Squaw Duck	8	—	—
Coot	62	8	—
Wilson Snipe	2	11	—
Killdeer	12	3	2
Dove	1	3	4
Turkey Vulture	5	1	—
Black Vulture	2	1	—
Red-tailed Hawk	2	—	—
Sparrow Hawk	6	1	—
Great Horned Owl	1	—	1
Kingfisher	3	3	2
Hairy Woodpecker	5	5	1
Downy Woodpecker	10	16	8
Yellow Bellied Sapsucker	2	3	2
Pileated Woodpecker	4	—	2
Red-headed Woodpecker	18	13	—
Red-bellied Woodpecker	7	10	4
Flicker	43	60	7
Blue Jay	12	63	14
Crow	127	10	2,100
Starling	1,800	—	500
Cowbird	50	—	—
Meadow Lark	3	27	12
Bronzed Grackle	2,525	60	—
Purple Grackle	—	—	100
Purple Finch	4	—	—
Savannah Sparrow	5	—	—
Goldfinch	33	73	1
White-Crowned Sparrow	8	—	—
White-throated Sparrow	73	500	52
Field Sparrow	77	5	39
Junco	267	275	130
Song Sparrow	69	120	28
Swamp Sparrow	3	—	—
Fox Sparrow	5	8	—
Towhee	62	15	23
Cardinal	23	80	14
Cedar Waxwing	20	35	—
Myrtle Warbler	10	60	6
Mockingbird	31	22	20
Carolina Wren	17	54	22
Bewick Wren	1	—	—
Winter Wren	10	12	3
White-breasted Nuthatch	2	3	19
Brown Creeper	3	14	1
Tufted Titmouse	18	44	13
Chickadee	25	35	55
Goldencrowned Kinglet	3	14	3
Hermit Thrush	3	11	1

Robin .....	22		1
Bluebird .....	31	35	6
Herring Gull .....		2	
Ring-bill Gull .....		12	
Bob White .....		25	62
Cooper's Hawk .....		1	
Barred Owl .....		2	
Phoebe .....		1	2
Red-winged Blackbird .....		300	
Logger-head Shrike .....		3	
Brown Thrasher .....		6	
Sharp-shinned Hawk .....			1
Screech Owl .....			1
Ruby-crowned Kinglet .....			1
Pine Warbler .....			1
Totals .....	5,838	2,120	3,246
Species (70 in all) .....	56	51	42

Knoxville: John J. Hay, Brockway Crouch, Mary Beard, Earl Henry, H. P. Ijams.

Memphis: Scout Troop No. 1, B. B. Coffey, Jr., E. S. Henrick, W. A. Allen, Jr., Robert Reinert, George Reed.

Nashville: J. R. Baker, Compton Crook, Mrs. Sanford Duncan, A. F. Ganier, Dr. Wayland J. Hayes, Dr. and Mrs. George R. Mayfield, Harry Monk, Ernest Spain, Dr. H. S. Vaughn, George B. Woodring.



## NESTING DATA ON MIDDLE TENNESSEE BIRDS

By VERNON SHARP, JR.

There are numerous fields of endeavor in connection with the study of bird life that might easily hold our attention and interest, varied though they are. Each phase is unique in its particular scope and appeals to us in a different manner. Many specialize with their songs; others are most keenly concerned with migration; while some delve deeply in a scientific research of their minute habits. Regardless of our specialty, we all have at least an inquisitive interest in their breeding and nesting peculiarities, and the purpose of this short article will be to list, with some systematic arrangement, the order of nesting our better known species. Those nesting, roughly speaking, after the middle of May will be discussed in the next issue of *The Migrant*.

Even though the cold blasts of winter are still in evidence the earliest of our Owls, the Great Horned, nested some weeks ago (about January 20), and now has young, which will be ready to fly before many of the warblers start their annual trek northward.

During the month of March there are only some half dozen birds that should be nesting. By March 4 the notorious Black Vulture has usually selected some hollow tree or rock cave in which to deposit her two beautiful eggs. As the middle of the month arrives the weird little Screech Owl, the wary Woodcock and the majestic Red-tailed Hawk have begun incubation, to be followed by the Killdeer and a true falcon of old, the Duck Hawk, in the closing stages of the month. Though the number of species for March is small no more interesting and varied selection could be imagined, with a nocturnal member, a carrion vulture, probably the outstanding of birds of prey, a rare game bird, and the noisy, well-known Killdeer. Pages could be



written on each individual, but in so short a space only two of the outstanding thrills in the entire scheme of birdlife, to my mind, will be mentioned. First comes the mating flight and song of the Woodcock as he leaves the ground at twilight, after a series of dull, monotonous calls, flying in circles upward and upward with increasing rapidity and whistling wing beats, only to climax the performance with a series of clear notes before it makes a sudden drop for the earth, to repeat the concert for the attentive female on her nearby nest. Again, picture the Duck Hawk in his native haunts on some huge rock cliff overlooking a deep ravine as he leaves his lofty eyrie with nervous wing beats and spasmodic soaring along with a penetrating duck-like call. This very spectacle itself brings to mind those thrilling legends of the days of falconry.

To summarize rapidly those that nest in April with an appropriate average date, we find the Crow, April 2; Turkey Vulture, April 2-10; Mourning Dove, April 5; Tufted Titmouse, April 10; Carolina Chickadee, April 12; Bluebird, April 14; Red-winged Blackbird, April 20; Towhee, April 14; Cardinal, April 14; Red-bellied Woodpecker, April 15; Phoebe, April 16; Black and White Warbler, April 22; White-breasted Nuthatch, April 18; Flicker, April 18; Field Sparrow, April 20; Hairy Woodpecker, April 15; Pileated Woodpecker, April 20; Bronzed Grackle, April 15; Carolina Wren, April 20; Bewick Wren, April 21; Kingfisher, April 22-26; Mockingbird, April 24; Blue Jay, April 25; Yellow Warbler, April 28; Barn Owl, April 28; Blue-grey Gnatcatcher, April 28; and lastly, Louisiana Water Thrush, April 28. Of this group one particularly interesting fact should be mentioned concerning the Mourning Dove. This quiet, unassuming member has been known to be either building, brooding or feeding young in nine months of the year—all except December, January and February. Let's sincerely hope that in the years to come our Legislatures will deem it expedient to delay the open season on this beautiful bird for at least four weeks, to afford an opportunity for the young to develop fully.

As May arrives we can expect a new specie to start nesting most every day. In tabulated form these would be included: Sparrow Hawk, May 1; Cooper's Hawk, May 2; Bachman Sparrow, May 2; Rough-winged Swallow, May 3; White-eyed Vireo, May 3; Migrant Shrike, May 3; Parula Warbler, May 5; Brown Thrasher, May 5; Maryland Yellow-throat, May 5; Barn Swallow, May 6; Cowbird, May 2-15; Bob White, May 7; Red-eyed Vireo, May 8; Prothonotary Warbler, May 9; Wood Thrush, May 10; Meadow Lark, May 10; Baltimore Oriole May 10; Chipping Sparrow, May 11; Red-head Woodpecker, May 13; Catbird, May 13; Chuck-Wills-Widow, May 15; Downy Woodpecker, May 15; Warbling Vireo, May 15; Orchard Oriole, May 16; and Yellow-throated Vireo, May 16. In this varied assortment we will find a great many examples of architectural beauty in nest construction. For example, the Blue-Gray Gnatcatcher, with its delicate bowl, is a magnificent creation, or the Parula Warbler, with its nest suspended in the long usnea moss of our uplands. There's the graceful Barn Swallow, which makes a nest of mud plastered on a beam and lined with snow-white feathers. On the other hand, it is hard to visualize more unique designs than those of our Orioles, the Vireos or our earlier Warblers.

These nesting dates are only given as an indicator and cannot be followed except as a guide, as individual pairs may vary greatly from the typical. An early warm spell, a prolonged winter and a destroyed first set are a few of the factors causing these irregularities. Again, successive seasons may be typically early, and, from weather conditions to date, we may expect a rather early nesting period during the spring of 1931.



## THE ROUND TABLE

Since the Great Horned Owl is the earliest of our birds to begin its nesting, it is in order that its likeness grace our cover page at this season. The drawing is copied from Audubon and, to one who really knows this "tiger among the birds" in its forest haunts, it seems the best likeness that has ever been drawn. At such times it is the personification of alertness and presents a far different appearance than the captives we see slouching in the zoos.

H. P. Ijams, our East Tennessee Vice-President, writes that on January the third a Golden Eagle was captured alive in Monroe County and brought to Knoxville. It had gotten tangled in a barbed wire fence during a snow-storm; we suspect some wily Brer Rabbit lured him into the meshes.

Messrs. Ganier, Mayfield, McGill and Shaver attended the meeting of the Wilson Ornithological Club at Cleveland, Ohio, during the week following Christmas. A pretty good delegation, considering the distance. President Ganier returned via Washington, where he spent two days at the United States Biological Survey looking over such data as they had on Tennessee birds. He reports that there was hardly a State represented by such meager data as is ours.

Snowy Oil Visitors: Several records of this species (*Nyctea nyctea*) have been reported during the past winter in Tennessee. One was captured at Reelfoot Lake on December 3 and sent to Nashville, where it was mounted by Edgar McNish. Another was shot near Johnson City on December 31 and sent to Knoxville, where it was seen by H. P. Ijams. From the Memphis area B. B. Coffey, Jr., reports two records of this owl. One was taken at Paris, Tenn., on December 22 and the other at Como, Miss., forty miles south of Memphis, on December 19. Both specimens were examined by him. The unusual visitation of this boreal species is possibly due to a scarcity of rodents in the North, caused by the excessive drouth of last summer. An earlier record in our Curator's file is that of a specimen shot near Paris, Tenn., on February 3, 1918, a foot having been sent to him for identification.

Our near neighbor, "The Kentucky Warbler," the organ of the Kentucky Ornithological Society, lists a very large number of species seen during Christmas week. The records that they make are very nearly interchangeable with our own. This publication carries the up-to-date bird news of our sister State.

SPRING FIELD DAYS: Sunday, May 17, has been tentatively set as the date for this annual and always enjoyable affair, and it is hoped that a number of our members from a distance can arrange to attend. For those who just can't wait that long it is probable that we shall have a preliminary, a sort of "warming up" affair, say on April 19. This "preliminary" is a rain or shine, mud or dust proposition, so only the hardiest hikers should count on it.

MEETINGS: Well attended meetings have been held this year, bi-weekly, on January 5, 19, February 2, 16 and March 2. Future meetings are scheduled for March 16, 30, April 13, 27, May 11, 25, and into June. If you are missing these meetings, you are missing a treat. A feature paper, round table field notes, and important discussions make each of them well worth while. Meetings are at Peabody College, main building, at 8 p. m.

Mr. Harry P. Ijams, Vice-President at Knoxville, announces that the Annual Spring Census for East Tennessee will be held at his "Island Home" farm on April 26, 1931. He is expecting a large delegation from the T. O. S. to help him.

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