

A PHOTOGRAPHIC STUDY OF THE POTOO IN COLOMBIA

JOSÉ IGNACIO BORRERO H.

Photographs by the author

Little has been published about the Common Potoo. The following paper by Alexander F. Skutch is the most thorough study yet reported on this bird. Still, many questions remain unanswered.

On 13 January 1969, I began to study a pair of Crimson-crested Woodpeckers (*Phloeoceastes melanoleucus*) that nested in an old *Cecropia* tree at the edge of the Cauca River near Cali, Colombia. One of them flew to another *Cecropia* tree some 200 meters away. As I focused my telescope to locate the woodpecker, I encountered a Common Potoo (*Nyctibius griseus*) perched on a truncated branch some 15 meters from the ground. It sat erect with its bill in a horizontal position. I approached to observe it better. As I arrived within 25 meters of the tree where it was sitting, the potoo raised its head slowly, its bill assuming a nearly vertical position. It closed its eyes so that only dark slits marked their position. It remained stationary.

The Common Potoo requires an upright, broken branch of certain thickness on which to roost and nest, and also one that has a slight depression in the end of sufficient depth to support an egg.

The adult blends well with its surroundings, as can be seen easily in the photographs—so much so that I frequently had difficulty pinpointing the bird the following day, although I knew where its nest was. The bird's behavior greatly enhances the crypticity of the plumage.

I continued to visit the site and observe the potoo as often as other commitments permitted—usually two or three times each week. Whenever I did, I tried to photograph it. On 25 January, I found a second potoo sitting, like the other, at the end of a truncated branch and at about eight meters above the ground. Approximately 500 meters of mostly open country separated the trees in which the two potoos roosted.

By 11 February, it was apparent that both potoos were sitting with nestlings. I do not know when these young hatched. Both were small and inconspicuous, being almost completely covered by the parent most of the time. When they were exposed, they did not raise the bill at this early age although the parent always did so whenever I was in the vicinity.

The nests of both birds were in the end of a broken vertical branch less than eight inches in diameter and with a shallow depression less than one inch deep.



Figure 1. A Common Potoo sits in a cryptic posture, its mottled plumage simulating the bark of the tree.



Figure 2. Another potoo appears to be an extension of the branch on which it rests. A single chick can be seen sitting in front of the adult.



Figure 3. A young potoo, probably three weeks old, photographed on its nest, a slight depression in a broken branch.



Figure 4. This young potoo, now about five weeks old, sits on its nest in the cryptic posture typical for its species.



Figure 5. At about six to seven weeks of age, this bird flew from the nest when I climbed the tree to photograph it.

On 13 February, I noted the accelerated development of the young birds, but still they were inconspicuous, especially when seen from the ground.

By 15 February, the nestlings had grown so large that I could see them with ease when they stood at the edge of the nest in front of, or at the side of, the parent. The nestlings wore a conspicuous cream-colored plumage that had a pale pinkish tint. I noted that now the young potoos in both nests also raised the bill and remained stationary when they were conscious of my presence.

On 1 March, I decided to watch for the parents arriving to feed the nestlings, to find out, if possible, at what hour they did so. Placing an observer at one nest, I hid some 15 meters from the other nest. At 18:55 hours, at the nest I was watching, an adult flew into the nest tree, passing in front of me at a height of only about three meters. It was already dusk. At 19:03 an adult arrived and landed at the nest beside the young bird. I could see the two silhouettes perfectly, but it was too dark to observe any details or activity. The observer at the other nest had seen a large bird, possibly one of the parents, leave a neighboring tree.

With the hope of photographing a nestling at close range, I attempted to capture one on 11 March. My activity in climbing the tree caused it to fly, possibly for the first time. It landed at a site about one hundred meters away. When I found this nestling, it was alert and stationary with the bill in a horizontal position. As I tried to capture it, it flew again, this time another 50 meters and obviously with greater difficulty. I located it this time, sitting on a low branch of a shrub where I finally caught and photographed it. When I replaced the nestling gently in its nest, it remained quiet, showing no intention of flying and allowing me to approach no less than 20 inches with my camera. Although at this distance it did not attempt to camouflage itself by characteristically raising its bill, it did show intention to attack or strike by opening its enormous mouth and facing me.

During the day the nestlings panted and gular-fluttered forcefully with bill partially opened and directed upward. The tropical sun, from which they had practically no protection, shone directly on them at times.

By 19 March, the parents had abandoned their respective nests and were possibly roosting nearby, but not in the nest trees and no amount of searching in the neighboring trees revealed their whereabouts.

On that day I brought one of the nestlings down from the tree and photographed it. Then I returned it to its nest. By now, 19 March, the tarsi were grayish, the bill black with a white tip, and the eyes large and yellow with greatly reduced pupils. The general plumage coloration was cream with a pale pinkish hue, with the pink more pronounced on the forehead. Above and below the fine dark spots, characteristic of the adult, stood out. And already I perceived the well, but not yet fully, developed remiges and rectrices.

On 17 March, I noted that for the first time one of the nestlings was sitting outside its nest—about five meters away—on another branch in the same tree. By 20 March, the other nestling had abandoned its nest completely. Two days later both the young and the adults disappeared. I have not seen any potoos since in the vicinity.

THE LIVING BIRD

NINTH ANNUAL

of the

Cornell Laboratory
of Ornithology

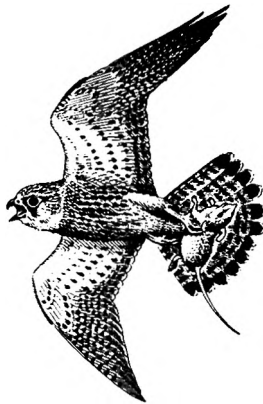
1970

Edited by

OLIN SEWALL PETTINGILL, JR.

and

DOUGLAS A. LANCASTER



Published by

The Laboratory of Ornithology

at

Cornell University, Ithaca, New York

1970