

NESTING OF THE TURKEY VULTURE

BY W. BRYANT TYRRELL

Plates 16-17

ON the afternoon of January 16, 1932, while walking along the Patapsco River in the Patapsco State Forest, about ten miles west of Baltimore, Maryland, I noticed a large number of Turkey Vultures (*Cathartes aura septentrionalis*) soaring high above us, some so high that they were mere specks against the bright sky. There were hundreds of them and their intermingling circles made a kaleidoscope pattern as we watched them through the bare branches of the trees. As the shadows lengthened, the birds came to roost in the uppermost branches of several tall trees. On February 22, we again visited this roost and concealed ourselves near three roosting trees. It was interesting to watch the great birds as they came sailing noiselessly over us, their naked red heads gleaming in the last rays of the sun, their dark, silvery-lined wings moving only to catch the movements of the air currents. Some, after alighting, would shake themselves until every feather was ruffled, giving them a most unkempt appearance. Others would alight on branches where one or more were already roosting and the impact of their landing would throw those already there off their balance, resulting in many awkward and ludicrous balancing movements of body and wings. A few would sit and preen, while some were always watching the movements of their neighbors, cocking their heads first on one side and then on the other to see each newcomer. A few seemed to be resting oblivious of what was going on around them. Quiet reigned as dusk deepened into darkness, with only an occasional bird coming to roost. At 5.30 p.m. when it was quite dark, we counted 147 birds in the three trees in front of us. Probably as many more were in other nearby trees, so that there must have been between three and four hundred birds in the roost.

On April 15, 1933, while hunting for Red-shouldered Hawks' nests in a piece of virgin timber on the Middle Branch of the Patuxent River, near Laurel, Maryland, we found a Turkey Vulture's nest by the side of a fallen tree, an ideal location for photographing. The nest, which contained two fresh eggs, was merely a slight depression around which were a few sticks. Our next visit was on April 30. As we approached the region of the nest the buzzard rose with heavy wing beats until it cleared the tree tops and then joined its mate who was gracefully circling above. The two eggs, though somewhat soiled, were still there. We were unable to visit the nest again until May 21. As we came near, we saw the old bird on the nest, with her head under the log. We approached stealthily and soon were so close that we thought she must have been injured, but I was taking no

chances, and cautiously got closer and closer until I was able to grab her. When I lifted her from the nest and disclosed the helpless young, she made no sound, nor did she struggle to get away, but lay limp in my hands. To our surprise, when she was released she went back to the nest and covered her downy young. Several times we picked her up, releasing her each time farther from her nest, only to have her run clumsily, with wings dragging, back to her young. We wanted to get her out of the way so that we might work with the young. Taking her from the nest had no effect, so we put her on the log above. No sooner had we let her go than off she flew.

The young were helpless little creatures, unable to hold up their heads for long, unable to stand, just a bundle of white down not as big as one's fist, with face, bill, front of the neck and the crop a bluish black, while the legs and feet were a dirty gray. We estimated that they were three or four days old but were later informed by A. C. Bent that they were probably nearly a week old. Two weeks later, on June 4, we again visited the nest. In this time the young had trebled in size but otherwise looked the same, except that the sheaths of the primaries, which were about three-quarters of an inch long, were beginning to show, each tipped with a tuft of down. On this visit while we were near the young they were almost continually uttering a hissing sound like escaping steam. They were clean, as was the nest area, and fairly free from odor until after we started to handle them. Then they proceeded to disgorge the vilest-smelling material I have ever been near. A heron rookery, where the stench is terrible, is mild compared to the odor of that disgorged putrid food. By June 24 the young had grown considerably. Although they were still mostly covered with white down, the primaries and their sheaths were then about four inches long, the secondaries about three inches long, the coverts were beginning to show, and the tail feathers were about two inches long. The young birds resented our approach and when we were near, uttered their hissing noise, though not as continuously as on our last visit. Their feet and legs had grown sufficiently so that we could band them. The band numbers were C 616458 and C 616459.

My partner on these visits, Edward McColgan, and I shall long remember our visit of July 4. The recent heavy rains had swollen the river over its banks and after the water had subsided a film of soft mud about two inches deep covered everything. We made our way cautiously through the hot, sultry woods, trying to avoid slipping in the soft mud among the nettles. On reaching the nest we found that the young had changed considerably. They were about eight weeks old and of nearly adult size with the feathers of the wings and tail well developed, but the down still clung to the neck and under parts, and the bill and face were still black.

On July 17, when we approached the nest tree, both young birds were

standing on the log. They were then about ten weeks old and the wing and tail feathers were fully developed. There was practically no down on their backs but it still clung to the neck, although some feathers were beginning to show through; the under parts were still white and the bill and face, as before, were black, with a peculiar band of thick down over the top of the head. Although they were unable to fly they used their wings as they ran to hide under a nearby log. It was remarkable how easily so large a bird could become invisible among the foliage.

When we approached the nest on July 25, both young were to be seen but one managed to get out of sight among the roots of an upturned tree and was not found until we were about to leave. They were then about eleven weeks old and fully grown; one still had some down on the neck and under parts, while the other,—the more active of the two,—had only a few patches on the legs and under parts; the band of thick stubby down over the top of the head was still present and the bill and face of both were still black. It could not have been long after that visit that they flew; for one, by vigorously flapping its wings four or five times, was then able to fly about twenty feet.

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TURKEY VULTURE'S NEST BY A FALLEN TREE



YOUNG TURKEY VULTURES IN DOWN



YOUNG TURKEY VULTURES ABOUT EIGHT WEEKS OLD



YOUNG TURKEY VULTURES ABOUT ELEVEN WEEKS OLD