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Fairfield
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OBSERVATIONS ON *NYCTIBIUS GRANDIS* IN SURINAM

BY FR. HAVERSCHMIDT

Plate 3

ON June 14, 1946, I was told that a strange owl had been found on the grounds of the Agricultural Experiment Station at Paramaribo, Surinam. On seeing the bird it was clear at first sight that there was no question of any owl, but that it was a nestling of the Great Goat-sucker (*Nyctibius grandis*). It looked rather like a small Snowy Owl, white as it was, being barred all over its body with brown. With its huge, dark brown eyes and its rather pointed head, it had an extremely dog-like appearance and expression (Plate 3, left figure). It behaved quite calmly and was unable to perch sideways on branches but liked to sit in a rather upright posture at the end and at the sides of a log or on the ground. According to the finders it was found sitting on the ground. When approached too near or when about to be handled, it opened its huge mouth in a threatening attitude (Plate 3, right figure)

and uttered a soft call. Its weight was 220 grams. Unhappily it refused all food and died the next day. Its skin is now in my collection.

Not much seems to be known about the life history of this remarkable bird and I am not sure whether its nestling is already known or has ever been photographed before. Well-authenticated eggs do not seem to exist; the only description of one is that by Burmeister (Journ. f. Ornith., 1: 169, 1853) which was doubted by Goeldi (Ibis, 1896: 299). There are no eggs of this species in the Nehr Korn collection (Nehr Korn, Katalog der Eiersammlung, 2e Auflage: 127, 1910; and Nachträge: 12, 1914), nor in the collection of the British Museum (Oates and Reid, Catalogue of the collection of birds' eggs in the British Museum, 3: 56, 1903).

As to its breeding season, it may be remarked that the Penard brothers (De Vogels van Guyana, 2: 75, 1910) received a female, captured near Paramaribo at the end of February, which had a nearly fully developed egg in its oviduct. In connection with this, the following observation may be of interest. On November 24, 1946, I met at the coffee plantation "Peperpot," some few miles up the Surinam River, from Paramaribo, two soldiers who told me of having shot, just before, a large owl that was sitting on a branch in a tree. This proved to be an adult example of *Nyctibius grandis*. On falling to the ground, an egg, too, had come down with the bird and was, of course, broken into pieces. I much regret not having witnessed this incident having thus missed the opportunity to watch a Great Goatsucker sitting on its egg. I saved its skin for my collection. The weight of this bird—an adult female—was 581 grams.

On the same plantation, during the entire afternoon of February 2, 1947, I watched an adult individual sitting motionless on a branch of one of the shadow trees (*Erythrina glauca*) in one of the coffee fields. It had vanished from this spot the next morning but was observed there on subsequent occasions. It was April before I realized that this was its permanent roost during the day, where it dozed with closed eyes, motionless, on exactly the same spot on a branch in that particular tree. On May 10 I watched it scratching its head with one of its feet which it did in goatsucker fashion with its foot over its wing. This daytime roost it still uses at the time of writing this note (July 15, 1947).

On April 5 I found one of its hunting places. The bird was sitting on a pole of about $1\frac{1}{2}$ meters height near the bank of the Surinam River. With the aid of a strong flashlight we could approach the bird which sat looking around calmly, with its huge, dark eyes that showed bright orange reflections in the beams of the flashlight. It did not fly

away before we actually touched the pole on which it was sitting. Unhappily all photographs taken on that occasion failed owing to a temporary defect in my camera. On April 12, it had moved to another place in a neighboring tree, where it was detected easily with the help of the flashlight, even at a great distance. Two bright orange spots in the darkness betrayed its position in a short time. On May 25, it had moved again, this time to the top of a royal palm where it could be watched better owing to the exposed position. From then on it could be found night after night on exactly the same spot which is still in use at the time of writing.

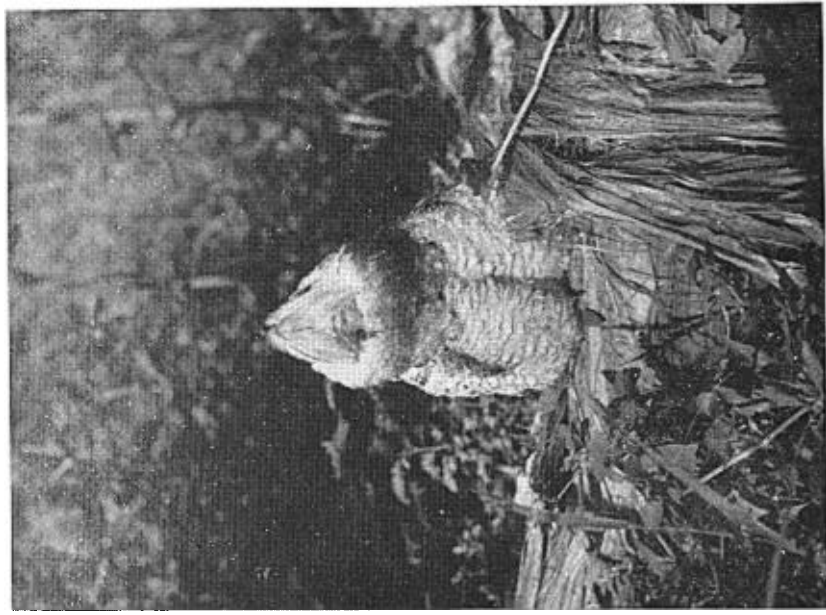
During the evening of May 30, I could, for the first time, study the bird's hunting methods, and it now became clear that *Nyctibius grandis* is a perch hunter and not a flying hunter. The bird sits on its exposed position, conning its neighborhood attentively, moving its head in all directions; then suddenly it flies away, often for rather a long distance, then turning with an elegant movement of its long tail, which acts as a rudder, it returns to its favorite lookout, often uttering a note on alighting that sounds like *oorrrr*. I never could distinguish any prey, nor could I tell whether all its hunting trips were successful, whether it detected its prey at such a great distance, or whether it pursued its prey for some time before actually capturing it.

On June 13, at 6:50 in the evening, I saw it arrive at its usual lookout on the top of the royal palm. It came as noiselessly as an owl, with slow wing movements, its long tail acting as a rudder when it turned to alight. While sitting on its lookout it constantly moved its head in all directions, looking not only into the sky above it but also beneath it. Its activity was in great contrast to its motionless attitude when roosting during the day. In the ten minutes of the fast-falling darkness during which I was able to watch it, it made two hunting flights, each time immediately returning to its lookout. In neither case could I distinguish whether or not it had been successful.

During the night when it was impossible to make observations owing to the darkness, strange notes sounding like *oorrrroo* from two birds were heard regularly.

According to my observations, it seems clear that this species has a definite roost where it remains dozing during the day and that it starts hunting from a lookout as soon as darkness has fallen.

14 Waterkant
Paramaribo
Surinam



NESTLING OF *Nyctibius grandis* (Right) IN THREATENING ATTITUDE. PARAMARIBO, SURINAM, JUNE 14, 1946.