

GENERAL NOTES

What Bird Lays Black Eggs?—It has been stated that the honeycreepers of the genus *Cyanerpes* "are the only birds in the whole world that lay black eggs" (Penard, 1910: 477). Such almost solidly black or purplish-black eggs, attributed to this genus, have been collected in northeastern South America—Surinam (Penard, 1910: 475–477), British Guiana (Beebe, 1917: 241–242), Venezuela, Trinidad (Belcher and Smooker, 1935: 19), and Brazil (Snethlage, 1937: 517–518). The nest in each case has been described as a thin-walled, closed bag or pouch, with the entrance to the side, composed of blackish fibres, and hanging over water. Reported egg measurements vary only slightly, from 18.9–21.9 × 13.3–15 mm. (*op. cit.*: Hellebrekers, 1942: 272).

Beginning with the first edition of Nehr Korn's egg catalogue (1899), which figured the black egg, these eggs have been regularly attributed by collectors to the Red-legged or Blue Honeycreeper (*Cyanerpes cyaneus*), which ranges north to Mexico, and to its congener, the South American Yellow-legged or Purple Honeycreeper (*C. caeruleus*)—both of which were formerly placed in the genus *Coereba*. The correctness of this attribution has occasionally been questioned (Ihering, 1900: 209; Hellebrekers, 1945: 99). Long ago, a nest of *C. cyaneus* from Cuba had been described as an open cup, and the egg as whitish with lilac and reddish-brown spots (Thienemann, 1857: 152; Gundlach, 1876: 102), and from Brazil a similar whitish, vinaceous-spotted egg had been reported as taken with the parent birds (Allen, 1891: 348). Nehr Korn himself, in the second edition of his egg catalogue (1910: 324, pl. III, f. 26), changed his opinion and assigned the black eggs to the Green Honeycreeper (*Chlorophanes spiza*), describing eggs of *Cyanerpes cyaneus* from Cuba and of *C. caeruleus* from Venezuela and Bolivia as whitish with gray to brownish spots.

Nevertheless, the attribution of the black eggs to *Cyanerpes* has continued to receive general currency, probably because of the seemingly circumstantial account in the Penards' valuable book, "De Vogels van Guyana" (1910: 475–477). Only recently has it become widely known that the Penards' entire egg collection was derived from hunters, Indians, and the like, and that their identifications were not based on personal field experience, as they were confined to their house in town from early boyhood by reason of leprosy (Haverschmidt, 1949: 56–60). Beebe's eloquent description (accompanied by a photograph) of a pensive nest with black eggs, taken in British Guiana, which he assigned to *C. cyaneus* (1917: 241–242), has been quoted at length in Chubb's "Birds of British Guiana" (1921: 481).

Yet observations of active field ornithologists now resident in the tropics establish beyond question that *Cyanerpes* does *not* build bag nests nor lay black eggs. Dr. Alexander Skutch, who has studied the life history and found many nests of *C. cyaneus* in Costa Rica, writes me that the nests are shallow cups, and the eggs whitish with brown spots. Dr. Miguel Alvarez del Toro of Chiapas, Mexico, independently has published a description and photograph showing a cup nest containing white eggs, finely spotted with reddish-brown and grayish (1952: 18, f. 12). Dr. Francois Haverschmidt of Surinam observes (*in litt.*) that in his experience *C. cyaneus* is a bird of second growth and clearings, not likely to require as its nesting site a riparian habitat, such as has been described by the collectors of the black eggs. My own observations of this common species in Panama are in complete agreement with Haverschmidt.

Nehr Korn's later allocation of the black eggs to *Chlorophanes spiza* also turns out to be wrong, for Skutch writes me that *Chlorophanes*, too, lays whitish, brown-spotted, eggs in a shallow cup nest.

The identity of the remarkable black eggs thus remains a mystery, though we know the nest, the habitat, and, in a general way, the South American range. We also have some indication of the breeding season, for Surinam eggs in the Penard collection were taken in May (Hellebrekers, 1942: 273), and those reported from British Guiana, Trinidad and Venezuela, in July. Judging by the number of such black eggs reported, the species cannot be rare. It is quite possible that the bird laying the eggs is streaked and olivaceous in color, like the female of *Cyanerpes*. The suspicion arises that a member of the Tyrannidae may prove to be responsible. What is needed is careful observation, rather than assumption based upon published identifications.

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