

### The Scissor-tailed Flycatcher in Texas.

FLORENCE MERRIAM BAILEY.

IN visiting the prairie country of southern Texas, the scissor-tail was one of the first new birds that I noticed, and his forceful originality made him the last to seem common or uninteresting. If you see him first perched on the chaparral you are struck by his long white tail and glistening black, white, and salmon plumage. In perching the tail is closed thin and the black of the wings contrasts well with the bright salmon sides. He sits quietly like any every-day bird giving only an occasional bee-bird note till suddenly—he up he darts into the air, and with delighted wonder you watch his odd figure and odder gyrations in the sky.

One of his favorite performances is to fly up and, with rattling wings, execute an aerial seesaw, a line of sharp angled VVVVVVs, helping himself at the short turns by rapidly opening and shutting his long white scissors. As he goes up and down he utters all the while a penetrating bee-bird scream *ka-quee'—ka-quee'—ka-quee'—ka-quee'—ka-quee'*, the emphasis being given each time at the top of the ascending line.

Frequently when he is passing along with the even flight of a sober minded crow and you are quietly admiring the salmon lining of his wings, he will shoot rattling into the air and as you stare after him, drop back as suddenly as he rose. He does this apparently because the spirit moves him, as a boy slings a stone at the sky, but fervor is added by the appearance of a rival or an enemy, for he is much like a Tyrannus in his masterful way of controlling his landscape.

The head of a family we saw on the Nueces River one day was guarding his mate at the nest when another scissor-tail invaded his preserves. The angry guardian flew at him in fury, chasing him from the field with a loud noise of wings. At the first sound of combat the brooding bird's head ap-

peared above the nest and hopping up on the rim she watched the chase with craned neck till the intruder with her lord and master close at his heels faded into white specks in the blue.

Another day we saw a scissor tail in pursuit of an innocent caracara who was accidentally passing through the neighborhood. The slow ungainly caracara was no match for the swift-winged flycatcher and with a dash *Milvulus* pounced down upon him and actually rode the hawk till they were out of sight.

The flycatcher's long feathery tail gives it such a light airy, not to say ethereal appearance that the heavy role of pugilist seems most unbecoming, but such a flying apparatus doubtless suggests much mischief. If a slow-winged *Chondestes* starts after an insect and by bustling along at its best can only just keep even, what more natural than that a swift-winged onlooker should swoop down and with one beat of the wings pass over the head of his laboring neighbor and snap up the bug from under its bill? And what more natural than for him to give a chuckling twitter and a shake of his tail as he sails off leaving his crest-fallen brother to drop heavily to the ground? Such a shocking performance was witnessed close to the court house—the hall of justice, alas!—in Uvalde; for the scissor-tails while as free as Texas rangers on the prairie, make themselves as much at home as mayors and aldermen in the towns. In San Antonio and Austin they are to be seen perching on telegraph wires and fences as complacently as English sparrows.

The powerful flight of *Milvulus* is useful not alone in social matters but in the small affairs of life. Mr. Bailey once saw one bathe on the wing in the deep water of the Concho River. The bird swooped down, struck the surface of the water with his breast and glanced

up dripping with the spray. He repeated this five times in about as many minutes stopping between to shake and preen his feathers.

A bird who does everything in such a large way can hardly be expected to bring his mind to commonplace detail, and the nest of the scissor-tail certainly looks as if made on a generalization. It is usually big, with long streamers dangling from it in the breeze and looks as if the materials had been thrown at it—in passing. One nest we found at Rio Coloral, however, was a marked exception to all the others we saw, being small, compact, and neatly built. It had a large admixture of wool, left by the goats on the barbed wire fences.

Wherever you find him the scissor-tail is so much in evidence that, like a barking coyote, one is as good as a flock, really abound. Near Corpus Christi we but in parts of the mesquite prairies of southern Texas the beautiful birds once counted thirteen in sight down the road. The largest number we ever found together, however, was in the San Ignatius oak mott, a grove of oaks half way between Corpus Christi and Brownsville. In that section the low

shin oaks of the sand prairie affords no good roosting places and the birds of various kinds congregate at night in the few oasis-like oak groves. The night we got to the San Ignatius mott we were too much occupied making camp before dark to notice much but a general noisy assembly of grackles and scissor-tails and the presence of a *Pyrocephalus*, the red of whose breast we could just discern in the twilight; but at sundown, when Mr. Bailey shot a rattlesnake at the foot of a big oak in camp the report was followed by a roar and rattle in the top of the tree and a great flock of scissor-tails arose and dispersed in the darkness. They did not all leave the tree, apparently, even then, although some of them may have returned to it, for when daylight came to my surprise a large number of them straggled out of the tree. How one oak top could hold so many birds seemed a mystery. Before the flycatchers dispersed for the day the sky around the mott was alive with them careering around in their usual acrobatic manner making the air vibrate with their shrill screams.

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### Some Experiences of 1901.

P. M. SILLOWAY, LEWISTON, MONT.

**A** BRIGHT morning, May 28, saw me early afield in quest of eggs of the long billed curlew, (*Numenius longirostris*). A dry pond on the prairie about two miles from my home appeared to be the center of operations of a colony of these curlews, and I started out in high hope of adding a number of sets of *Numenius* to my collection. By way of introduction I should say that my experience with *Numenius* in the preceding season had so elated me that I felt capable of finding any nest of this species which might chance to be on the prairie. On this particular morning, therefore, I am armed with a capacious basket and sundry other receptacles

(cigar-boxes), and was anticipating a red-letter day in my oological career; in fact, I was already formulating an exchange notice, announcing to my needy ornithological friends that I was overstocked with eggs of the long-billed curlew and that I would take any old thing in exchange for them.

The pond mentioned was near the corner of four extensive pastures, so that I had ample field for the exercise of my powers as a finder of curlews' nests. Approaching the pond from the south, according to a system I had arranged, I was not surprised to see a curlew flying out to meet me, cackling his disapproval. Now, anyone who has