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WITH *RALLUS* IN THE TEXAS MARSH

By GEORGE FINLAY SIMMONS

WITH FOUR PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR

NOTHING had been mine all spring but ill-luck! The season had been an unusually rainy one, even for the Gulf coastal region of southeastern Texas (which is by way of saying that there had been *some* rain). The prairies and prairie marshes were flooded, much to my sorrow, for I knew full well that no Louisiana Clapper Rail would be so indiscreet as to nest under such conditions.

But I was especially anxious to locate a nest of the bird, in order to make a further study of its nesting habits and home life (*Cf. Auk*, July, 1914, pp. 363-384), for but recently had I added the bird to my local list, and what I did *not* know about it would fill many volumes. It is said that the things people don't know will never hurt them, but that subject had rested heavily on my mind for some time.

For hours and hours, on numerous trips, I had tramped the flooded marshes, thinking evil thoughts of both the weather and the rails, and inwardly cursing my luck. I had searched every suitable clump of rushes and tussock of grass for miles around, but had found only one nest, April 21, 1914. To cap the climax of my seeming ill-luck, that nest was destroyed by still heavier rains before a single egg was laid!

Time and again, during May, I visited the localities frequented by *Rallus*, but found nothing until the 30th. The whole day was spent among the group of small ponds and marshes on the extensive coastal prairie south of Houston, and in the same marsh where the nest of April 21 was located I found a nest which the young had already deserted. It was among the tall weeds and rushes growing in water a foot deep, and contained one lone egg (1.62x1.18)

which held a dead chick. The nest was a slightly concave platform composed of coarse, buffy rushes and grasses, and was approximately four inches thick and nine and a half inches across. It was rather loosely attached to the reeds and rushes five inches above the water.

To me the nest was of especial interest, from the fact that it was in a small marsh of less than an acre in size, and not over a hundred yards north of a ranch house, the occupants of which were wont to pass within fifty feet of the nest several times a day. Generally the birds select a marsh far distant from any one of the few houses on that uncultivated prairie.

June 6 found me in the same region, about six miles south of Houston, searching the marshes and ponds for nests of the Least Bittern and Purple Gallinule. On the 30th I had been quite successful, for had I not located a nest of each containing five eggs? In the enthusiasm of the new discoveries I laid



Fig. 1. AT THE NEST OF THE LOUISIANA CLAPPER RAIL IN A MARSH NEAR HOUSTON, TEXAS. THE FEW SCRUBBY PERSIMMON TREES IN THE BACKGROUND FORM THE ONLY SHELTER FOR MILES.

aside my season's incubus—the search for a nest of friend *Rallus*—and took to the marshes in an effort to locate further nests of those two birds.

Merely as a matter of form, for that was one of my two regular routes when out abirding, I stopped at a favorite colony of the Florida Red-wing (*Agelaius phoeniceus phoeniceus*) by the side of the road six miles from the city, and made a circuit of the two-acre marsh, checking the various birds and making a casual search for nests. Among the birds checked were two Maryland Yellow-throats, male and female, a pair of birds whose nest had successfully eluded me from year to year. It is true that on June 1, 1911, I found their nest in the tall bull-rushes near one side of the marsh, but not until the young were preparing to leave. Very naturally, what I wished to find was a nest containing eggs.

So I stopped, shed my coat and hung it on a tiny persimmon tree growing

in the marsh, and began my search for the nest of that small Warbler. Common sense advised me to begin at the site of the former nest; so I slowly made my way through the rushes and grasses and was soon parting the tops of the particular clump which in 1911 hid the tiny nest. With a quick gasp, I stopped in my tracks, for the moment not comprehending my find. For there before me, not a foot from my hands, lay the elusive nest. No, not a nest of the Maryland Yellow-throat, but a nest of the Louisiana Clapper Rail (*Rallus crepitans saturatus*) containing eleven eggs. Though for the moment dizzy with my good fortune, I soon recovered and began to look around for Mrs. Rail. Though I searched for some time and watched carefully in the vicinity of the nest, she was not observed.

The following afternoon, on June 7, I returned to the nest in company with Mr. Geo. B. Ewing of Houston, this time armed with a 3-A Folding Brownie. A careful search failed to reveal a single rail, but the nest was just as we had left it, so we got busy by promiscuously shooting at the nest and general surroundings with the Brownie. To beguile the remainder of the two hours spent in the vicinity, each of us took turns in snapping the other in approved ornithological pose, namely: standing by the nest, chest expanded, and with one hand parting the rushes to show the eggs while the other allows its thumb to snuggle in the arm-hole of the vest.

During the last few moments at the nest I had been pondering whether or not it would be best to take the eggs, for it seemed that they must be deserted. As much time as we had spent at the nest on the two trips, not a rail had we seen. Finally I came to my decision: Should the eggs be in condition to blow

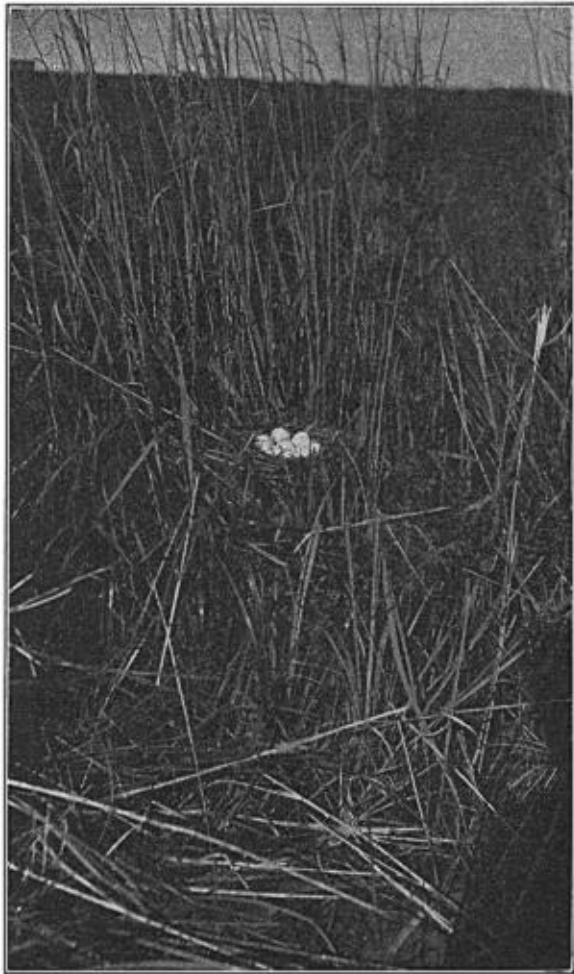


FIG. 2. NEST AND ELEVEN EGGS OF THE LOUISIANA CLAPPER RAIL, AS PHOTOGRAPHED JUNE 7, 1914. OBSERVE HOW SECURELY THE NEST IS SET AMONG THE RUSHES, OVER A FOOT ABOVE THE GROUND, SO THAT IT IS OUT OF REACH OF HIGH WATER

with comparative ease I would take them home with me; otherwise I would take the chance of the bird returning to them by leaving them in the nest. Picking one up, and hooking my thumb and forefinger about it, I placed it to my eye; with the sunlight on the opposite side I could note that incubation was advanced.



Fig. 3. ANOTHER VIEW OF THE NEST OF THE LOUISIANA CLAPPER RAIL, SHOWING DETAIL OF CONSTRUCTION

But just as I held the egg to the sun, between thumb and finger, there came an awful clatter from the grassy jungles near at hand, the protest and expression of indignation of the parent at my conduct: "*CHACK, CHACK, CHACK, chack, chack, chack!!*" As if to say, "*HEY, YOU, put that egg back!*" The first syllable was loud, harsh and startling, and each succeeding one

slightly less in volume. It was so unexpected and so discordant that I nearly jumped out of my skin (figuratively speaking), entertaining the feelings of a pedestrian who hears a shrieking auto siren at his back. I could see that Ewing was affected the same way, for he turned pale with fright and was about to crawl under a nearby bush. I saved him from that undignified proceeding by explaining that it was merely our friend *Rallus*, which had doubtless been watching us with tolerance, until we touched her eggs, from a distance of about fifteen feet.

Four days passed before I visited the nest again. On Thursday Mr. Howard G. Hill and I made the trip across the prairies, approaching the marsh from opposite sides. I had a trusty Graflex ready to spring, but no bird appeared. For over an hour and a half we waited patiently near the nest, *sans* coat, *sans* sleeves, under the blistering rays of the tropical sun, with the nearest shelter three miles away. But all to no avail.



Fig. 4. NEST AND EGGS OF THE SOUTHERN MEADOWLARK, PHOTOGRAPHED NEAR HOUSTON, TEXAS, JUNE 11, 1914

The nest was built up in a clump of rushes and grass, thirteen and a quarter inches above the ground, and was neatly hidden by the thick growth of rushes closely surrounding it on all sides. It was a thick mass of vegetation (buffy rushes and grasses) five and a quarter inches thick, supported by the broken stalks of the rushes and by a small vine which had entwined itself about the stalks below. The top of the nest was slightly concave, the edges being an inch and a quarter above the center, and we found it to measure nine and a half inches from rim to rim.

The eggs were quite soiled and stained, being splashed and spattered with the oozing slime of the marsh; they were light buffy specimens, marked with small spots and specks of a reddish brown which were distributed in an irregular circle near the extremity of the larger end. They measured in inches: 1.76x1.23; 1.69x1.19; 1.68x1.18; 1.67x1.19; 1.66x1.20; 1.66x1.17; 1.64x1.20; 1.63x1.22; 1.63x1.19; 1.63x1.17; and 1.62x1.21.

Finally, becoming tired of the wait, and cringing from the blasting heat of the summer sun, we scoured the neighboring grassy jungles in an effort to rout out the owner of the nest, but not a "hide nor hair" did we see.

The characteristic birds of the two-acre marsh were raising a considerable disturbance. A pair of Kingbirds had a nest in a small locust tree by the side of the railroad track on the edge of the marsh, and were quite solicitous about the two young which it contained, flying and twittering about our heads. A few nests of the Florida Red-wing still contained eggs, probably second settings. One held four eggs, rather unusual for the bird in the vicinity of Houston. Now and then a Florida Nighthawk would float lightly by. And the Scissor-tailed Flycatchers, Southern Meadowlarks, Orchard Orioles, Western Lark Sparrows, Western Grasshopper Sparrows, and Dickcissels were twittering, singing and buzzing, and probably all were nesting near at hand.

A hundred yards north of the nest of the Louisiana Clapper Rail, and just outside the limits of the marsh, we did indeed flush a Southern Meadowlark from her arched or domed nest containing four nearly fresh eggs. It was cunningly concealed under a tussock of grass, slightly sunk in the ground and well lined with dry grasses.

The rails evidently deserted the nest after our careless handling of the eggs; for, though several trips followed that of June 11, not a bird was seen in the marsh. The nest gradually acquired a deserted air, soon appearing weather-beaten and rough. The eggs, by the way, are still in the nest, abandoned to the mercy of the elements. Let us trust that next season the rails will have less hardships and nest under more favorable conditions.

Houston, Texas, August 19, 1914.

THE NESTING OF THE BLACK SWIFT

A Vindication

By WILLIAM LEON DAWSON

WITH FOUR PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR

ALL THE TRADITIONS and expectations of ornithologists were set at naught when A. G. Vrooman, of Santa Cruz, announced (*Vide Auk*, Oct., 1901, p. 394) that he had taken the single egg of the Black Swift (*Cypseloides niger borealis*) from the bare damp earth of a sea-cliff. It seemed incredible, and the writer was among those who indulged in cheap witticisms at the expense of this newest aspirant to oölogical honors. Not even with the announcement of a second discovery, July 9, 1904 (reported in the *CONDOR*, Nov., 1905, p. 176), was our unfaith shaken, although that astute connoisseur, Col. John E. Thayer, of Boston, made haste to secure the eggs and was so delighted that he wanted more. We thought we knew our Swifts and we did not know Mr. Vrooman. Moreover, we had been disappointed once before (see last volume of *CONDOR*, p. 95), and did not propose to be hoaxed again. Vrooman's announcements fell coldly, therefore, upon the public ear; and their author, a sensitive and conscientious man, relapsed into pained silence.

For this unpublished naturalist, be it understood, was no upstart. At the