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THE SHADOW-BOXING OF PIPILO

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WITH FIVE PHOTOGRAPHS BY THE AUTHOR

EVIDENCE of the pugnacious instinct which the approach of the mating season brings to the males of most of our birds and mammals is always interesting. Take the moose for example. For half a year Nature bends her energies toward the antler development of the bull, and then, in apparently wanton forgetfulness of the task accomplished, limits the use of his horns to the transient season of mating and of combat. Short as that season is, it nevertheless furnishes one of the most striking examples of the height to which this pugnacious intolerance of rivals can rise.

Time after time I have come on deep-pawed holes and trampled horn-scarred brush where two New Brunswick bulls had met, and, in the vernacular of the North Woods, "sassed each other" with deep-toned grunt and clash of antlers on surrounding brush. Sometimes wads of blood-matted hair bore mute testimony to the fact that bluff alone had not sufficed to dispose of the weaker contestant, and that mortal combat had been resorted to. However commonplace the sight of such a wilderness ringside may come to be, one can never escape a thrill on finding such a spot. In imagination the two great, heavy-weight champions again stand challenging each other, with horns stripped of their velvet, and burnished for the fray, and with coats in all their early fall gloss, like the oiled gladiators of old.

Unfortunately in these cases we can do no more than call on our imagination, for these are generally fights in the dark, and the eyes of very few men have witnessed them. Luckily, however, we do not need to live a wilderness life to find some evidence of the warring of males at the approach of the mating season. Restrict yourself to the birds alone, and, even in the heart of New York City, you can see that rough and tumble of the English Sparrow ragamuffins in the gutter, which heralds the approach of spring. The more fortunate Californian sees frequently the aerial melée of two Western Mockers as they



Fig. 29. NO BIRD LENDS ITSELF BETTER THAN THE ANTHONY TOWHEE TO QUIET, PATIENT PHOTOGRAPHY WHEN AWAY FROM ITS NEST. THE INDIVIDUAL IN THE PICTURE HOPPED CLOSER AND CLOSER TO THE BLIND WHERE I WAS CONCEALED, WITH ALL THE CURIOSITY OF A WREN-TIT. STRANGE AS IT SEEMS IN SO PHLEGMATIC A BIRD, HOWEVER, I HAVE FOUND IT HOPELESSLY SHY WHEN CONFRONTED AT ITS NEST WITH A CAMERA.

fall head over heels from a palm tree to the ground in their trial for mastery.

Our interest in these encounters is partly the natural human zest for any well matched test of strength; partly it is because they accompany, in the case of beast and bird, the annual climax of their horn development and habit-interest, and of their plumage and song. But for the nature student there is a deeper significance in all this, since it is the foundation of that basic law of selection, which probably influences the development of a race more than any other one thing, if we except the food problem and untoward climatic condition.

The fundamental quality of this instinct is my only excuse for calling attention to its freakish and amusing manifestation in the shadow-boxing of the Anthony Towhee (*Pipilo crissalis senicula*). The males of this species will come, in the breeding season, to a window pane where a good reflection of themselves is to be had, and fight with their mirrored and supposititious rival for hour upon hour. I have seen this with such frequency as to preclude the hypothesis of isolated individual vagary, and while, as I say, it is a small matter in itself, it nevertheless shows, as well as the mortal combat of the moose, the length to which this pugnacious instinct can carry a creature.

For dogged persistence and violence I have no case to compare in interest with the following experience of General Penney, of Nordhoff, California. He is one of those fortunate men who campaigned in the early days with Dr. Coues, so his observations have added interest and assurance of accuracy. In the late winter of 1913-1914, when the mating season had as yet hardly begun, one of these Anthony Towhees began coming every morning at nine or ten o'clock to a certain window of the living room of the General's Ojai Valley home. At this hour the interior of the room was comparatively dark, and, in contrast to the bright light outside, created a very fair mirrored backing for the window pane. Perching on the sill, the bird would eye his reflection, and then set systematically to work to kill that supposed rival, with all the ire and intolerance of a rutting moose. The tactics varied somewhat, but on the whole, the bird firmly believed that victory lay in the frequency of his attacks, rather than in their violence, so that the blows of his beak rained on the pane with all the persistence of water dripping on a tin porch roof after an Eastern thaw. Each blow was, of course, met squarely by the shadowed beak of his opponent; each retreat was mimicked by the shadow; each unusually furious onslaught was countered in equal force. Sometimes they rested as though by mutual consent—the bird and his sparring partner—but presently some turn of the bird's head would find an answering challenge in the glass, and he would fly at it again. Hour after hour this continued, until the bird was completely exhausted, or until the light changed and the reflection vanished.

This continued day after day and week after week with scarcely an interruption, and became a positive nuisance. As time went on and his attacks netted him nothing, Pipilo worked himself into greater and greater frenzy until blood specks from his beak often covered the lower part of the pane. The smaller head feathers, loosened in the fracas, would stick to these blood spots and necessitate frequent window washing, in addition to the "damnable iteration" of his tap, tap, tapping at the pane. Nothing was done about it, however, and it continued as an almost daily performance until early summer. Then, with the close of the breeding season, the bird stopped of his own accord.

One can imagine a bird fighting its reflection for a moment on first dis-



Fig. 30. THE INTERLACED FLOWER STEMS AND WEED STALKS USED BY THIS ANTHONY TOW-
HEE FORMED A NEST WHICH WAS SO STRIKINGLY HANDSOME AS TO BE QUITE UNIQUE, IN
MY EXPERIENCE, WITH THIS SPECIES.

covering it, but that instinct should be strong enough to bring it day after day for so protracted a time, is beyond comprehension. It, of course, never occurred to us that the experience would be repeated. Imagine every one's surprise, then, to have an Anthony Towhee show up bright and early one morning at the same pane in the early spring of 1915. He went immediately to work attacking the reflection with all the vigor of his recouped forces; for chance points to its being the same bird. Remembering the aggravations of the year before, General Penney tacked mosquito netting over the lower half of the pane, but the bird was not to be so easily discouraged. Next morning he was fighting as busily as ever, having merely transferred his interest and perch to the upper, or uncovered, portion of the window.

Next the netting was tacked over the whole frame, but almost immediately



Fig. 31. BETWEEN BOUTS AT THE GARAGE WINDOW THIS BIRD BOSSED OUR FEEDING STATION ABSOLUTELY.

the bird pecked a hole through the netting in his savage search for that enemy. In spite of the cramped quarters between the netting and the glass, the bird made himself as objectionable as before, so as a last resort a wire screen was substituted for the netting. This proved entirely effective from the first. Pipilo recognized defeat and went his way. After a month or so, therefore, the screen was removed, but within two days he was back on the job. Next morning the screen was back on the window, and there it stayed until July of last year, when it was removed with impunity because of the passing of the nesting season.

This spring for the third consecutive year a bird returned to the same spot with the same intent, but the cure had at last been found. The screen was

immediately applied, and now the General smokes his after-breakfast cigar in peace and comfort.

This is, as I say, the most persistent bird of which I have record, but several other cases have come under observation. For two years an Anthony Towhee has started the same performance on my own garage window in Pasadena, but in these instances the bird was less determined, and within a week or so abandoned the attempt of his own accord. In the same way individuals have formed the habit at the Pierpont Cottages, in the Ojai. There have been at least three different cases since 1911, when I have happened to be there, but these birds, also, gave up the attempt after a comparatively short trial. On two other occasions friends have told me of birds which had an obsession for "getting into a certain room of their house". On investigation these also proved to be Anthony Towhees, which had not the slightest burglarious intent,



Fig. 32. SCRATCHING ABOUT AMONG THE DRY GRASS STEMS AND DEAD LEAVES AFTER THE FASHION OF HIS *MACULATUS* KINDRED.

but were merely employed in this strange phase of rival conquest.

The habit is not entirely restricted to Towhees, since I have seen two instances of California Linnets attempting the same thing. That even our Western Mocker is sometimes tricked into this same waste of time and strength seems certain from the statement of Mr. Sylvanus Tyler, of Pasadena. His interest in birds for many years makes him an accurate observer, and he assures me that a Western Mocker attacked a window across the street from his home with tremendous fury and daily persistence one spring. It was finally found dead under the window, and as there was no mark on the bird, death was presumably caused by the continued shock of the glass upon its beak.

The habit appears so much more common, however, with *Pipilo*, that one is justified in taking him as the exemplification of this strange perversion of

the strongest of the secondary sex instincts. As I say, it is of interest only when one realizes its cause, and sees the lengths to which it is carried, but I, for one, cannot now resist watching Pipilo with interest and commiseration



Fig. 33. A CHARACTERISTIC NEST OF THE ANTHONY TOWHEE IN A SAGE THICKET.

whenever I discover him thrusting and countering with his Phantom Rival of the Pane.

Nordhoff, California, April 9, 1916.