

SOME UNUSUAL NESTING SITES OF SEVERAL ARIZONA BIRDS

(WITH THREE PHOTOS)

By F. C. WILLARD

AFTER collecting the eggs of certain species for a number of years one learns to know when he is looking in the right places to find them. To stumble, then, upon a nest in an unlooked-for situation gives one a considerable thrill. There are a number of Arizona species which have been the means of giving me that thrill, and it may interest others to hear of some of their eccentricities.

The Cactus Wren (*Heleodytes brunneicapillus couesi*) ordinarily chooses an open site in a bush, small tree, cactus, or yucca. Among the unusual sites in which I have found nests of this species are the following. One pair built for several years in the hollow cornice of a schoolhouse. The entrance was through a hole cut one winter by a visiting flicker. Another site was in an old woodpecker's nesting cavity which was twenty-five feet up in a large sycamore, one of a line of these trees extending out from the foothills of the Huachuca Mountains. A broken-out cavity in a sahuaro cactus is also rather out of the ordinary for a Cactus Wren to choose as a nesting site. Previous to 1916 I had found but two or three so placed, but the season of 1922 I have found half a dozen occupied nests in this cactus. During the intervening period I have not been in Arizona and so do not know whether the extra number was just a peculiarity of the one season or whether the habit is growing on this wren.

The House Finch (*Carpodacus mexicanus frontalis*) builds as a usual thing in the open, in vines growing around houses, in trees of many kinds, in yuccas, and in cactus. This year I was surprised to see a House Finch fly from a woodpecker hole about thirty feet up in a large sycamore, and climbed up to find its nest cosily placed so that the bird could sit and look out. On the San Pedro River are some large ranches where much hay is raised. At one of these a large stack is always built in a certain deserted ranch yard and a pair of House Finches have had their nest in it every time I have visited the spot. This season, after a lapse of six years, I visited the place again, in company with Mr. A. C. Bent, and remarked as we came to the stack that I always used to find a finch's nest in it "just about here", and, as I touched the hay, out flew Madame Finch from her nest, which held five eggs. In passing, may I remark that this was one of the few places where I could count on getting a set of five eggs. Most of the finches in that region lay four. A similar site was in the grass-thatched roof of a shed. Old oriole nests are so frequently used as hardly to come under the heading of unusual nesting sites.

A Canyon Towhee (*Pipilo fuscus mesoleucus*) likes best a thick bush, one with thorns preferred; but one pair chose a ledge inside a porch near the roof, such a place as a robin dearly loves. Another built in an old splint lunch basket which had been tossed aside and hung bottom up in a thorny bush. For several years two pairs used to build near the extreme tops of some thickly leafed cottonwood trees at my uncle's home in Tombstone. These nests were thirty feet or more from the ground. After the trees died, one pair took to building in the ivy and honeysuckle which grew over the walls of the house. I found an unfinished nest in one of the vines there this year.

An Abert Towhee (*Pipilo aberti*) nest, twelve feet up in a cavity near the top of a rotten cottonwood stump, is enough out of the ordinary to call for mention. The usual choice is in bushes or among willow sprouts.

The Rock Wren (*Salpinctes obsoletus obsoletus*) normally chooses a hole in an old adobe wall or in the perpendicular bank of an arroyo; but one pair chose the drawer of a small table which stood inside a deserted house. The drawer was open a couple of inches and offered a fine place for a nest.

The Baird Wren (*Thryomanes bewicki bairdi*) likes a natural cavity in an oak tree but is quick to take advantage of other snug situations. Between the vanes of the fan of a prospector's forge was the place chosen by one pair. Another made use of a pocket formed by a burlap awning which had torn loose at one corner. This species will also take kindly to cans and boxes put up particularly for its benefit.



Fig. 41. UNUSUAL NEST SITE OF THE CANYON TOWHEE.

Thrashers seem more inclined always to chose the normal situation, so I associate Palmer Thrasher (*Toxostoma curvirostre palmeri*) with chollas. Imagine my surprise to see one fly from a hole fifteen feet up in a large sycamore, and on climbing up to find that she had a nest there full of young. Chollas were not uncommon in that vicinity, either. Sets of four eggs of this thrasher are very uncommon, yet one year I took two four-egg sets one day from nests built in clumps of mistletoe.

Quail are rather promiscuous in their choice of a nesting place, but usually they like to have something good and solid under them. However, while hunting up Sabino Wash near Tucson one year, I looked into a Palmer Thrasher's nest several feet up in a cholla and found a female Gambel Quail (*Lophortyx gambeli*) looking back at me. She had seventeen heavily incubated eggs under her. On several occasions I have found Palmer Thrasher's nests with from one

to four Gambel Quail eggs mingled with the rightful owner's, but this is the only time I ever found a full set and the parent there.

Another bird which likes good solid ground under its nest is the Arizona Junco (*Junco phaeonotus palliatus*), yet I once found a set of incubated eggs fifteen feet up in a hole in a dead pine branch where the year before I had dug out the nest of a Chestnut-backed Bluebird (*Sialia mexicana bairdi*). A still more surprising find was a nest of one of these juncos nine feet up in a small oak tree alongside a well-used trail. The nest was placed on a small branch and against the trunk. The bird flushed as I passed. During the years from 1910 to 1916 a pair also built in a small Spanish bayonet which grew beside a trail at Berner's in Ramsay Canyon of the Huachuca Mountains. When cats were introduced at this place, they made short work of this pair.

Mr. Bent and I occupied a cabin here during part of May, 1922, and a Painted Redstart (*Setophaga picta*) built its nest in the ivy which covered one



Fig. 42. ABERT TOWHEE'S NEST IN A COTTONWOOD STUMP.

wall. This nest was close up under the eaves and had about twice the usual amount of rough nesting material in it. A hollow on a bank with some dry grass hanging over it is the common situation.

An old woodpecker hole or a natural cavity of similar size is the usual home of the Ash-throated Flycatcher (*Myiarchus cinerascens cinerascens*). A kick against a discarded joint of stovepipe lying on the ground flushed one of these birds from a nest containing five fresh eggs. There was no cover at all, just a small greasewood bush against which the pipe was lodged and which kept it from rolling down the rocky hill on which it lay.

Under the drooping leaves of a soapweed or a tall Spanish bayonet is the proper place to look for nests of the Scott Oriole (*Icterus parisorum*), and so I was surprised indeed to flush one from her nest when I climbed to the top of a

small pine tree where I had seen what looked like a female tanager enter. The nest held four small young. It was nearly forty feet from the ground and was built of the usual yucca fibres, but was attached to a cluster of pine needles, among which it rested instead of hanging, as is the usual position. Later, I found another nest in a small pine tree. This one was but twelve feet up and hung from a fork in somewhat the fashion of a vireo's nest, but still with some supporting needles around it and partially woven into the sides.

The Song Sparrow sometimes deserts the ground and low bushes in favor of a tree, and the desert subspecies (*Melospiza melodia fallax*) also has this trait. One nest was built fifteen feet up in a large willow tree, on a horizontal branch. The bird was on the nest when I found it and remained until I was nearly up to



Fig. 43. GAMBEL QUAIL'S EGGS IN A PALMER THRASHER'S NEST.

it. When she flushed and I looked in, what a nestful I found! There were four of the song sparrow's eggs and four of the Long-tailed Chat (*Icteria virens longicauda*), quite a remarkable combination.

As a climax, however, an experience which Mr. Bent and I had in the mesquite forest this year is the best. He saw a Gila Woodpecker (*Centurus uropygialis*) leave a hole about twenty feet up in a mesquite tree, and I climbed up to cut it out. What was our surprise when I pulled out an Elf Owl (*Micropallas whitneyi*), and our still greater surprise when I reached in again and found a set of Elf Owl eggs! All the while the woodpecker was raising the usual noisy rumpus at having its nest rifled, and it was the only woodpecker which *did* put in an appearance or take any interest in the proceedings. We had held onto the owl and now Mr. Bent shot the woodpecker. It proved to be a male and the

owl was a female. The eggs held small embryos. Here is a romance for those who choose, or a biological question for those who wish to speculate. At least it is interesting as the only departure I have ever known from the Elf Owl's regular habit of nesting in the sahuaro cactus, many of which were within half a mile and eminently suitable, as we found when collecting among them the next day.

Farmingdale, Long Island, New York, April 18, 1923.

HOW IS THIS FOR CONSERVATION OF WILD LIFE?

By JOSEPH MAILLIARD

IN Natural History (Journal of the American Museum of Natural History), vol. 23, no. 1, January-February, 1923, appears an article by Rollo H. Beck, entitled "The Voyage of the 'France': A Later-day Trip to the Scene of the Bounty Mutiny and to Other Islands of the South Pacific."

In his account of this voyage Mr. Beck says, on page 40: "In the way of birds Henderson [Island] yielded a rail, a dove and a warbler, as well as the usual sea birds, but travel over the island proved so difficult that most of our collecting was necessarily done near shore. . . . *The last three goats*¹ purchased for food in Rapa *we liberated on Henderson*, but they chose to remain close to the landing place until our departure. Future visitors should have less trouble than we cutting trails through the tangled vines and shrubbery if the goats use their freedom to good advantage in nibbling their way to the interior." Yet, on the next page, he says: "On one of the small uninhabited islands where goats were kept, *the surprising capture of a rail was made*. There was hardly any cover on the island for a bird with the ordinary habits of the rails as we knew them in Polynesia, but a few had managed to exist in spite of the destruction of the vegetation." Again, on page 43, Beck says: "After cleaning the vessel and getting a fresh stock of provisions we headed out to the eastward to visit other unknown atolls and secure *before their extermination* examples of their dwindling fauna."

It seems almost incredible that such a veteran collector as Rollo H. Beck, in the employ of one of the best known museums in the world, should have done what he evidently knew must mean the ultimate extermination of certain species of birds, and most probably of other and interesting forms of animal and plant life! His own words, quoted above, prove that he knew this from previous experience, and yet he deliberately established upon Henderson Island the machinery to produce such a deplorable result.

It hardly appears reasonable to assume that the three goats liberated were non-breeders, for the reason that on a tropical island of such an extent as this, it being about five miles long by two and one-half miles wide, such a limited

¹The italics are mine, here and below.