

# THE CONDOR

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## DISCOVERY OF A NEST AND EGGS OF THE BLUE-THROATED HUMMINGBIRD

WITH ONE PHOTOGRAPH BY MILTON S. RAY

By ROSE CAROLYN RAY

IT WAS on the 11th of May, 1924, that we made our camp at an elevation of 5675 feet in the Huachuca Mountains of Arizona. This rather well timbered range, that runs almost parallel with the Mexican boundary and some of whose southern spurs just cross the line, is about 40 miles in length and at some places rises to a height of nearly 10,000 feet. Mr. Ray spent several days each week in the higher altitudes and when I did not accompany him I confined my work to elevations around 6000 feet.

On the way to Arizona, articles, principally by Harry S. Swarth and F. C. Willard, those authorities on the bird-life of these mountains, had been very carefully read. Particularly interesting to me was the variety of hummingbirds which had been found in the region, including the tiny Morcom and the giant Blue-throat which, I believe, represent the extremes of size in the family on the North American continent. Among the other species were the large, brilliant Rivoli, and the curious White-eared, whose eggs, like those of the Morcom, apparently remain undescribed. As this family had always possessed a fascination for me, I decided early to spend much of my time in the haunts of its members.

One morning in the latter part of the month, while making my way up one of the narrow canyons, I came upon a small deserted building close to the ravine's sloping bed. As such structures often harbor nests of the Western Flycatcher, Western House Wren or other species, a point was always made to investigate them. On entering, I discovered a most unusual nest, woven to a pendant wire. As I approached, the sitting bird buzzed off, and, standing upon some old logs, I was enabled to see, in the dim light, that it held two eggs. I waited some time but the parent bird did not return, and as both nest and eggs were unfamiliar, I left them undisturbed. On the following day, however, accompanied by Mr. Ray, we paid this nest a second visit. The day's adventure stands in his field book as follows:

"Wednesday, May 28, 1924: We visited this morning the unknown nest that Mrs. Ray found yesterday. On reaching the old deserted shed, imagine my extreme bewilderment to see, sitting on a daintily woven nest of rare beauty, which was suspended on a wire hanging from one of the rafters, that *rara avis*, the great Blue-throated Hummingbird (*Cyanolaemus clemenciae*). Although the first I had ever seen afield, its large size, the distinctive white stripe near the eye and the very broadly white-tipped tail feathers quickly dissipated any doubt as to the bird's identity. I

felt I had some chance of locating a nest of the Rivoli; but in my fondest hopes I would have considered myself lucky to have gained even a fleeting glimpse of this species, of which H. S. Swarth, after spending all together a whole year in these mountains, covering hundreds of miles afield, definitely records but a single bird. I

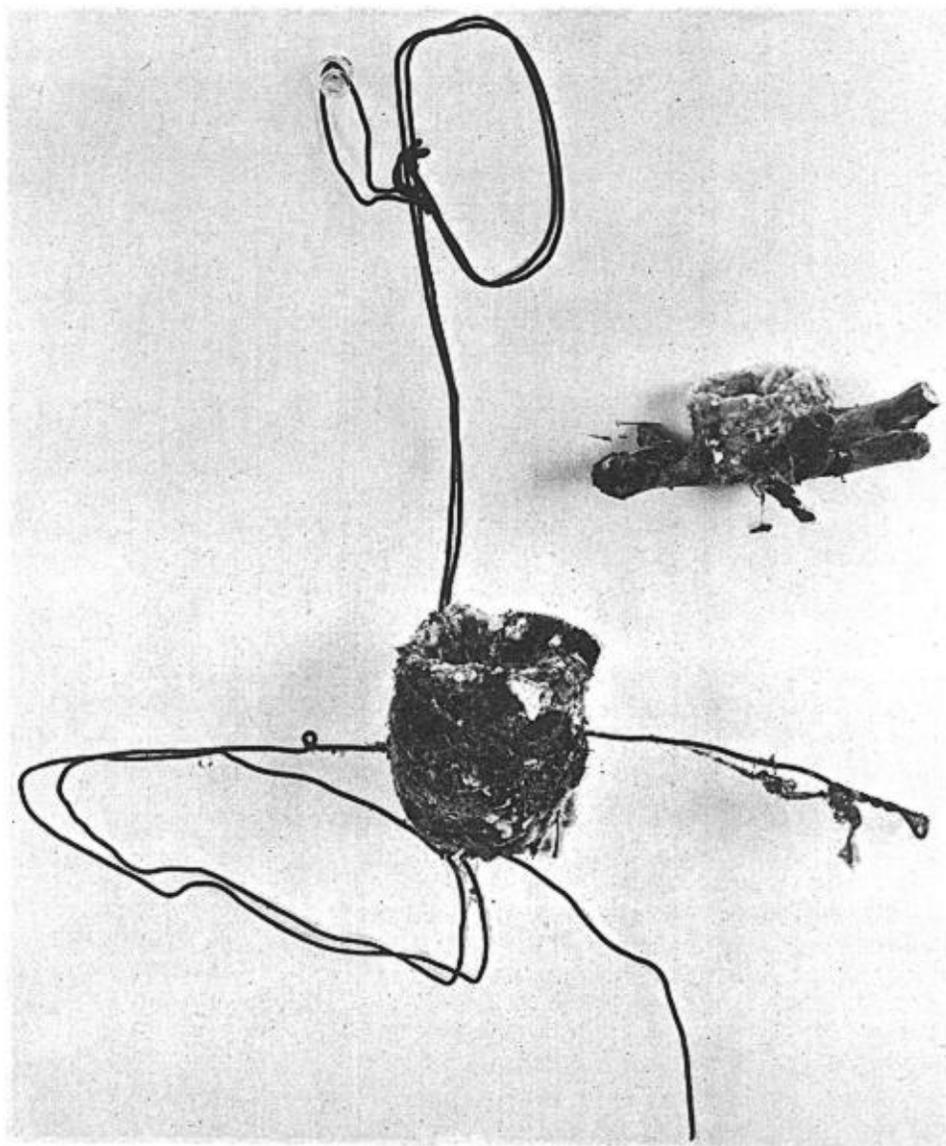


Fig. 16. NESTS OF THE BLUE-THROATED AND BLACK-CHINNED HUMMINGBIRDS, OF THE HUACHUCA MOUNTAINS, SHOWING COMPARATIVE SIZES. THE DIAMETER OF THE BLUE-THROAT'S NEST IS  $2\frac{3}{8}$  INCHES, THAT OF THE OTHER,  $1\frac{1}{2}$  INCHES.

endeavored to photograph the female on the nest, but as I drew nearer she whizzed off and disappeared up the canyon. After some little time we could hear a rather far-reaching but not overloud alarm note, "seek"—"seek"—"seek". Again and again

came the keen penetrating call note, and then the giant hummingbird flashed in beneath the rafters, poising in mid-air and remaining nearly motionless, save for her almost invisible whirring wings. Suddenly darting, she hovered directly over the nest and then quickly and lightly settled down upon it. On flushing the bird a second time I was able to learn that the two eggs the nest contained were unfortunately dark with incubation; as Keats has said: "Aye in the very temple of delight veiled melancholy has her sovereign shrine." However, packing the specimens very gingerly and with fervent hopes that they might eventually be saved, we returned to camp. The embryos proved well formed; yet by careful and tedious work I was successful in preparing the eggs for the cabinet. Although this task required about two hours, I felt amply repaid by having saved specimens that I could scarcely ever hope to replace. The pure white eggs are of the characteristic shape and measure, in inches, .61 x .40, .60 x .41.

"The nest is beautifully woven of moss, plant down and cottony fibers, webbed together on the exterior and decorated there with bits of very bright green moss and pale green lichens. The lining of the nest consists almost entirely of cottony fibers and down. It is unusually large for a hummingbird, measuring  $3\frac{1}{4}$  inches high by  $2\frac{3}{8}$  across. The cavity is  $1\frac{3}{4}$  inches across by  $1\frac{1}{8}$  deep.

"Compared with the Rivoli Hummingbird, the Blue-throat is appreciably greater in length and this difference is accentuated by its heavier build. Unlike the Blue-throat, the wings of the Rivoli project back of its tail, and this is very noticeable when the bird perches, at which time, also, we always noted a peculiar jerky movement of the head. We saw the Rivoli up to the very crest of the range, but our nesting Blue-throat was the only one seen on the entire trip."

It will be remembered that Oliver Davie (*Nests and Eggs of North American Birds*, page 291) chronicles but a single nest of this species, that found by Nelson on September 9, 1893, containing two eggs and located at an altitude of 11,500 feet on the slope of the Volcano Toluca in Mexico. This nest was built in the fork of a small shrub growing out of the face of a cliff, about 30 feet above its base, on the side of a canyon, in a forest of firs and pines. It was a handsome and rather bulky structure, of fine mosses smoothly quilted together and lined with the down of willow catkins. The nest was nearly inaccessible and one egg was broken in securing it; the other specimen measured .64 x .39.

George F. Breninger and, later, F. C. Willard are the only others, so far as I am able to learn, who have recorded finding nests of this species. As an indication of the scarcity of these eggs, I may state that of the 1250 species and subspecies of North American birds (not including, of course, 68 not rated), R. M. Barnes in his 1922 list only gives the eggs of five species precedence in rarity. Three of these are extinct or nearly so, and are, respectively, the California Condor, Ivory-billed Woodpecker, Passenger Pigeon, Black Swift, and Spoon-bill Sandpiper.

Our last view of the Huachuca Mountains was obtained as we speeded north by auto-stage. The day was typical of Arizona in early July, sultry and still. Far to the south, standing against the almost cloudless sky, rose the lofty range, with the dominant Miller Peak, partially obscured by a great, lazy bank of clouds. I feel I shall always remember these mountains with their wild rocky canyons, Sierran-like pine forests, and their varied and curious forms of bird life. But most indelibly impressed upon my memory will be the vision of the Blue-throated Hummingbird sitting motionless in the dim light upon its tropical-looking nest in the lonely canyon.

*San Francisco, January 10, 1925.*