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PECULIAR NESTING SITE OF A DUSKY WARBLER

WITH FOUR ILLUSTRATIONS

By CLINTON G. ABBOTT

PRINTED reference to the nesting of the Dusky Warbler (*Vermivora celata sordida*) seems to be sufficiently scarce to warrant my recording a nest which came under my observation during the summer of 1924, particularly as the site was distinctly unusual. The Dusky Warbler, I might state, is a not uncommon resident of brushy canyon sides within the city limits of San Diego, even in sections



Fig. 22. DUSKY WARBLER, COSILY NESTLING IN THE MOSS AT THE BASE OF THE FERNS; SAN DIEGO, JUNE 14, 1924.

that are fairly well built up. The cheerful little trill of its song may often be heard in the spring, but its nest is hard to find and the one here illustrated is the only inhabited nest I have ever seen.

The peculiar location selected by the birds for this nest was a decorative fern basket inside a small lath house adjoining the home of Mrs. A. P. Johnson, Jr., at 2470 C Street, San Diego. According to information I secured from Mrs. Johnson

and from Albert M. Ingersoll, a Fellow of the San Diego Society of Natural History, selection of the lath house as a nesting location by the Dusky Warblers dated back to April, 1923, when a small, greenish bird sprang almost into Mrs. Johnson's face one day while she was watering one of the fern baskets. Peeping in, she saw the nest, which contained three eggs, cosily placed in the moss at the base of the ferns. She notified Mr. Ingersoll, who is well known to San Diegans as an authority on bird life,



Fig. 23. DUSKY WARBLER BEING PHOTOGRAPHED BY CLINTON G. ABBOTT.
THE NEST WAS IN A SWINGING FERN-BASKET INSIDE THE LATH HOUSE.

and he identified the bird as a Dusky Warbler. The eggs, he said, were very heavily incubated when he saw them in April, 1923. The young, according to Mrs. Johnson, left the nest either thirteen or fourteen days after hatching.

The following year, 1924, the birds made another nest in the same basket, adjoining the first nest. As soon as the new building operations were noticed, Mrs. Johnson informed Mr. Ingersoll, who kept the nest under observation and states that an interval of twenty-one days elapsed after the rim of the nest was formed before the first egg was laid. The bird laid only two eggs in this nest, which were duly hatched,

although the young were destroyed by some unknown enemy. The lath house was kept locked so that a cat was not responsible in this instance. The fact that the nest itself was not disturbed turned suspicion to a snake or a rat.

Later in the season (1924) the warbler built a new nest in another of the fern baskets and, as Mr. Ingersoll was out of town, Mrs. Johnson telephoned me at the Natural History Museum. It was certainly a surprise, when I visited Mrs. Johnson's home, to observe the strange situation selected by the birds. Her house is in one of the older residential sections of the city, known as Golden Hill. The homes here are large and surrounded by more or less extensive grounds, but the whole aspect is distinctly urban, with streets everywhere paved. Broadway, with double trolley tracks, is only one block away. The lath house, sixteen by twenty-four feet in size, was filled with a luxuriant growth of cultivated plants. A rectangular path within



Fig. 24. DUSKY WARBLER: THE BIRD SEEMED PRACTICALLY FEARLESS.

was marked at its corners by four wire fern baskets suspended about four feet from the ground. In one of these were the remains of the two previous years' nests, and in the basket diagonally opposite was the inhabited nest, which contained three eggs. Although the eggs were manifestly not fresh, there was no bird about and they seemed cool to my touch. I waited about for fully ten minutes and was beginning to fear that disaster had overtaken the home, when I heard a low, scolding note overhead. Then down from between the laths hopped the dainty little warbler, and, with no concern whatsoever, she took her place upon the eggs, although I was standing in full view close by.

Realizing that here was an unusual opportunity for photography, I returned with two cameras to the lath house on June 14, 1924, in company with Laurence M. Huey, of the Museum staff. As at the previous visit, the bird was not on her nest when we arrived, but she soon appeared and went unhesitatingly to her eggs. We then set up a camera on the tripod, and, with no concealment whatever, took all the photo-

graphs we desired. We soon discovered that not only was the bird practically fearless in the ordinary sense, but that she would even allow us to touch her without leaving her nest. She would permit us to raise her from her eggs with no greater protest than a pecking at the intruding finger. If she was not sitting sufficiently broadside for a good photograph, it was possible to arrange her the way we wanted her! Sometimes, if our familiarity was beyond her patience, she would merely hop among the foliage behind the nest, wait there for a few minutes, and then nestle back on her eggs. One usually associates "broodiness" with barnyard fowls, but this instinct is common to virtually all birdkind, and here, surely, was an instance of a tiny feathered being that was as broody as any old hen. Mrs. Johnson said that the warbler, on all her nests, became quite oblivious to frequent showerings from the watering can.

That the photographs we secured were not better than they are was due to no lack of accommodation on the part of our subject, but to the difficult light conditions. The natural light and shade of the lath house had to be screened for photographic

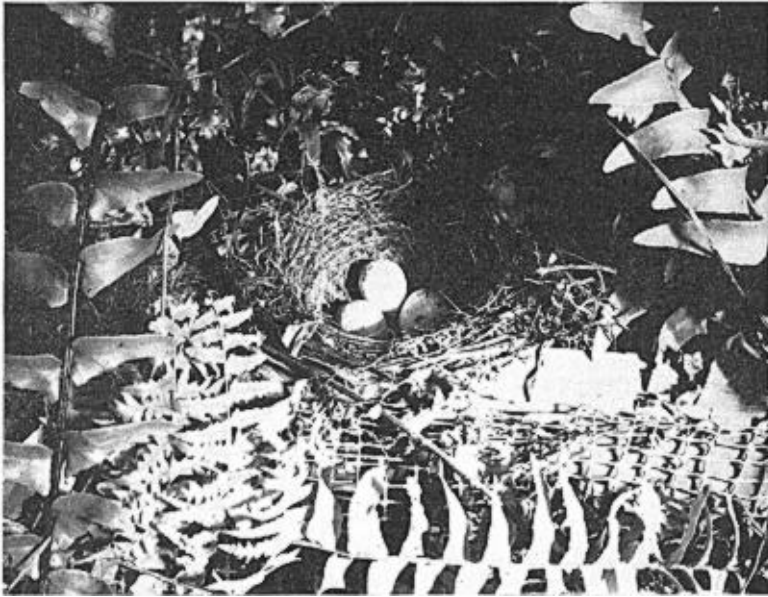


Fig. 25. DUSKY WARBLER: ITS NEST AND THREE EGGS DISCLOSED.

purposes, and the constant moving of the bird's head prevented an exposure of necessary length. Unfortunately our little friend was doomed to disappointment once more, for the young from these eggs were also destroyed (by an unknown enemy) before they left the nest. No young were therefore raised by these birds in 1924.

This year, 1925, the lath house was moved, but the Dusky Warblers were seen around, both at the location of the old lath house, and at the new lath house. However, no nest was found this year, although Mrs. Johnson thinks the birds may have built in a wisteria vine in her garden. As late as August 11, 1925, they were heard "chipping" as though they were tending young then. It might be added that throughout Mrs. Johnson's acquaintance with these warblers, she usually saw but one bird at the nest, but that when the young were on the wing, both parents raised a great disturbance.

San Diego, California, August 28, 1925.