

## ITEMS FROM AN OOLOGIST'S NOTEBOOK

By JOHN G. TYLER

A short time ago the editor of one of the leading American ornithological journals, in a review of a monumental work by an author of international renown, fully concurred in a certain statement found therein and credited to a third party, to the effect that oologists can be numbered on the fingers of two hands but egg collectors are without number. This verdict having been brought in by three such eminent authorities, the present writer feels under obligation to confess that he is fully aware of the presumption evident in the selection of the title to this paper and to assure the other seven eligibles that he will promptly vacate whenever they are nominated. With this matter thus disposed of, he begs to submit a few scraps from the field notes of one who joyfully confesses to having been interested in this phase of bird study for the past thirty years and more, and who is still able to get a big thrill from inspecting a raven's nest tucked snugly into the cranny of some cliff along a rocky canyon wall. To be strictly consistent, however, the following items will, no doubt, be considered as mere by-products gathered much as a botanist might carry home an occasional beetle for an interested friend.

**Plegadis guarauna.** White-faced Glossy Ibis. I have frequently been impressed with the inability of small young of this species to withstand the effects of direct exposure to the rays of the sun. Even chicks a few days old perish in a few minutes if the parents are frightened away from the nest. Under normal conditions one of the parent birds stands on the nest shading the young, but if this bird vacates her position for any length of time the young quickly succumb. It should be remembered, however, that this species is not an early nester and that the mercury often runs high at that season of the year. From 100° to 108° F, in the shade, is not unusual, and most nests of the ibis are fully exposed and also usually well cut off from whatever breeze may happen to be blowing.

Young of the Black-crowned Night Heron (*Nycticorax nycticorax hoactli*) which are often found in the same communities seem but little affected by exposure which is quickly fatal to young of the ibis.

**Falco sparverius phalaena.** Desert Sparrow Hawk. While this little falcon is sometimes charged with being a bird killer, yet many individuals certainly are innocent of such a charge and are not feared in the least by smaller birds. On a day in January I noticed a Sparrow Hawk and a Western Mockingbird perched on the same telephone wire and paying not the slightest heed to one another's presence, although scarcely twenty-four inches of space separated them. Again, on a warm noonday in June, on the cross-arm of a telephone pole I observed one Sparrow Hawk, one Western Meadowlark and a California Shrike, each perched in the scant shade afforded by an insulator and separated from each other by only the distance between these devices.

**Aquila chrysaetos canadensis.** Golden Eagle. Coming, by chance, upon an eagle standing in the edge of the shallow water of a small pool in a nearly dry foothill creek, I was attracted by the actions of the bird which had all the appearance of attempting to capture something in the water. The bird allowed me to drive within about seventy-five yards before taking flight, and I noted that it seemed to be in normal health and plumage. The pool in which the bird was standing was swarming with pollywogs averaging about an inch and a half in length. This seemed rather humble fare for the king of birds.

That the eagle is still monarch of the air was amply demonstrated, however, on another day and within half a mile of the same place. A pair of Prairie Falcons (*Falco mexicanus*) in a surly mood had evidently decided to free the neighborhood of all feathered intruders. A Barn Owl (*Tyto alba pratincola*) disturbed from its hiding place in an erosion crevice in a high bank, started for a pot-hole in the cliff below the falcon's lookout perch. With a suppressed whistle of anger one of the falcons took to the air. About one hundred feet of climbing seemed to suffice and with a sudden, fierce stoop she struck the unfortunate owl, which crumpled up and fell into a deep ravine followed by a small cloud of feathers. The falcon, flushed with victory, returned to her perch on a well white-washed knob. A moment later a Golden Eagle came sailing along over the crest of the ridge and both falcons instantly went in pursuit, harassing the big bird from every angle. The eagle sailed serenely on his way with no attempt at defense or retaliation. The falcons became bolder and as one of them closed in, the eagle suddenly turned on its side and caught his antagonist totally unprepared to dodge a terrific blow from the full sweep of one wing. The falcon fell nearly to the earth, an estimated distance of two hundred feet, before it recovered sufficiently to go whimpering back to its perch, closely followed by its mate, while the eagle continued on its way unperturbed.

*Zenaidura macroura marginella*. Western Mourning Dove. I had always considered the dove as one of our fastest flying birds among the smaller species and was glad to be able to test the matter on three different occasions with the following results. A single dove, coming in to roost at sundown, paralleled my car for about 200 yards and kept even with me at just 36 miles per hour. On another occasion three doves, flying against a rather heavy wind, were paced at 35 miles per hour. They attempted to cross in front of me but seemed unable to increase their speed and could only cross the road after I had slowed down to about 30 miles. A single dove on a calm August day came alongside my car and in traveling an estimated distance of one hundred yards gradually drew ahead of me. I happened to be making 30 miles per hour and maintained that speed until the bird had gained noticeably. A Western Meadowlark greatly surprised me by making a two hundred yard flight only a few yards from the edge of the highway, and with no apparent extra exertion keeping in the same relative position to my car during the entire flight. I was making 40 miles per hour at the time. The lark was employing its characteristic low, direct flight with alternate periods of sailing and rapid wing-beats. The best a California Horned Lark (*Otocoris alpestris actia*) could do under similar conditions was 28 miles per hour.

Without submitting figures to support the statement, I am convinced that one of the fastest flying birds among the passerine group is the Brewer Blackbird (*Euphagus cyanocephalus*). When just moving from tree to tree or from place to place in short flights in a field this species moves in a leisurely fashion, but when really going places, the birds skim along just above the ground in a manner of flight much like that of the flocks of Tri-colored Blackbirds when moving northward in their spring flights; at such times their speed is much greater than anyone who has not paced them down a pasture lane, would ever believe possible.

*Psaltriparus minimus californicus*. California Bush-tit. A nest of this species suspended from a lower branch of a live-oak tree upon discovery was not disturbed any more than was necessary to ascertain the contents, which consisted of an incomplete set of eggs. Passing the same tree a few days later I discovered one of the birds in the branches nearby, while the other, as it afterwards proved,

was inside the nest and just below the entrance. What sort of antics the latter was going through I could not determine. The entire nest was being frequently, rapidly and violently vibrated and I marveled that a creature so small and so closely confined in the narrow neck of the nest, could produce so much disturbance.

After watching for a few moments I grasped the branch and jerked it rapidly but gently. The effect on the nest, so far as I could see, was not unlike what I had just been witnessing, but my technique was evidently faulty as the bird came hustling out of the nest to see what it was all about. To this day no satisfactory explanation of this bush-tit's actions has been forthcoming.

**Botaurus lentiginosus.** American Bittern. I had sometimes wondered how a bird so lacking in flesh and so scantily feathered could generate enough warmth to incubate eggs in the make-shift nest which this species often constructs. The problem was solved when a Bittern, sitting on a fully exposed nest in a thin growth of marsh grass growing in about ten inches of water, was approached to within six feet before she slowly arose and revealed the fact that her legs were nicely doubled up under her and held about one inch apart. The eggs were balanced in the groove thus formed on the tarsi and were, in this manner, held snugly against her body, and not in contact with the nest material at all. No wonder, after letting the eggs roll off her shins onto the nest platform, that this Bittern sprang into the air and went bellowing away, her voice sounding not unlike that of a Great Blue Heron when forced to take wing from a favorite slough.

**Corvus corax sinuatus.** Western Raven. A chick just out of the shell in a nest which I chanced to examine gave me an opportunity to record a description of his appearance which was quite unlike that of a nestling raven a few days older. This young bird was entirely a rich orange color, including legs, feet and bill, the bill however, being paler colored toward the tip. The chick appeared to be entirely naked save for a sparse growth of inch-long bluish filaments along the spine. The bird was blind but with large blue bulges at either side of the head indicating the location of eyes. It was able to move about in the nest in a rather limited way and occasionally gave voice to a single note—a somewhat harsh squeak which was clearly audible at a distance of thirty feet.

The orange color in a young raven soon fades out, leaving the skin a dirty flesh color, and in a few days the body grows out of all proportion to the head. Each day the young bird becomes more repulsive in appearance, and in my opinion, even a young cormorant must yield the palm to a ten day old raven when it comes to utter unattractiveness.

On one occasion I had with me on a field trip a companion who had had no previous experience with this bird nor with the type of country which it inhabits. Finding an easily inspected nest on a dirt bank, I called this man to come over and see the three young birds as they lay sprawled out amid the most unsanitary nest conditions imaginable. As we climbed out of the gulch on the way back to the car, I recalled the fact that my companion had not enthused in the manner that the occasion seemed to demand. In fact he had made no comment whatever. Well! what did you think of them? I queried. He flashed a quick look of disgust and replied, "No sale! Only a mother could love those little devils!"

*Fresno, California, May 3, 1933.*