

# THE CONDOR

VOLUME XXXIX

SEPTEMBER-OCTOBER, 1937

NUMBER 5

## NESTING OF THE SAW-WHET OWL

WITH ONE ILLUSTRATION

By WILLIAM M. GRANFIELD

Early last fall a companion and I put up a number of boxes for Screech Owls in the vicinity of the southern end of the Spring Valley Lakes in San Mateo County, California. One "house" in particular was set up about twenty feet from the ground in a coast live oak, situated in a narrow belt of trees among madrones, valley oaks and chaparral between two large meadows. These meadows are bordered on the south and west by heavily forested hills and on the north and northeast by the southernmost of the Spring Valley Lakes. The house itself is about two hundred yards from the southern shore of the lake. During the winter and early spring we visited this house only twice and, both times, noticed that the box was occasionally being used as a roosting place by an owl.

Then came the surprise. On April 18, 1937, after having inspected our other owl houses, we approached the box in the tree. Because of the noise we made rustling the dead oak leaves, an inquisitive, brown-streaked head was thrust from the opening of the box. It was a Saw-whet Owl (*Cryptoglaux acadica*)! The head remained in the doorway and regarded us sleepily though in a somewhat surprised manner. But when we climbed the tree, to find six creamy white eggs in the box, the owl immediately flew in great alarm into a nearby lichen-laden oak.

The eggs were lying in a circle on a bed of sawdust and pellets approximately in the center of the box, and there was no evidence of any prey having yet been brought to the nest. Fear of causing the bird to desert the eggs made us immediately retreat from the vicinity without further examination.

The following Sunday, April 25, we revisited the box in the oak, armed with camera and flashlight bulbs; but this time the sleepy-headed owl did not appear at the opening. Even when we climbed to the box there was no audible activity inside, but when we raised the roof we discovered the owl brooding the eggs. During the time it took us to take flashlight pictures, she sat immobile and stared at us fixedly. In the box with her this time was a dead field mouse, probably a result of the previous night's foraging.

On May 2, the female (supposedly this sex) again chose to remain on the eggs and did not appear at the entrance. Having had little previous experience with nesting owls, we did not disturb her, so were unable to learn whether the eggs had hatched.

As a result of the rising of the Spring Valley Lakes, the house was inaccessible to us the following week-end; but on the succeeding Saturday, May 15, through the aid of the district patrolman (the Spring Valley Lakes lie in a state game refuge), Mr. Percie Bee, we reached the owl box. The saw-whet evidently knew of our approach and was peering out of the entrance when we arrived. We were able to ascend to within six feet of the box and snap her picture before she left the nest, reluctantly, to fly into an adjacent oak. In the box were four sleepy babies, about two weeks old, and two

discolored, infertile eggs, surrounded by the remains of a number of field mice and the upper portion of a rat.

When we switched on a flashlight, the mother owl uttered the whistle peculiar to the saw-whet, which resembles the sound made by filing or whetting a saw, and flew



Fig. 54. Young Saw-whet Owl photographed June 5, 1937, near nest site in San Mateo County, California.

back into the nest-box tree about seven feet from us. While we examined the babies, she nervously stared at us, occasionally blinking and surveying the surrounding territory, acting as if she intended to approach closer. Having satisfied our curiosity we departed and left the owl family to itself.

On our succeeding visit, May 18, my companion, Dick Santee, banded the mother in the box and each of the babies. Returning the following Sunday, May 24, to obtain photographs, we found the mother absent from the nest and the babies well feathered. The box emitted the unpleasant odor of dead mice and regurgitated pellets.

As our last visit, June 5, was beyond doubt one of the babies' few remaining days in the nest, we decided to take them down from the box and photograph them in the open. It was then obvious that the baby owls had the "Kirtland" plumage, the seldom-seen evanescent juvenile plumage of the Saw-whet, which is believed to have been photographed but rarely before (Bird-Lore, vol. 39, 1937, p. 141); the mother owl, the only parent observed, had the common saw-whet plumage.

We lowered the apparently docile owlets in a knapsack and set them on a low oak branch in the open. We intended to take a family picture, but in the end we had to be content with a group picture of only three, because when we succeeded in placing the four owls on the branch, they would either claw and scratch each other, or one or two would spread their wings and drop off. During one attempt two of the babies took to their wings and succeeded in flying over fifty feet before being caught and brought back.

When we returned them to the box, they continued to fight among themselves, acting as if they were total strangers, and one of them continually attempted to escape through the opening. When we used a flashlight bulb, while taking a final picture, they huddled in a corner and evidently remained so until one appeared at the entrance and intently watched us depart.

*1125 Cortez Avenue, Burlingame, California, June 23, 1937.*

## WINTER HABITS OF THE WHITE-THROATED SWIFT

By GAYLE PICKWELL

Alum Rock Canyon, a city park of San Jose, Santa Clara County, California, is a comparatively deep, east-west canyon in the foothill region of the Mount Hamilton range about six miles to the east of the city. Certain portions of the upper canyon, on the south and west-facing slopes, are composed of precipitous rock faces. These rock faces lie immediately above the Sycamore Canyon Road which follows the north wall of the canyon some two or three hundred feet above the canyon's bottom. In the vicinity of these rocks, White-throated Swifts (*Aëronautes saxatalis*) have frequently been observed, and in the crevices the swifts have nested. Only during the past few months, however, have observations of some care been made in connection with the wintering habits of these birds in this area.

On one occasion, as long ago as November 21, 1931, White-throated Swifts, some two or three score in number, were noted entering and leaving a fissure in the rock faces above the Sycamore Canyon Road. These observations were made about 3:30 p.m. Not again until the late summer of 1936, and the winter just past, were further observations made. During this period, visits were made as follows: August 3 and 21, September 12, October 24, and November 15, all in 1936; March 6, and April 4, in 1937. Mr. Henri Hill kindly furnished reports for November 29, 1936, and January 9, 1937. Mr. James Peterson made a report concerning the swifts on January 23, 1937.

The niche in which the swifts quartered themselves in 1931, and throughout the observations here reported upon, consists of a recess of unknown depth extending beneath a rock face that lies at an angle a little short of the vertical. It is about fifteen feet immediately above Sycamore Canyon Road. The crevice through which the swifts enter and leave measures, it is estimated, from two to three inches in width and about two and one-half feet in length. All of the swifts noted, during the dates specified, used this aperture and this one only.

On August 3, the swifts were flying about in the canyon when first observed just at sunset. A crude estimate made of their numbers in the air gave from one hundred to two hundred individuals. Prior to entering the night roost the birds streamed in a procession into the shadows by it and then turned out into the light of the canyon. Shortly thereafter they entered the rock, streaming in with unbelievable rapidity. Three or four struck the crevice simultaneously, and now and then they struck one another. Twenty or more entered in an interval of one or two seconds. The entire flock was housed between 7:20 and 7:25 p.m., and a constant chattering thenceforth welled from the rock face. The sun had set some time previously, and deep shadows filled the gorge of the canyon.

The region was visited too late (6:55 p.m.) on August 21 to observe the swifts entering their nightly abode, but their voices came in volume from the rocks. The