

## BIRDS AND AN ANT ARMY IN SOUTHERN TAMAULIPAS

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In midafternoon on March 19, 1949, in thick scrubby woodland along the Río Sabinas, near the hill village of Gomez Farias, in southwestern Tamaulipas, I was afforded a remarkable and wholly unexpected opportunity to observe certain Mexican birds which I had many times heard but never very satisfactorily seen. Chief among these were the Barred Ant Shrike (*Thamnophilus dohertyi*) and the Red-throated Ant Tanager (*Habia gutturalis*), forms which reach their northernmost limit of range in or near that area.

I had devoted that day almost exclusively to hunting Groove-billed Anis (*Crotophaga sulcirostris*), a species well known and common thereabouts, but unaccountably hard to find at the moment. My Mexican friends called these birds *garrapateros*—tick-birds. The matter was urgent, for this was to be my last full day in the low country along the Sabinas and several specimens were needed. Midafternoon was not, admittedly, a good time for bird hunting, but I reasoned that if I found the anis at all they would probably be sitting quietly in the shade and easy to obtain.

Bearing in mind that I had often seen anis near livestock, I visited all the places at which I knew cattle would be resting at that time of day. But not a single ani did I see or hear. Refusing to give up, I decided to concentrate upon the place at which I had shot a specimen that morning. There, I recalled, the bird had flown southward from a clearing into the shrubbery, and I had heard another calling farther to the southward in the thicket. This was not a comforting thought. It was tick season and I knew the young ticks, the dread *pinolillos*, would be especially numerous in the dense, tangled mats of wild pineapple. Following a straight, little-used trail along a fence, I eventually came to a freshly cut property line leading south. The air was soft and hot. I could see tiny ticks crawling up my pants. Some of these I brushed off vigorously. How shut-in and apart from the rest of the world the thicket seemed!

Suddenly, some rods off in the tangle, I heard a most welcome sound, the clear-cut *pee-to* of an ani. I started straight through the thicket, but quickly changed my plan partly because of the thorny vines and partly because I heard another ani calling nearer at hand and in a different direction. Returning to the property line and following it, I presently saw three anis fly up, then a fourth. The last was the closest of all. It did not seem shy and I had little trouble approaching it. As I shot, the other three flew off, disappearing to the northward. I retraced my way along the property line, pausing frequently to listen. When fifty yards or so from the place at which I had shot the bird, I was surprised to hear a sharp *pee-to* very near me and to see five or six anis hopping and flying southward through the thicket. Confident that I should be able to obtain more specimens if only I could keep track of the flock, I started after them. All at once anis seemed to be all about me, hopping through the shrubbery and calling excitedly. Soon I had my six specimens and needed no more.

The living anis, instead of flying off as I had expected them to, continued to stay close by, and their behavior puzzled me greatly. At first I thought they were merely curious. Then, watching them closely as I held one of the specimens toward them, I fancied reading suspicion and resentment in their behavior. I could not remember ever having seen wild, free-flying anis at such close range.

The sensations of the next few seconds were so vivid, so wholly unexpected, and followed each other in such rapid succession, that they were—and I use the word realizing that it hints of hyperbole—semiparalyzing. I stood there as if transfixed, as if

actually unable to move, appalled by the enterprise of which I seemed suddenly to have become a part. Birds of many sorts were all about me, among them species I had spent hours looking for and never before so clearly seen. Some of the least familiar were almost within touching distance. They were feeding eagerly, almost gluttonously, it seemed, on insects which continued to rise from the ground and undergrowth. Without having either the time or the ability to identify these insects very satisfactorily, I saw moths, leaf-hoppers, stink-bugs, grasshoppers, crane flies, and beetles, not to mention unwinged forms which were moving, apparently in all possible haste, up, up, up the twigs and leaves. The flying insects poured out so incessantly that I could not help thinking of a barrage in miniature, or odd little fireworks in display. All these insects were—and the full impact of the idea was terrific—fleeing for their lives. The birds were eating them, to be sure, but it was not really the birds they were fleeing from. Their true enemies were ants—an ant army.

The ants, thousands upon thousands of them, were moving in a mass directly toward the trail in which I stood. I could see the vanguard filing slowly but inexorably forward in lines along certain twigs and grass blades only a rod or so away. Those which were obliged to move over the dead leaves on the ground were impeded by the uneven surfaces. The vanguard did not seem to be putting any insects to flight. But just to the rear of them, back where the shadowed, sheltered spots were being invaded, the activity was intense. I saw a large caterpillar at the end of a twig turn and twist violently as the ants bit it. In its writhing it lost its grip and fell to the ground. I saw a fritillary butterfly flapping its wings as if for flight and then I watched the four wings separate, move off in different directions, fall flat, and completely disappear beneath the ants. The noise of the approaching army and of the fleeing insects was incredible. Not that this sound was loud. At first I did not notice it, or if I did, I attributed it to wind in the tree tops. It was a seething sound. I had heard something like it at the mouth of Tornillo Creek, along the Rio Grande, when water from a cloudburst far upstream had suddenly filled the broad gravel bed and risen swiftly.

The ant army's front seemed to be twenty or thirty yards broad. This I guessed from the concentration of fleeing insects and of the birds which were capturing them. The ants stayed close to the ground. I saw them on fallen branches, on shrubbery, and on the roots and lower trunks of the trees, but they did not seem to be moving up into the higher branches.

After a moment I walked swiftly to one side, following that blessed property line, surveyed the advancing army with the binoculars, decided that there could be no real danger so long as I was sound of limb, and retraced my steps cautiously. Especially noticeable were the very birds I had so wanted to see—the ant shrikes and ant tanagers. It was unbelievable that they should be moving about in plain sight, perching *on*, rather than *in*, the shrubbery. I had spent hours, literally hours, crawling about through bamboo tangles and tick-infested brush trying to see these birds and had usually failed miserably. Here they were, at least four ant shrikes and a company of eight or ten ant tanagers, each battering an insect to death, or swallowing hard, or wiping its bill energetically while getting ready for the next mouthful. The ant shrikes often lifted their crests high and the whiteness of their eyes was almost startling. Their legs and feet seemed disproportionately coarse. I did not see them alight on the ground, though they may have done so. They hopped vigorously from twig to twig, often without lifting or spreading their wings in the slightest. They did not, however, climb about as did the one Pepper Shrike (*Cyclarhis gujanensis*) of the flock. The ant tanagers, to my surprise, seemed to be too busy for scolding. In that very thicket I had often heard their rough

chatter and bursts of rich, full-throated song, but how very little I had seen of them! Here they hopped and fluttered about like dooryard birds, with body-plumage fluffed out slightly and wings and tails partly spread.

There was a flash of red-brown as a woodhewer (*Xiphorhynchus flavigaster*) flew in front of me, alighted on a trunk, hitched downward, dropped to the ground, and seized a large pale green orthopteran in its beak. With my glass I could see hundreds of ants moving about the woodhewer, but they did not seem to attack it. There was another flash of red-brown as a Squirrel Cuckoo (*Piaya cayana*) snatched at an insect and hopped rapidly off through the undergrowth. The birds were so active that it was hard to be sure how many there were of a given species. I believe, however, that there were four woodhewers and two Squirrel Cuckoos in the company. I saw neither Yellow-billed Cuckoos (*Coccyzus americanus*) nor Mangrove Cuckoos (*C. minor*), although both those species nested in the vicinity.

Small birds to which I had at first paid little attention were the dainty Fan-tailed Warblers (*Euthlypis lachrymosa*), Lichtenstein Warblers (*Basileuterus culicivorus brasherii*), White-eyed Vireos (*Vireo griseus*), Yellow-green Vireos (*Vireo olivaceus flavoviridis*), White-bellied Wrens (*Nannorchilus leucogaster*), Spotted-breasted Wrens (*Thryothorus maculipectus*), and Olive Sparrows (*Arremonops rufivirgatus*). There were several of each of these, but I saw no Pitiayumi Warbler (*Parula pitiayumi*), no gnatcatcher, and no hummingbird of any sort.

I made a point of noting that no black bird which put in its appearance was of a species I had long been wanting to see to better advantage, the Prevost Cacique (*Amblycercus holosericeus*). Nowhere, indeed, did I see an icterid of any sort, although several species of that family lived thereabouts. In the wake of the army, rather than in the midst of it or in front of it, were several Green Jays (*Xanthoura yncas*), a few Gray Robins (*Turdus grayi*), two or three Long-billed Thrashers (*Toxostoma longirostre*), and at least one Blue Bunting (*Cyanocompsa parellina*). In the trees not far from the ants, but definitely above ground, were two pairs of Rose-throated Becards (*Platypsaris aglaiae*), a single Olivaceous Flycatcher (*Myiarchus tuberculifer lawrenceii*), and two Ladder-backed Woodpeckers (*Dendrocopos scalaris*). The more I thought about the matter, the more puzzled I was at seeing no Brown Jays (*Psilorhinus morio*), Crimson-collared Grosbeaks (*Rhodothraupis celaeno*), Black-headed Saltators (*Saltator atriceps*), or large flycatchers of the genera *Tyrannus*, *Myiodynastes*, *Pitangus* and *Megarynchus*. My failure to see any little stub-tailed euphonias of the genus *Tanagra* did not surprise me, for I knew that those tanagers subsisted principally on mistletoe berries. I was not surprised at seeing no doves or pigeons, and swallows and swifts would have seemed entirely out of place in the thick woods. It is noteworthy that I saw no Blue-crowned Mot-mot (*Momotus momota coeruliceps*), Pygmy Owl (*Glauucidium brasilianum*), or Coppery-tailed Trogon (*Trogon elegans ambiguus*), and no crypturiform, falconiform, or galliform bird of any sort.

I did not collect specimens of the ants but suspect they were of a species which ranges little, if any, farther north than the Sabinas valley. The army was so dense that it almost hid the ground in spots, but it did not move forward very rapidly. I did not see a bird of any sort feeding directly on the ants themselves, nor did I see an ant attack any bird. I saw nothing which called to mind the phenomenon of "anting." Somewhat to my surprise I saw no snakes, tarantulas, scorpions, centipedes, or small mammals which had been put to flight. The two or three lizards which I saw in the vicinity may have been attracted, as had the birds, by the fleeing insects.

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