

Discovery of the First Black Swift Nest

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ASK ANY COMPETENT BIRDER to describe the nest and eggs of the Black Swift, and you'll be told that this largest of North American swifts places a small cup of moss and other plant material on a sheltered ledge near a waterfall, on a sea cliff, or in some other moist but inaccessible spot, and that there is a single white egg.

These basic facts are common knowledge. You can find them in Arthur Cleveland Bent's "Life Histories," in John K. Terres's *Audubon Society Encyclopedia of North American Birds*, and in field guides, manuals, and regional bird books. But putting them on record was far from easy. Had you asked the same competent birder the same question 80 years ago, you would have received an equally quick answer. It would have been quite different, and quite wrong.

The Black Swift is not a common or widespread bird. It was discovered more than two centuries ago in the West Indies, but the first North American birds were not found until the 1850s, when Caleb Kennerly saw a large flock at Semiahmoo Bay, in the northwest corner of Washington Territory. He collected a single bird and described it as a new race in 1857. During the next several decades, few reports of this swift trickled in. Little was learned about its habits, and nothing concrete about how or where it nests.

On June 16, 1901, all this changed. Or at least it should have changed. That morning, Arthur George Vrooman, of Santa Cruz, California, set out with a companion to collect some eggs of the Pelagic Cormorant on the sheer cliffs west of town. As this young egg-collector inched down his ladder toward a cormorant's nest, a Black Swift darted suddenly out of a narrow



The uncommon Black Swift, at their nest. Photograph/T.J. Ulrich/VIREO (u02/1/021).

cleft and disappeared. Peering into the crevice, Vrooman saw a single white egg in a small, damp depression behind a tuft of grass. Not certain that the bird had finished laying, he left the nest undisturbed.

Vrooman returned the following week, but there was still only one egg. So he "took the egg, and peeled off the nest, grass and all." When he prepared the egg later, he found that incubation had already advanced several days. Noting that on this second visit the bird had been difficult to flush, as an incubating bird usually is, he decided that the clutch, though it consisted of just one egg, was complete.

When Vrooman published his find in the October issue of *The Auk* that year, he discovered that no one believed a word of his story. After all, everybody knew that swifts lay more than one egg. And 22 years earlier, Charles Bendire, who discovered the

thrasher that bears his name, had reported a colony of Black Swifts nesting on a high cliff on the upper Columbia River, not on the coast. But because the colony was inaccessible, Bendire never actually saw a nest.

Not only that, but a nest of the Black Swift had already been described. In the issue of *The Auk* for October, 1888, Matt H. Gormley had published a description of a nest of straws, chips, and horsehair that he had found on a warehouse along the waterfront in Seattle. Gormley's nest had contained five eggs, not one. And Gormley's nest, everyone agreed, settled the matter. It was even suggested that what Vrooman had found was the nest of a storm-petrel.

Vrooman was undeterred. He knew perfectly well what he had found. In 1905, this time in *The Condor*, he reported that he had collected a second nest and egg, "the circumstances being identical with those of 1901." To allay any lingering doubts he also



Arthur Vrooman perched on a Santa Cruz windswept cliff in search of Black Swift eggs. Photograph/William Leon Dawson/Condor, Vol. 17 (1915).

collected the two adults and announced that he had them in his collection. The ornithological community remained unmoved.

Arthur Vrooman must have been a very patient man. As the years passed, he carefully collected more nests and more eggs. The nests were hard to find, and once found, were hard to reach. He often tied a tin can to a string and let it rattle down the face of a cliff to flush an incubating swift. Sometimes he had to use a dip net attached to a long pole to scoop an egg out of its crevice. In some years his search went unrewarded, and he never took more than one egg in any year.

As Vrooman continued his searching, he saw his discovery ignored by leading ornithologists of the day. Florence Merriam Bailey, in the 1904 edition of her *Handbook of Birds of the Western United States*, described the nest of the Black Swift in the following terms: "On cliffs or about buildings. One described by M. H. Gormley, on the cornice of a building, made of straw, chips, and horsehair, lined with green grass and paper. Eggs: 5, white." No matter that Charles Bendire and even Gormley himself had already decided that the Seattle nest had actually been built by a Purple Martin; Bendire published this correction in 1895. Gormley kept quiet.

There were other indignities. Joseph Grinnell quietly omitted Vrooman's articles from his *Bibliography of California Ornithology*, which appeared in 1909. In Part 5 of "Birds of North and Middle America," Robert Ridgway followed Gormley in his description of the nest of the Black Swift. That was in 1911.

In 1914, William Leon Dawson, a prominent California ornithologist and egg-collector, who was soon to

produce his monumental *Birds of California*, wrote a paper entitled "The undying error," in which he disposed of Gormley's nest once and for all. Although Dawson cited no fewer than seven authors in addition to Gormley, he made no mention of Vrooman and his two articles. Dawson's "The undying error" convinced everyone that Gormley had been mistaken, but no one other than Vrooman claimed to have found a nest of the Black Swift. All but forgotten, Vrooman never doubted that he had found it. The real error had not yet died.

But in that same year justice finally prevailed. In March, 1914, John E. Thayer, the noted Massachusetts ornithologist and namesake of Thayer's Gull, announced that he had obtained seven Black Swift eggs from Vrooman. In the now-defunct journal *The Oologist*, Thayer stated: "Mr. Vrooman was the first to discover the eggs of this species." After Thayer's death in 1933 six of these eggs, including the first one Vrooman had collected, passed to Harvard University. There, in the Museum of Comparative Zoology, they reside to this day. So does the original nest, its tuft of grass still intact after almost 90 years.

But true vindication came from none other than William Leon Dawson. On June 22, 1914, after reading what Thayer had to say, Dawson finally made the journey from Santa Barbara to Santa Cruz and accompanied Mr. Vrooman along the windswept cliffs he had searched in solitude for so many years. After a lengthy search, Vrooman's rattling tin can dislodged a nesting swift, and after dangling from his ladder for over an hour, he found the nest. Dawson quickly descended partway down the 65-foot cliff, surf thundering at its base, and photographed the nest. It contained,

as advertised, one white egg. Dawson collected the nest and egg, which was the eleventh that Mr. Vrooman had found.

Dawson described his visit in the first issue of *The Condor* for 1915. He came straight to the point. His title was "The nesting of the Black Swift: A vindication." With photographs of Mr. Vrooman, the nest, and the egg, and full of praise for their discoverer, the paper declared that "this unpublished naturalist, be it understood, was no upstart." Dawson noted the "neatly labelled skins of *Cypseloides niger borealis*," and said of their collector: "His mind is well stored with incident and example of bird-lore, and his enthusiasm in things out-of-doors is so contagious that he makes an ideal field companion." At long last "this genial naturalist" received the recognition that was due him.

Today, the Black Swift is known to breed along the California coast in San Mateo, Santa Cruz, and Monterey counties, as well as in scattered colonies on cliffs in the interior, where a nest was finally found in Alberta in 1919. Because of the height of the cliffs, few nests have been seen, but the breeding range of the species is understood to extend from southeastern Alaska to Costa Rica and the West Indies.

Egg-collecting—or "oology," as it was once grandly called—has quite properly fallen from favor. It is now illegal without permits, which are difficult to obtain. But in the early years of American ornithology, egg-collectors played an important role in documenting the nesting habits of little-known birds, and in procuring the specimens that form the core of today's museum collections and provide a tangible basis for what we know about nests and eggs. The serious oologist of long ago made a contribution as valuable as that of any field naturalist.

William Leon Dawson was expressing more than just the enthusiasm of a fellow collector when he harked back to the morning of June 16, 1901. "To A. G. Vrooman of Santa Cruz belongs the exclusive and distinguished honor of bringing this rare egg to box; and my hat, for one, is off to him for a pretty piece of work." ■

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