

AUDUBON'S CARACARA.

POLYBORUS CHERIWAY (JACQ).

BY A. H. W. NORTON, SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS.

A common resident of Bexar Co., Texas.

The habits of this bird resemble those of the vultures, especially its feeding; but in regard to its nesting and manner of flight, it is entirely different from its associates, the Turkey and Black Vulture.

It will eat anything that the Buzzard will, but by no means confines itself to dead flesh. Field-rats, snakes, lizards, and rabbits are preyed upon. The balls of refuse from their stomachs contain parts of beetles and bugs. I have often watched these birds stalking around some bunch of prickly-pear cactus, waiting and watching for some unlucky rat or snake.

The flight of the Mexican Eagle, as it is locally called, is exactly like that of the common Crow—always in a straight line with even, steady flapping of the wings. It is not much given to soaring, and does so only at great heights and in the company of vultures. I have never seen them make long plunges with closed wings, like the hawks, but they are adepts at making short downward swoops, and when doing this, often appear to turn completely over in the air.

This bird is seen to best advantage when standing among a group of vultures on the ground; the trim appearance and erect, almost soldierly bearing of the Caracara then bringing it into striking contrast with the crouching attitude of the vultures.

Being of a quiet and unobtrusive disposition, its temper is seldom ruffled. Still there is a limit to the patience even of the Caracara, for upon several occasions I have seen them give an interfering Red-tail a good drubbing.

The birds remain in pairs, and in the same locality year after year, and as far as I have observed, always return to the same nest to breed. I have always found the nest in live-oak or hack-berry trees, but never in mesquites, nor in the river bottoms. They seem to avoid river bottoms, and to prefer a brushy country with the large trees few and scattered. Of course the nesting sites will differ with the character of the country; but the fact remains that these birds are rare in the heavily timbered country twenty miles east of here, and are seldom noted in the hills about fifty miles north-west.

Some of their nests are remarkable structures, often two feet high and a foot or more deep inside. Here, it is, as a rule, made of stiff weed stems, firmly matted together to prevent being blown entirely out of the tree. Deserted hawk-nests are often made over to suit the taste of the pre-empting Caracaras. As a result, nests are found having a firm foundation of sticks, on which are piled the inevitable weed stalks.

Generally the nests have no linings, the rough stalks being considered sufficient; but I know of one enterprising pair of these birds that gave their nest a complete lining of cedar-bark from a newly made fence near by, and also sprinkled the limb the nest was on, giving the whole a reddish appearance.

The first set of eggs is laid very early in March, and if left undisturbed, the birds will content themselves with rearing one brood; but if the eggs are taken or disturbed, they invariably lay another set. If the sets are taken in succession, three sets or even four are laid in a season. Twice I have taken three sets from one pair in a season, and in 1893 I took four sets from one pair. In this instance the third set in the series was laid in a refitted nest near the nest in which the other three sets were laid. I have so often noticed the Caracaras laying the second or third set of a series in a newly built nest near the old one, that I have come to regard this action as the rule rather than the exception.

A few extracts from my note-book in regard to two of these series may be of interest. Let us designate two nests as A and B respectively. One is a large mass of decayed weeds, fully two feet across the top and about six inches deep in the middle, saddled in the crotch of a live-oak, about twenty-five feet up. The other is but a shallow platform of weeds, about thirty feet up in a live-oak. On March 2, 1893, I took a set of three from A and a set of two from B, both fresh. Again on March 25, I took another set of three from A and of two from B, both fresh. On April 15, I took a set of two from B, which was the last set from that pair that year. In this set, one of the eggs had a pure white ground color all dotted over with little red dots congregating at the larger end. On April 17, I took another set of three from nest A, or rather a new nest about 100 yards from the old nest. Again visiting nest A on May 18, I was surprised to find another set of two awaiting me. The eggs were quite fresh, and are the most peculiarly marked eggs of this species I have yet seen. The ground color was a light cream. One of the eggs was completely capped upon the larger end with dark red, while the other was capped upon both ends, leaving a ring of pale yellow around the middle of the egg. I am certain that these four sets were laid by the same pair of birds, as the nest and locality were watched.

From the above you may see that four sets—in all eleven eggs—were taken from nest A in seventy-seven days, and three sets—in all six eggs—were taken from nest B in forty-four days. The intervals between sets were very regular, being twenty-three, twenty-three, and thirty-one days for the one, and twenty-three and twenty-one days for the other.

I have taken incubated eggs as late as June 10, and have seen birds still in the nest in September; but these are extreme instances. The best time for collecting their eggs is during March and early April.

I find two eggs to a set more often than three, and have not yet taken a set of four.

The ground color is some shade of red or brown, sometimes pure white, but so obscured by markings as to be very indefinite. The eggs present every possible shade of red, brown, and black. Usually, the black is in the shape of small round dots, and sometimes in streaks. The pigment may be washed away from freshly laid eggs.

The average size of all the eggs of this species in my collection is 2.29 x 1.79 inches; the smallest, 2.09 x 1.79, 2.19 x 1.67; and the largest, 2.45 x 1.76, 2.25 x 1.87.

Beside the name of Mexican Eagle, I have heard the Caracara called Black-Capped Eagle. I must say that the latter name is quite appropriate.

GENERAL NOTES.

CANADA GOOSE IN CHESTER CO., PA.—Throughout the foggy day of November 25, 1895, an unusual number of migrating Canada Geese (*Branta canadensis*) passed over this section of the country. One large flock numbering one hundred or more individuals became confused and bewildered in the fog, and alighting in the midst of a corn-field on an eminence in the Chester Valley, proceeded with much clamor to feed upon the scattered piles of husked grain. In a few minutes the field appeared as if a drove of hogs had run riot through it for hours. A shriek of the whistle of a passing locomotive startled the feasting birds, and a double discharge of a gun, in the hands of a farmer's boy, had no other appreciable effect than to send them over the North Valley Hills in much disorder, where they again essayed to alight in a field near Berwyn, but were frightened before all had settled. For some minutes they flew around in utter confusion, dividing into three irregular flocks, the largest of which contained sixty birds. Later in the day, presumably