

THE RUFESCENT TINAMOU

BY GEORGE MIKSCH SUTTON

THE Rufescent Tinamou (*Crypturellus cinnamomeus*) is the most northern of the tinamous. Friedmann, Griscom and Moore, in their useful 'Distributional Check-List of the Birds of México,' inform us that in western México it ranges northward to central Sinaloa, "breeding up to 3000 feet." In the east it is common locally northward to the Río Sabinas, in southwestern Tamaulipas. I have heard it also in the valley below the Mesa de Llera, not far south of Victoria; and Irby Davis has recorded it in eastern Nuevo León, in the hills south of Linares.

In southern Tamaulipas it is especially common in the all but impenetrable, waist-high thicket of wild pineapple (*Bromelia pinguin*). Here its whistle, a mellow, slightly quavering *who-ee-you*, is to be heard all day in spring. Here it passes its whole life, hidden from the outer world, rarely flying, rarely even having occasion, it would seem, to cross a trail. I wonder if there is a more strictly sedentary bird anywhere. Only twice, during the course of several expeditions to México, have I seen a Rufescent Tinamou in full flight. On each occasion the bird acted as if it had never flown before.

I saw my first Rufescent Tinamou in the early spring of 1938. That year Thomas D. Burleigh, the late John B. Semple and I spent several days along the Río Sabinas, seeing for the first time many tropical birds with which we were to become familiar later. I recall how puzzled we were when the Mexicans told us that these whistling birds we were hearing in the flood-plain about us were *perdiz*. Translating the word as *partridges*, we were at a loss to figure out what sort of galliform birds they might be. Semple finally secured a specimen—a badly mutilated one with only a little of the bill left. Our mingled joy and regret can be imagined—joy at examining in the flesh our first crypturiform bird, regret at realizing how useless it would be as a model for the portrait I wanted so much to draw!

Finally, after devoting virtually a full day to the project, I got a tinamou. I never shall forget the peculiar thrill I had in seeing that beautiful specimen lying beside the trail. The sun had disappeared back of the mountain long since, so evening was descending, but I could see, even in the dim light, how pale the large eyes were; and I was much impressed by the coral-redness and peculiar, almost waxy smoothness of the feet. My watercolor drawing I made the following morning, several hours after the bird's death.

We did not find the nest of the *perdiz* in 1938; but on May 2, 1939, in dry,



MEXICAN RUFESCENT TINAMOU
(*Crypturellus cinnamomeus mexicanus*)

Adult female, life-size, sketched March 4, 1938, along the Río Sabinas, near the hill village of Gomez Farias in southwestern Tamaulipas, México, by George Miksch Sutton. This is the first of a series of eight color plates honoring the memory of Dr. David Clark Hilton.

scrubby woods a few miles north of Valles, San Luis Potosí, I stumbled upon a nest and two eggs under a dead palmetto fan in a tangle of shrubbery and cat's claw smilax. The bird scuttled off, running this way and that with wings spread and drooping, head lowered, and bill parted. It gave low, breathy squeals, which at first I did not recognize as coming from the bird. On preparing the specimen later I was surprised to find it a male, with greatly enlarged testes. The eggs were lustrous but not highly glossed, and of a faintly purplish pale tan color. A nest found by a Mexican friend along the Sabinas about April 20, 1941, held three eggs. We were told that the clutch was never larger than that. I have never seen a downy chick.

The Rufescent Tinamou's whistle can be imitated easily, and it is possible to station one's self in the thicket and whistle the bird up. In the spring of 1941 Dwain W. Warner whistled one up to within a few feet, struck a fence wire with his gun to see what the bird would do, and was surprised to see it crouch with wings spread. When he struck the wire again it whirred noisily up and straight off (1942. *Auk*, 59: 7). Straight flight may not be intentional; it may be the only flight of which the bird is capable. The tail is so very short that it probably does not serve as a rudder.

In 1947 Ernest P. Edwards whistled a bird up and took wonderful motion pictures of it as it ran through the tangle.

It is hard to believe, as one drives southward along the main Laredo to Mexico City highway that there are tinamous within hearing distance of kilometer mark 619—but there they are; and there they will continue to be as long as the thicket remains. If the thickets go, the tinamous will go with them.