Bird Photography

As far as it is possible to judge by retrospective consideration, my present interest in photography arose from an interest in birds. Odd as this connection may seem without clarification, it has been responsible, together with other factors, for a return recently of my interest in birds.

As a small boy on spring afternoons after school was out, poking into bushes, scouring wood-lots and climbing trees looking for nests, I learned a little about birds and plants. At the same time I acquired something more significant, though intangible, through these experiences; a feeling for the life out of doors, a sympathy with the feel and smell of the spring woods; not just dead knowledge but knowledge made real by recognition and pleasure and the appreciation of life as a virile going concern. These feelings at first found concrete manifestation in the simple pleasure of collecting birds' eggs, but later, due to a complex series of factors together with the accident of my being given a camera, were diverted into photographic channels. The practice of childish ornithology and photography, which began in the woods and swamp-land of northern Illinois and along the shore of Lake Michigan, developed into a more serious hobby when, at the age of eleven, I started spending summers on the coast of Maine. There the opportunities for bird photography were enhanced by the abundance of bird life and stimulus was given to the occupation by the romantic setting of a rugged coast, carved by bays and inlets into

many small islands and rocky ledges, where colonies of gulls, terns and herons abounded and where Fish-Hawks nested by the hundred. During this period, with a companion who shared my enthusiasm, several summers were given over to photographing these larger birds whose colonies and nesting habits were new to us and excited our imaginations. The smaller birds, warblers, sparrows, thrushes and such, were neglected by us because of their similarity to species with which we were already familiar and also because of the difficulty of finding their nests and their identification.

As our proficiency increased, we became interested in action pictures and gradually acquired more efficient apparatus. From Brownie cameras we graduated to the better grade of Kodaks, and eventually to the Graflex, which seemed to us then the ne plus ultra of photographic equipment. Our activities became confined to recording Fish-Hawks in flight - alighting on their nests or swooping at stuffed owls - and gulls fighting, dancing and performing their grotesque and amusing rituals at their nesting places. The results of our labors were to us marvels of precision and perfection, which satisfied all that could be desired or required of a bird photograph. In the light of more mature experience and standards, they are but crude attempts at a photographic representation, which, after discounting poor development and commercial printing, are still sadly lacking in many qualities necessary for photographic excellence.

Because of this self-satisfaction and limitation of effort to

such a narrow field of bird photography, it was inevitable that interest would die, and so it happened. For about ten years, except for sporadic groping and fumbling with several kinds of cameras, I practically gave up photography. With the introduction of miniature cameras I became interested again, but this time in general photography. After a few years of struggle and defeat with minute negatives, during which time, reciprocally, a gradual crystallization of a concept of the possibilities and the valid product of photographic technique took place, I adapted equipment used to these newly formed ideas.

Two years ago on the coast of Maine with a young ornithologist, I was inspired to attempt again the photography of birds. This time, however, from a point of view determined by the idea of maximum use of the inherent characteristics of the photographic technique. Two general considerations are implied. The final photograph should not only be a good record, in which the bird can be identified insofar as is possible within the limitations set by black and white representation, but also fulfill the criteria adopted for a good picture. I shall not attempt to define a good picture by setting down criteria of judgment, for, if specific, they will inevitably contain subjective personal qualifications which cannot hope to receive universal acceptance, while, if sufficiently general to be accepted, will be almost meaningless. But I will shortly in discussing the examples presented here try to show how far they succeed or fail in qualifying as good photography according to my judgment.

The first attempts to photograph small birds were not a great improvement over those of my youth, but I was, at least, able to tell why they were bad. As records of birds, they were poor; and as pictures they were not worth consideration. The failure was due to having been forced by poor lighting to use large apertures. I had already given up the excessive speeds obtainable with focal plane shutters (necessary, however, for action pictures) and was using a small view camera equipped with a compur shutter. Often the bird itself was not entirely sharply defined as neither, needless to say, were the surroundings. Identification was difficult or impossible, and the picture as a whole was uninteresting because much of it fell away into a jumble of objects badly out of focus. With larger birds, brighter lighting, and greater distance of camera to object, greater success was achieved. Speeds between 1/10 and 1/50 second and apertures as small as f/16, or even f/22 on occasion, were used. Under these favorable conditions and by choosing moments for exposures when the birds were not in motion, it was possible to obtain pictures which had great depth of focus and in which essential objects were not blurred. It should also be pointed out that the swing back and the rising and dropping front feature of the view camera are very useful in this kind of photography in increasing the apparent depth of focus.

To improve the weak natural lighting that is usually found at the nesting sites of the ~~smaller~~ smaller birds, it was decided to introduce artificial light. This can be most effectively and easily done by the

use of flash bulbs with reflectors. There are two general techniques which can be employed. First and simplest is the old open-flash-shut method of exposure. This operation, easily adapted to remote control, can be performed at time, bulb, or one-second settings of the shutter. The duration of the exposure in this case, if due entirely to the flash, is about 1/50 second. The stop used should be greater than that recommended by the manufacturer of the bulbs for indoor flash pictures because the reflection from foliage is less than that from the walls of a room. For example, using #20 G.E. flash bulbs three feet from the object, stop f/22 gives a more nearly normal exposure than the recommended stop f/32. This method gives satisfactory pictures where the natural illumination is very weak, such as in deep woods, but cannot be used without danger of overexposure or double exposure where the object is partly in direct sunlight. The second method involving the use of a synchronizing device permits exposures determined not by the duration of the flash but by the shutter speed. It is also operable by remote control and is applicable to moving subjects or those in bright through insufficient light.

In conclusion, something should be said about each of the photographs appearing with this article. I shall describe the method used in each case and shall also try to discuss critically the success achieved from the very personal point of view of what I consider good photography as well as from that of documentation.

The picture of the American Eider standing on a rock above

her nest was made by direct manipulation from a blind. The illumination was natural; the day cloudy. The exposure was 1/25 second at f/11 on Eastman Portrait Panchromatic film. This picture is successful solely as a record, but as such has one serious fault - the bird's head is not sharply enough defined to show the markings clearly. It is not an example of good photography because whatever interest there may be in the picture is centered entirely on the duck; the surroundings contributing nothing, ~~and~~ being poor in quality and definition. This is an example of one of my first recent attempts at bird photography, and shows little improvement over my youthful accomplishments.

The Gannets on the cliff were taken by direct manipulation of the camera without a blind. The illumination was bright sunlight. The exposure was 1/10 second at f/22 through a 2 X yellow-green filter on Eastman Super-Sensitive Panchromatic film. As a record of one aspect of Gannet life, this picture is a success. The birds can be easily identified and the environment is characteristic of this particular Gannet colony. As a photograph, its faults are chiefly compositional, which are probably responsible for its dullness. This is an example of apparent depth of focus being increased by the use of a swing back. The side of the cliff on the left was much nearer the camera than the birds and was brought into focus by means of this device.

The picture of the Spotted Sandpiper taken in direct sunlight

was made by operating the shutter from a distance. To act as decoys, the young sandpipers were captured and concealed behind the log. Exposure was 1/100 second at f/11 on Eastman Portrait Panchromatic film. This is a good record, showing clearly characteristic markings and attitude and suggesting the kind of environment inhabited by these birds. Photographically, it is not outstanding, having, though to a lesser degree, the same faults as the picture of the American Eider. The background falls away into distracting confusion, which contributes little or nothing to the whole.

To facilitate the photography of birds that nest in trees, a portable scaffolding on which the camera could be mounted, was constructed. The Northern Parula Warbler was photographed in this way by remote control, using a #20 G. E. flash bulb, synchronized with the shutter. The exposure was 1/200 second at f/16 on Eastman Portrait Panchromatic film. This photograph is a good document in spite of slight blurring of the bird's wing due to motion. That the bird is a male is evident from its markings, and the nest construction is typical. The black background, a result of the flash technique, produces in this picture, poor compositionally, an effect of artificiality.

The photograph of the Red-eyed Vireos was taken from the portable scaffolding by remote control, using the open-flash-shut method of exposure at f/22 and Eastman Portrait Panchromatic film. As a record, this picture is not very good - the birds are only partly in focus and the details of the nest are faint because of overexposure. They can be identified as Vireos,

but to determine the species from the photograph might be difficult, although certain features of the birds are clearly shown. From the point of view of the requirements for a good photograph, it is better. But in this case also, the black background is too empty and some of the leaves and branches fall out of focus to a distracting degree.

In some respects the Olive-backed Thrush and Alder Fly-Catcher, which were photographed by exactly the same technique as the Red-eyed Vireos, are more successful pictures. The Thrush is weak as a document because of indistinctness of the white eye ring, characteristic of this species. Composition and general quality are better, however, than in the Vireo picture. The Fly-Catcher picture, good within the limitations of black and white representation, is weak as a document because identification of this bird depends largely on color and call note. Definition of several important objects is poor, though the composition is pleasing.

In my judgment, the most successful picture of this group, from all points of view, is the photograph of the female Black-throated-Green Warbler, which was also made by the same technique as the Vireo picture. Great clarity allows identification, in the absence of characteristic colors, by one familiar with the Warblers. The faults of this picture are due chiefly to a disturbing lack of definition of several of its less important parts.

The last two pictures, the Savanna Sparrow's nest and the dead Herring Gull, do not illustrate problems different from those

encountered in general photography, and are presented here merely for the sake of variety and because they do have ornithological interest. The Sparrow's nest was photographed on an overcast day - exposure 10 seconds at f/45, on Eastman Portrait Panchromatic film. It is unfortunate, from my point of view of good photography, that the grass above the nest and at the bottom of the picture was not brought into sharp focus. As a record of nesting habit, however, the picture is satisfactory. I shall not discuss the dead Gull photograph, for there is little to say about it, and whether or not it is appreciated depends largely upon individual emotional constitution and imagination.