

Bird Photography with some observations on Bird Behavior and a few
Comments on Conservation

My interest in birds goes back to my childhood and the influence of my parents who encouraged a preoccupation with nature. Like so many boys who grew up before motor cars, movies, the radio, and television one of my greatest pleasures was to roam the countryside, usually with a friend, and to visit all the wild places within bicycle range. Where I lived in Illinois, sixty years ago, these wild places, virgin woods, swamp lands, and prairie creeks, are all gone now, replaced by suburban developments and parks. In this pristine environment my attention was naturally drawn to the wild inhabitants, among which in spring and summer birds were the most conspicuous members.

This love of birds, which began then, has never diminished. On the contrary it developed steadily along lines not usually recognized as the valid justification of a full-time profession. I have always been a great deal more affected by the beauty of birds than by the mysteries and unanswered questions concerning their classification and behavior, with which the ornithologist is primarily occupied. Since the two lines are not completely separable, I have found myself from time to time concerned with bird behavior, but not with the single-minded dedication of the scientist. I soon discovered that the most satisfactory tool for expressing my excitement over birds was the camera, not the pencil or brush. The camera was an instrument for quick results and its operation helped to sublimate, by focusing my attention on the subject, the indefinable longing that close association with birds aroused in me.

The photography of birds, if seriously undertaken, soon involves one in projects a beginner could hardly anticipate. The best time to photograph birds is while they are rearing their young, when behavior is most predictable and foraging areas are restricted by territorial necessity. Preceding the breeding season many

birds acquire by molt their most brilliant plumage which serves the purpose for them, just as it facilitates for us, of interspecific identification, of display in pair formation, and the establishment of territorial claims. Before any photography can start, except the most chancy sort, the birds' nests, which will become the center of their activities for several weeks, must be found. This part of the photographer's work is by far the most time consuming and paradoxically the most enjoyable for it keeps him out in the open in wild places for hours at a time. To find birds' nests it is first necessary to identify the birds visually, and second to recognize their songs. Singing during the breeding period has a ^{special} ~~social~~ significance in defining the territory of the breeding pair, and it tells the observer that the bird in question has tentatively established itself in the region and will probably nest there. Song, in most species, is an exclusive attribute of the male. He arrives first on migration, selects the location where he will court a later arriving female, mate with her, and where she will build her nest. By singing at various points around its circumference, he roughly delineates the area that he is prepared to defend against intrusion by other individuals of his species. Of ^{of} ~~equal importance as nest finding~~ is knowledge/habitat preference, favored nest sites, and nest structure.

Finding the nest of a small song bird does not guarantee that one will obtain photographs. Many hurdles still remain to be cleared. The nest may be deserted or it may be destroyed by predators. In view of all these hazards it should be obvious that the bird photographer cannot count on obtaining photographs before he has actually taken them. The optimum time to photograph birds at their nests is after the eggs have hatched. Then the

adults are busy feeding the young and are least likely to desert because of the presence and activities of the photographer.

Birds like people behave as individuals. They do not act automatically to all common or unusual situations, but respond to circumstances in a broad variety of ways determined by past conditioning and experience just as we do. Redwinged blackbirds have an established reputation for preferring cattail bogs for their nesting colonies, although when bogs are filled they move to bushy pastures or alfalfa fields. Cliff swallows have readily accepted the shelter afforded by eaves on New England buildings as a satisfactory substitute for rocky cliffs. Barn swallows have adjusted to barns as a convenient alternative to caves. Swifts now use chimneys in preference to, or in lieu of, hollow trees. I once found a mountain bluebird occupying an abandoned gopher hole in the sandy bank of an arroyo far from its usual haunts in the aspen forests of high altitudes where it selects old woodpecker holes for its nest. The style of nest building that some birds have followed for all ^{the} time we have known their habits suddenly change or adapt to new situations. A redstart I knew shingled the outside of her nest with tiny scraps of white tissue paper in place of gray plant fibers. The extraordinary adaptability of birds is also manifest in their reaction to photography during which many individuals of very diverse species will accept a large amount of equipment near their nests including often the photographer himself.