

On another occasion in New Mexico, which was also a photographic failure, I was attempting to photograph Long-tailed Chats in a willow thicket on the flood banks of the Rio Grande. These birds, like the jays, were so extremely timid I had resorted to a blind, but even then they would not accept my equipment and I had removed most of it from near the nest and was beginning to set it up again piece by piece when the Chats began a querulous complaint -- those unmistakable despairing cries that always indicate the presence of a snake. I could see none, but the outcry which had begun some distance away drew slowly closer. From what direction the snake was approaching, whether along the ground or through the tops of the bushes as some varieties are quite capable of doing, I could not tell. I hoped only that it would pass by leaving the chats unmolested but I did not appreciate the hunting acumen of snakes and this one I learned soon enough was zeroing in on the chat's nest. In spite of the fact that I was very much on the alert for its appearance, I was completely taken by surprise when I saw it poise over the nest. It had climbed up the willow in which the nest was built and was looking down at the young birds. How it got there so suddenly unnoticed by me I could not understand which was a rather disquieting experience. Nevertheless the thought came to me of what a dramatic picture I could have gotten had only my equipment been operative: The copper-colored sinuous length of the snake

twined through the willow stems that supported the nest and arching over above to reveal the pale yellow-pink belly scales with its insensate head aimed like the arrow of ~~ineluctable~~ destiny at the immolation of the young birds below. The snake was a five foot Rio Grande Red Racer. I rushed out of the blind and drove it off. But I did not know how persistent snakes are and in twenty minutes it was back. Three times I chased it from the nest and three times it slithered off evasively over the branches of the willows without going to the ground with a speed that did not belie its name. The fourth time I pursued it with a determination fed by anger, caught and killed it. Then I packed up my camera and equipment and left the chats ashamed now for the travesty I had perpetrated against nature.

I have had other experiences with snakes in which I was less emotionally involved. In the Santa Anna Refuge of south Texas I had found the nest of a Hooded Oriole beautifully situated in a low festooned mass of Spanish-Moss Dendropogon usneoides. I waited for the opportune time to begin photography when the young orioles were five days old, and returning early the next morning anticipating no difficulties, found a blue racer draped in the moss with its head in the nest. Its bulging coils were proof that the dire work was near completion and that at that moment the last of the young orioles was in the process of being swallowed. I shook the branch from which the moss hung in disgust and dis-