

## Predators

Bird photography is a pursuit that involves one in long hours of quiet sitting in the woods or in a blind which inevitably affords an opportunity for observing not only the behavior of the birds being photographed but of the activities of other birds and animals. The secret of wild life observations is obvious enough -- and, in truth, no secret at all -- for it merely requires close attentiveness to all the minutiae of what goes on around one, made possible by a stillness of posture so that to other creatures one becomes just another object in nature. On numerous occasions I have found myself treated like an inanimate feature of the environment until I moved, when my fortuitous companion with whom I had begun to feel I had established a rapport by empathetic emanations, suddenly took fright. This happened in a most striking manner years ago in May in New Hampshire. Although the month was well advanced, spring had not yet fully developed as is so often the case with the unpredictable New England springs. The fields were still more brown than green as the new blades of grass were just beginning to show through the sere winter cover. Shad~~o~~ trees were in full bloom, looming ghosts through the iron-gray tree trunks of lowland wood lots, but alder buds had not burst, delayed by the trapped residual cold in the swampy hollows, although on hillsides the first blush of new green was evident like a thin liquid veil cast over the forest.

I had walked down the slope of one of these fields of withered grass to the edge of an alder bog where the land broke off sharply dropping into watery thickets. It was a good place from which to look down into the bushes for migrating warblers that had been arriving in increasing numbers every night for a week now. While I was thus engaged searching for new species that I had not seen yet that year, I heard a rustling, slushing sound out in the bog apparently made by some medium-sized animal working its way through the underbrush. I thought it might be a dog. As I peered intently toward the noise I saw a brown furry body push through the alder stems in my direction. It came on straight to where I stood on the bank, and I saw that it was a large woodchuck followed by four young woodchucks in single file. Without hesitation -- much to my surprise -- she ascended the bank coming out on top almost at my feet. Every moment I expected her to see me and charge away in panic, but as I stood there stone still, hardly breathing, she walked right past me within inches of my feet and headed out into the field. To her I was just an inert object. The first two young ones were following close behind her and all three had already gone several yards beyond me before the third little woodchuck had reached the top of the bank. When he got to my feet he stood up on his haunches to see better what direction his mother had taken, and because he was young and not very steady yet on his hind legs he placed a paw against my trousers for better balance. On seeing her and his two siblings he dropped down again on all fours and hurried after them. When the fourth baby came along

I detained him by placing my field glasses -- not my hand for I respected his young teeth -- in front of his nose. He hissed and squealed flashing those teeth at me so aggressively that I was thankful for my instinctive caution. His mother hearing his cries of distress looked back over her shoulder to see what trouble he was in, and, seeing me then apparently for the first time, hurried on without more delay towards the safety of her den in the field, abandoning apparently her improvident child to his fate. He galloped after her as soon as I let him go.

On another occasion I had a very mild encounter with a bobcat during which, for what seemed like minutes but was probably only seconds, I was able to watch it without being noticed although I was in plain sight. I was sitting on a log beside a path in the Santa Anna Wildlife Refuge that borders the Rio Grande in south Texas listening to Chachalacas and Green Jays and wishing I knew more about the nesting habits of the latter when I saw a setter-sized cat come out of the woods onto the path about fifty feet from me. In conformation, with the exception of its taillessness and the shape of its head, it was more dog-like than it was like a domestic cat. Its legs were even longer in proportion to its body than are those of a setter, and it walked with a stiff hesitant gate as though treading on sharp stones the way a person not used to going barefoot walks on a crushed shell beach. The cat looked as though it could make great speed if it were interested in catching something. Many years later in Africa



I recognized this same appearance in Cheetahs who run down their prey in the open. The bobcat sniffed around in the path before disappearing into the woods on the other side as silently as it had appeared.

For some reason associated with a primitive atavistic competitive instinct or with self-preservation or with an attitude that brooks no peer men have warred against bobcats nearly as intensively as they have against wolves. I am not at all fond of domestic cats, but this feeling does not spill over to color my attitude towards the wild felines. Like wolves, bobcats are classed as vicious animals. Viciousness is a pejorative epithet applied to describe the natural predatory way of life as well as the self-defensive behavior of any animal that resists being killed by man or his trained dogs. A creature that fights for its life is not deserving -- by this characterization -- of respect and protection or even of the right to live by the only means to which it is adapted, and according to this point of view should be exterminated. Recent studies on wolf behavior have established beyond dispute that far from being vicious, ruthless killers they instinctively practice a thrifty exploitation of their available food resources, killing no more than they require and culling from the herd of prey species the weakest and most handicapped members. If the term viciousness is applicable at all to predatory mammalian interspecific relationships it would most appropriately be used to characterize the behavior of man himself -- the hunter both amateur and professional



who kills for pleasure or for hire. It is the hunter who condemns extempore the wolf as a ruthless blood lust killer although the description fits more appropriately his own conduct. What could be more blood thirsty, and unprovoked than the "sport" of pursuing and shooting wolves and polar bears from an airplane, or for that matter running deer and elk to exhaustion with snowmobiles? And what does man do with his prey? At most he removes a part of the animal as a trophy of his prowess and leaves the carcass to rot. But should wolves or bobcats do the same -- behavior imputed but unsubstantiated -- they are reprehended for trespassing on man's prerogatives and condemned to death for displaying instinctively the very same proclivities its judges themselves exhibit. This is called sportsmanship. Sportsmanship which once meant even-handed division of opportunities between contesting parties, to the hunter has come to imply a situation in which the advantage is vastly over-weighted on the side of the sportsman with his mechanical equipment, highpower rifle, telescopic sight, and walky-talky. The sole recourse for his prey is in flight; and when the prey is a carnivore, cornered, exhausted, unable to flee, and turns to face its pursuer in a last desperate fight for its life, it still is destroyed by remote control. The savagery is all the hunter's.

The unexpected also happens while photographing birds. On June 3rd, 1948 I had set up my camera and flash equipment by a woodhouse's Jay's nest which was built in a pinon pine near

where I lived in Tesuque, New Mexico. The nest contained five young birds near fledging age. Since in this case the parents were rather timid and would not come to the nest while I was in sight, I had set up a blind from which to operate the camera. Most species of passerines will quickly adapt to the presence of a camera beside their nests as well as to the photographer if he operates his camera from a distance of fifty to seventy-five feet by remote control. These birds were not that accommodating. Whether birds are tame or timid is an individual rather than a species trait. For instance, for two years Woodhouse's Jays have nested in the honeysuckle vines beside the kitchen door, repairing the old nest the second year. They became so tame that the female could be stroked while she incubated her eggs and later they would allow one to hold his hand on the nest while they fed their young.

The jays I was trying to photograph were feeding their young very infrequently which indicated that the time of fledging was imminent and that the parents were trying to induce them to leave the nest by withholding food. Finally, after one and a half hours, during which neither adult came to the nest, although they both were nearby all the while, an event occurred that resolved the impasse. A sharp-shinned Hawk alighted on the nest tree. This was an interesting situation and I immediately became alert for a dramatic event though I did not know quite what to expect. Would the

jays defend their nest, or would I be witness to an unopposed predatory act. The latter turned out to be the case, but not in a manner that resulted in a once-in-a-lifetime photographic opportunity. The jays remained quiet until the hawk flew down to a lower branch when one of them started crying out vociferously. The hawk then moved to a perch directly behind the nest. I was expecting its next move would be to hop onto the side of the nest, but this did not take place. Instead, almost before I realized what was happening, the hawk reached over with one talioned foot, seized a young jay by the head dragging it out of the nest, and promptly flew off with it. This act of pilfering was carried out swiftly and silently. The parent jays had ceased their clamor for the moment and not a sound was uttered by either the predator or by the young jays including the one siezed, which was probably killed instantly. However, as soon as the Sharp-shin had taken wing the jays flew after it for several hundred yards crying out in unmistakable agitation.

A few minutes later the adults returned from their hopeless pursuit but did not go to the nest. The four remaining young birds became increasingly restless and one by one hopped up onto the edge of the nest, from there into the surrounding branches, and then down onto the ground. The removal of one of their number, by reducing the accustomed pressure of close quarters, had stimulated them to exchange a static security in numbers for a freedom to move about.



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 eneluctable 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 persistant 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-

appointment whereupon the racer let itself down to the ground and sped away. Another time, in Florida, I came across two chicken snakes in the act of cleaning out a Martin colony that had occupied several old woodpecker holes in a dead tree. The snakes, coiled together and hanging from the entrance to the lowest nest, were lumpy with engorged Martins like a stocking stuffed with tennis balls. They were too high to reach and could not be dislodged by pounding on the tree which was barkless and smooth, raising the question as to how the snakes had managed to climb it.

During my south Texas sojourn I found a Coot's nest in a cattail swamp on the edge of a small pond. The water was too deep for a blind but not too deep for a tripod so I decided to try a procedure which had worked well in a similar situation years before in a small Illinois prairie marsh, inhabited by Red-winged Blackbirds. While I was hunting through the cattails counting the redwings, I flushed a marsh bird from a nest containing eight sparsely speckled buffy eggs, but since she went off quickly through the reeds I was unable to identify her. I guessed a Virginia Rail because the eggs were smaller than a bittern's and not immaculate. I surmised that to try to photograph the owner of the nest from a blind would probably not succeed because of the reputed timidity of rails, so I planned another strategy which entailed placing a triggering device in the nest connected to the camera shutter. The device consisted of an electric contact concealed in a split section of dried



cattail stalk which I so arranged that the rail would press against it as she settled over her eggs, thus tripping the shutter and setting off the synchronized flash lamps. If the scheme worked at all it would undoubtedly be a one-time affair, since it was unlikely that the bird would return a second time following the trauma of the first exposure, as long as the camera and lamps remained in place. Nor was there any way to assure that the bird would be in a pleasing position at the moment of exposure, a situation that added greatly to the unpredictableness of the results. Nevertheless I decided nothing risked, nothing gained and set up my camera the next day with the concealed contact in the nest. Then I walked around to the far side of the small marsh to higher ground from which I could observe what happened. I hadn't been over there long before I saw the flash and knew that mechanically at least, the device had worked. Later the picture of a Virginia Rail arranging her eggs justified the effort. It was this device that I had in mind to try on the Coot, and so I set it up as I had one the first time in the Rail's nest. Then I went away and returned only after several hours to see whether in the mean time a picture had been taken. As I waded out to the camera no bird slipped away into the cattails and my first thought was that she had deserted; then I saw to my surprise that the nest was empty -- all the eggs had disappeared. A predator had come and eaten them, but what it could have been was a mystery for there were no

broken eggs, fragments of shells or signs of their contents anywhere to be seen. The nest was as clean and undisturbed as when fully completed. The bafflement was so great that I did not immediately think about my original intent, but when I finally woke up to the realization that I might have a record of what happened and examined the camera I discovered that indeed a picture had been taken. The processed film revealed the predator was an indigo snake in the act of seizing one of the last three eggs, all of which it had swallowed whole.