

THE NESTS AND EGGS OF BIRDS OF THE UNITED STATES.

By Thomas G. Gentry

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Preface.

F

OR many years we have been of opinion that a work on NESTS and EGGS, in life-like colors, would be a valuable acquisition to ornithological science, and meet a want that has long been felt to exist. After vainly hoping that some more competent person than the writer would see the necessity therefor, and take a step in the right direction, we were beginning to despair of any such enterprise being undertaken, when, to our surprise, two publications, partially of this character, loomed up in the literary horizon, one hailing from Ohio, and the other from New England; the former, a local publication, seemed of such high pecuniary value as to be beyond the public reach; while the latter, fully up to it in merit of learning, but illustrating merely the eggs, was destined to failure from the first, and, after running a brief career, has at last ceased to exist. Under these circumstances we embarked in the project, in the confident expectation that our ornithological friends and others would give us encouraging support.

The utter impracticability and, we may say, impossibility of any scheme looking to the delineations of all the nests built by the many hundred birds belonging to our country, in the small space of a single volume, was obvious at the outset. All that we could promise our conscience were the figures of representative forms, and this we have kept in view, and endeavored to fulfil. To future series, if there should be a demand, we will leave the continuation of the subject, when, not being necessarily restricted to family types, we shall labor to invest the Plates with greater charms and attractiveness in the shape of rarer and more magnificent birds.

Upon cursory examination it will readily be perceived that the work has considerably deviated from its original aim. This change

occurred shortly after the issuance of the third number, and in obedience to the popular demand, which insisted that the birds should be given with the nests, thereby entailing increased expense, but adding, it cannot be denied, largely to the beauty, utility and value of the publication. This innovation, dictated by good sense and sound knowledge, necessitated further expenditures of capital. In order that an air of uniformity should pervade the entire work, it was very essential that extra plates of birds should be furnished for the early drawings of nests. Determined that the work should be first class in every respect, and well worthy of patronage, the publisher spared not the expense, and once more exceeded the promises made to his patrons.

Especial pains have been taken with the text. The aim of the author has been to present a short, plain and detailed account of the habits of each species described, from the time of its arrival, if a migrant, until its retirement to the South in the fall. In the case of resident birds, he has been particular to give their winter history in addition to that of the breeding season, in the same orderly and continuous manner as is apparent in his descriptions of their more migratory brethren. The presentation of the events in regular sequence, if great care be not taken, is sure to lead to monotony. This he has tried to avoid, but how well he has succeeded, he defers to the judgment of his readers.

Throughout the work, considerable prominence has been given to those interesting and curious phases of bird-life which are present during the breeding-period, and which have been the principal study of the author for many years. Extraneous matter has been sedulously omitted, and nothing permitted to appear about which there could be serious doubts of accuracy. While he has drawn largely and, in very many instances, almost entirely from his own observations, recorded and unrecorded, for material, he has not hesitated to consult the writings of others, or to avail himself of the statements of reliable correspondents, where his own knowledge has been incomplete or defective. Wilson, Audubon,

Nuttall, Brewer, although dead, have spoken to him through their valuable works, and yielded up their varied observations for occasional selections. Among living authors, to Baird, Coues, Ridgway, Allen, Samuels, Cory and Minot, and others less eminent, he has had access through their writings, and he now takes this opportunity of returning to them his grateful acknowledgments.

In the arrangement of the details of the Plates, the artist has been subject to the suggestions and dictations of the author, the constant aim of the latter being to secure accuracy in this respect, as well as the greatest variety possible. The typography, for clearness, sharpness, regularity and finish, has rarely been surpassed by that of any other work. Much praise is due the enterprising publisher for his liberality and public-spiritedness.

With these few preliminary remarks, we send this beautiful book out into the world, trusting that it may meet with a cordial reception everywhere. If it be the means of acquainting man with the lovable manners and interesting domestic relations of a few, though not all, of our feathered friends, and of restraining our youth from nest-destroying propensities by offering them pictures of the homes of birds for study and contemplation, and thus abate the evil; or if it add but one new fact to the author's favorite science of ornithology, or benefit it in any way whatever, he will rest satisfied, and feel that he has not labored in vain.

Thomas G. Gentry.

Germantown, Philadelphia, Pa.,

May, 1882.

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**THE NESTS AND EGGS OF THE
UNITED STATES.**

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**Plate I.—AMPELIS CEDRORUM,
Sclater.—Cedar-Bird.**

T

he Cedar-Bird, though mainly a denizen of the wooded regions of North America, and occasionally of cultivated fields and orchards, has been known to nest from Florida to the Red River country. But, wherever found during the non-breeding period, it is the same gregarious, nomadic species.

After the beginning of October, the search for food so completely engrosses the attention, that it is not until the latter part of May, or the beginning of June, that the flocks break up into pairs.

Nidification now becomes the all-absorbing passion, and the birds after mating, which business is generally conducted in a quiet and unostentatious manner, repair to the woods or hedges in quest of a suitable shrub or tree in which to establish a home. This matter requires considerable labor and care; and, ordinarily, no little time is devoted thereto.

The place usually selected, is a retired and unfrequented thicket or nook; or occasionally, an orchard in close proximity to an occupied dwelling. When the former, the cedar, with its tall, nearly vertical branches and dark green foliage, is, of all our forest-trees, pre-eminently fitted to receive, support, and conceal the nest; when the latter, the apple is accorded the preference.

Having chosen the locality, the birds waste no time in idleness, but apply themselves to the task of building, with the most commendable zeal and perseverance. Each bird has its allotted part of the work to perform: the duty of the male being to collect the materials; that of the female, to shape and fix them in their proper places. Occasionally the latter, when not thus occupied, accompanies her partner in his frequent journeys, and assists in collecting and bringing in his load. The time employed in the labor of construction, making due allowances for recreation and rest, is

between five and six days.

In form, the typical structure is nearly hemispherical, and presents a rather neat and elegant appearance. It is compactly made, and, in the generality of instances, exhibits anything but bulkiness. In position, it rests upon the horizontal limb of a tree, or is wedged in among several upward-growing branchlets, at elevations varying from three to twenty feet.

During the period of nidification, almost any substance, having the requisite flexibility and strength, is in demand; consequently, the materials of composition are as varied as they are numerous, and depend in a great measure upon the *environment*. In thickets, small twigs, stems of grasses, dried leaves, lichens, and the tendrils of the vine, make up the bulk of the structure; but in places situated in close proximity to houses, wrapping-twine, strips of rags, and such other substances as are ready prepared and accessible, are utilized. The lining is generally fine roots of grasses, bits of string, flower-stalks, lichens and tendrils. The cavity seldom exceeds three inches in width, and scarcely two and a half in depth; while the external diameter varies from four and a half inches to five; and the height, from two and a half to three.

The specimen which we have figured, and which may be regarded as typical in its character, was obtained in the vicinity of Bridgeton, N. J., in the summer of 1878, and was neatly erected upon the horizontal branch of an oak, and held in position by two nearly vertical branches of the same tree. It was placed at a height of nearly twenty feet above the ground, and consists almost exclusively of fibres of the long greenish-yellow lichens which constitute so conspicuous a feature of the trees of that locality, in their sylvan retreats. Externally, besides a few fine rootlets, there is noticeable much white wrapping-string, which relieves, in a great degree, the monotony of the fabric. Internally, there is the same green moss-like lichen. The cavity is beautifully symmetrical, and measures about three inches in width, and nearly two inches in depth. The external diameter is five inches, and the height, two

inches. The nest is most elaborately finished, and is evidently the workmanship of superior mechanics. The Plate represents it three-fourths the natural size, placed upon an apple branch.

Among other fabrics which the writer possesses, is one which was obtained in June, 1871, in Germantown, Pa., saddled upon the horizontal branch of an apple-tree. It is rather firmly and compactly built, and is composed, exteriorly, of stems of the common timothy, fine rootlets, dried leaves of the mullein, and green leaves of the apple, which are held together by broad strips of colored rags, bits of lint, and divers strings, the latter constituting a prominent feature. Interiorly, there is a promiscuous lining of flower-bearing stems, fragments of strings, fine roots of grasses, fibres of linen, and tendrils of some species of cucurbitaceous plant. The nest is about four and a half inches in external diameter, and nearly three in height. The cavity is three inches wide, and two and a half inches deep in the middle.

This last model of architecture, as already remarked, was placed upon the limb of an apple-tree, near its extremity, and barely at a distance of fifteen paces from an occupied dwelling. The rags, etc., which form such a prominent feature of the outside, were purposely furnished by an inmate of the house. When first proffered, it was thought that the birds would be slow to perceive the use to which they could be put, but not so, for they entered into the idea with the most praiseworthy alacrity. And even after the materials were no longer supplied, they would repeatedly fly to the bush upon which they had been laid, as though soliciting a continuance of such favors.

The birds having constructed their home, the female commences on the day following its completion to deposit her complement of eggs. The time thus spent varies from four to six days, and depends upon the number which is to constitute a setting. Oviposition being accomplished, incubation follows, sometimes immediately on the deposit of the last egg, but, not generally, until the succeeding day. This is the exclusive task of the female for nearly fourteen

consecutive days. Although the male does not assist in the labor, yet he shows himself to be a very kind and attentive husband, by providing food for his partner, and keeping a vigilant lookout for approaching enemies. This he signals by a low single note, which the female quickly acknowledges, and instantly the two timid creatures beat a hasty retreat to an adjoining tree or shrub beyond the reach of peril, where they become passive spectators of the demolition of their home, with all its precious burden.

The eggs, which are from four to six in number, resemble those of the Waxwing, but differ in size, being somewhat smaller. Their groundcolor passes from a light slate to a dark stone-color. The markings are chiefly blotches of dark purplish-brown, lighter shades of the same color, and penumbrae of light purple, either by themselves, or surrounding the darker spots. In form, they are either oblong-oval, or nearly spherical; and in length, they vary from .80 to .90 of an inch, and in breadth, from .50 to .70 of an inch.

Original Size

**Plate II.—CONTOPUS VIRENS,
Cabanis.—Wood Pewee.**

T

he Wood Pewee, like most of its congeners, has a somewhat extended habitat, ranging from the Atlantic westward to the Plains, and from Texas to New Brunswick. It visits the United States about the 15th of April, and from this time until its departure for Guatemala in October, it is principally an occupant of high-wooded regions with a scanty growth of underbrush, and timbered river-bottoms.

But as the season advances, and the amatory feelings become awakened, these shady retreats are deserted by a few individuals of more venturesome disposition, and a temporary abiding-place is sought for amid the stirring scenes of active farm-life. This generally occurs during the last of May or the beginning of June, and is the prelude to the more important act of mating, which follows.

The assumption of matrimonial relations, however, is not a matter that is entered into without more or less consideration. Occasionally, much time is spent in its preparation. This is presumably the case when a young female is courted by some venerable male. But when an apparently experienced individual is the object of his devotion, the state of things is different. His advances are then either encouraged and reciprocated, or they are declined, and the disappointed suitor compelled to seek a partner elsewhere. It is probable, moreover, that the same birds pair together on each return of the breeding-season, unless prevented by death, or some other of the numerous vicissitudes of life.

The ceremony of mating being over—which business is ordinarily of short continuance, seldom lasting for a greater period than two days—the newly-wedded pair now set out to discover a suitable place for the building of a home. This is a matter of considerable moment, often requiring the performance of long and extended tours of observation and exploration. These reconnoissances generally last for a week, but eventually result in the choice of a locality well adapted, as far as the essential conditions of shelter and security are concerned, to become the

depository of a nest. The site generally chosen for this important purpose is a tall open woods with a preponderance of ash or oak trees; but where a time-honored orchard is the recipient of this favor, which is sometimes the case, the apple, 011 account of the many advantages which it possesses, is preferred above all other fruit-trees.

The site being mutually agreed upon, the happy pair proceed with all possible dispatch and diligence to construct a domicile: the male to collect and bring in the necessary materials; the female, to fix them in their proper places, and also to give shape and symmetry to the structure. The time devoted to this work varies with the industry of the builders, the style of the nest, and the character of the neighborhood. But, where the birds are laboring under the most favorable circumstances, the task is easily accomplished in five days.

This admirable piece of bird-architecture, which rivals in beauty and symmetry the nest of our little Ruby-throated Humming-bird, is either saddled upon a living or dead limb that is horizontal and lichen-clad, or else upon the crotch of a bifurcated branch, and is placed above the ground at elevations varying from five to thirty feet. According to Nutt all, "the body of the fabric" occasionally consists of "wiry grass or root fibres;" but we have yet to meet with a nest with "*small branching lichens* held together with cobwebs and caterpillars' silk, moistened with saliva," as that author remarks. In a structure before us, which is typical in its character, small strips of inner bark plucked from trees of chestnut and oak, bits of tow, and fragments of wool, circularly arranged and compactly pi-essed together, are the prevailing constituents. Externally, it is closely invested with the bluish-gray crustaceous lichens which are so plentiful upon the trunks of certain trees, and also upon fence-rails. In diameter, it measures three and a half inches; in height, one and a half inches. The width of the cavity is about two inches; the depth in the centre, three-fourths of an inch.

The most beautiful fabric, as well as the most compactly built,

which we have seen, was obtained in the spring of 1870, not far from Germantown, Pa. It was placed upon a horizontal branch of an apple-tree, in close proximity to a farm-house. Externally, it is thickly covered with *bluish-gray crustaceous lichens*, which are held in place by a few cobwebs, and fragments of the silk of caterpillars. The base consists of dried stems of grasses, and on these is reared a neat and cosy superstructure composed of the inner fibres of the wild and cultivated species of the vine, and a slight sprinkling of wool. These materials are variously interwoven, and arranged around the margin so as to form a cavity. The dimensions of this nest are as follows: External diameter, three and a half inches; height, one and a half inches; width of cavity, two inches; depth in the centre, three-fourths of an inch. In the Plate it is represented the natural size—built upon an oak branch.

In the details of form and dimensions, this nest differs immaterially from specimens which we have met with and seen from other localities. But wherever obtained, they will always be found to bear a very close resemblance to one another, differing chiefly in the character of the articles which constitute the inner arrangement. We will merely mention one example which was taken by Mr. Welch, in Lynn, Mass., and which will give our readers some faint conception of the extent to which variation is often carried. This structure was placed upon a dead limb of a forest-tree. Its walls were composed of small dry stems and vegetable down, finely interwoven, and covered on the outside with lichens which were cemented to it by a viscid secretion that was apparently supplied by the builders. The base was somewhat flattened, much thinner than the walls, and composed of finer materials. The external diameter was three inches, and the height one and a half inches; the cavity, two and a half inches at the rim, and the central depth about one inch.

Having finished their home, only a day or so intervenes when oviposition becomes the controlling instinct. The female now proceeds to deposit her complement of four eggs, which she does

on consecutive days, at the rate of a single egg daily. This is followed, on the day succeeding the last deposit, by the trying duty of incubation. Upon the female devolves this arduous and irksome labor. For about eleven days she is thus engaged, until her patience is finally crowned with success. Although the male takes no part in this duty, yet he contributes his share to the prosperity of the undertaking, by guarding his partner from danger, and supplying her with the essential articles of food. When his home is assailed by feathered enemies, if they are not more than a match for his strength, he is not slow to wreak instant vengeance upon them. But in the case of human depredators, where effort would be futile, no exertion is put forth to cause desistance from any contemplated assault, save a little scolding.

The eggs are four in number, and resemble in configuration those of the common Phoebe-Bird. They are obtuse at one extremity, and slightly tapering at the other. The ground is a rich cream-color, and is diversified about the larger end with a wreath of purple and lilac spots, which are large, and occasionally confluent. In length, they measure .76 of an inch, and in width .54. It is pretty well established that but a single set is deposited by any given pair of birds in a season. Nests with eggs, however, have been taken during the last of July, or the beginning of August; but whether a second laying or not, we cannot say—possibly the work of birds whose early efforts had been frustrated.

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