

A Bird's Nest of Pele's Hair.

WM. ALANSON BRYAN.

The nest here shown (Figs. 1 and 2) was deposited in the Museum by Mr. F. J. Lyman, and may be regarded as an exceedingly interesting example of the ease with which birds adapt themselves to their environment. The material used in its construction is of volcanic origin, being formed from drops of molten lava which are thrown into the air when the volcano Kilauea is in active eruption. As the drops rise they leave behind them fine glass-like

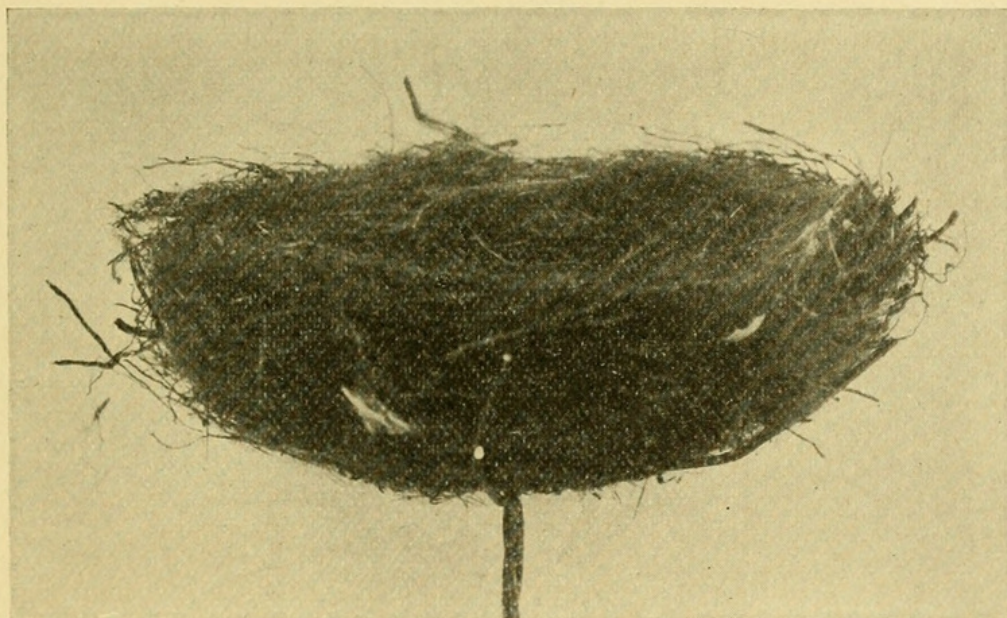


FIG. 1. NEST OF PELE'S HAIR: SIDE.

fibres which, when cooled, are broken up and carried away by the wind. The name "Pele's hair" is commonly applied to this product since the Hawaiian goddess Pele is supposed to preside over volcanoes, and the vitreous fibres are not unlike fine strands of hair.

The specimen, which is regarded as a family treasure, was secured on the island of Hawaii about five miles south of the crater of Kilauea, in November, 1881, while Mr. Lyman and his father were making a "short cut" journey from Kapapala Ranch to Olaa. Stopping for lunch almost in the centre of this barren plain, which in this region is covered with a-a and pahoehoe (lava), Mr. Lyman says: "I began to amuse myself by gathering bits of Pele's

hair, which was to be found there, intending to fill the pasteboard lunch box we carried with it. Noticing a small bird flutter into a bunch of a-a [rough lava] I went to the place. The bird flew out again, but I saw the nest wedged into a crevice in the rock. After considerable difficulty I broke away the rock and secured the nest. There were a few bits of egg shells in it. The bird was small and brown, not as big as a sparrow. There were only a few low bushes scattered about here and there over the plain."

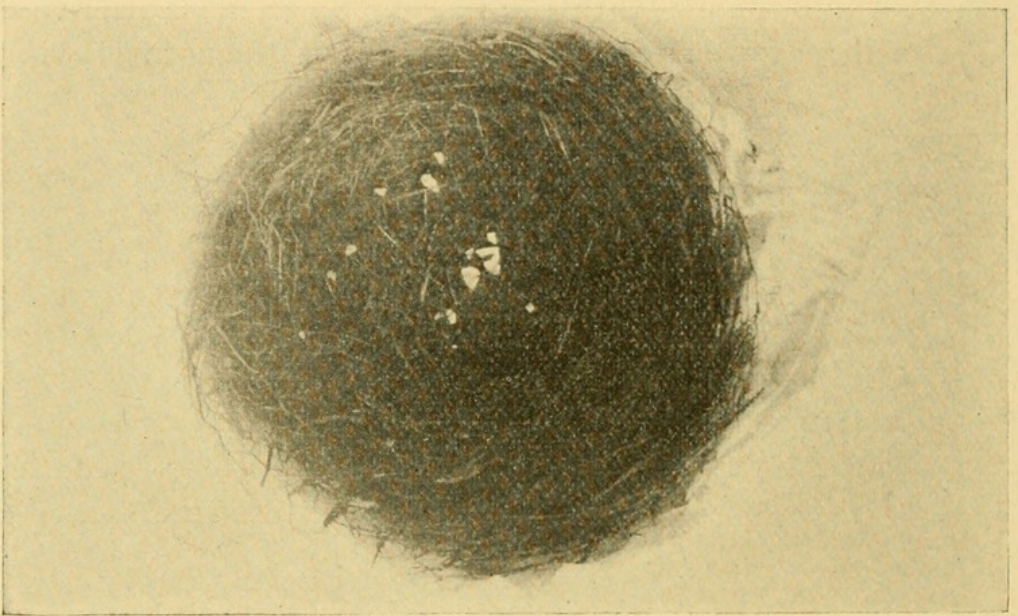


FIG. 2. NEST OF PELE'S HAIR: TOP.

The nest is, for the most part, constructed of the hair-like material, although there is a judicious use of fine roots, especially in the outer layers. Though slightly flattened with age, it is unmistakably nest shape, and could not be mistaken as a chance accumulation of the above materials blown into a crevice in the rocks. It measures 4.5 inches across by 1.75 in depth. The species of bird that is responsible for the nest will probably never be determined. I have elsewhere noted (*Condor*, vol. v, p. 79) that all of the common Hawaiian birds are to be found in the crater of Kilauea proper, but none of these, so far as I know, have been known to use this peculiar and local substance in nest-building; and none of the smaller Hawaiian birds have before been recorded as using crevices in the rocks for nesting purposes.



Bryan, William Alanson. 1905. "A bird's nest of Pele's hair." *Occasional Papers of the Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum of Polynesian Ethnology and Natural History* 2(3), 249–250.

View This Item Online: <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/31459>

Permalink: <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/partpdf/352015>

Holding Institution

Harvard University, Museum of Comparative Zoology, Ernst Mayr Library

Sponsored by

Harvard University, Museum of Comparative Zoology, Ernst Mayr Library

Copyright & Reuse

Copyright Status: NOT_IN_COPYRIGHT

This document was created from content at the **Biodiversity Heritage Library**, the world's largest open access digital library for biodiversity literature and archives. Visit BHL at <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org>.