

BIRDS OF A GARDEN IN SAN SALVADOR

By AUSTIN L. RAND*
CURATOR OF BIRDS

My son Stanley and I live in a guest house called Villa Margarita. It is No. 3, Colonia America, above the city of San Salvador and across the city from the Tropical Institute where we spend our days studying birds. The altitude, about 2,300 feet, is great enough to ameliorate the midday heat, if not the brightness, and the mornings are pleasantly chilly.

Though we sleep under blankets and are glad to pull them up under our chins, one



ENTRANCE TO VILLA MARGARITA

From here the members of the Museum's project travel daily to their research laboratories at the Instituto Tropical de Investigaciones Científicas of El Salvador. Photo by Sharat K. Roy, Chief Curator of Geology and a member of the project.

glance at the garden in which our spacious house is set would tell you it was in the tropics. The house, of stuccoed brick and tile, has its entrance heavily draped with orange-flowered trumpet vines. Two low fan-palms flank the steps; red-flowered hibiscus and crotons with gay leaves line the circular drive. There are orange and lime trees beyond, and two araucarias (imported from the Australian region) and two feathery palms, one draped with a white-flowered vine, stand beside the garden exit. A group of long-leaved pines, similar to those that grow higher in the mountains, is in one corner. Hedges on each side of the garden, one of them of bamboo, insure privacy. There is a red-flowered pito tree.

*Dr. Rand is a member of the current Salvadorean Project, a joint research activity of this Museum and the Instituto Tropical de Investigaciones Científicas, El Salvador.

Purple-flowered *Bougainvillea* drapes pines and hedges. Against this vivid tropical color, constant watering has kept a green lawn, and beds of roses and zinnias struggle valiantly but wanly under these alien skies.

ZOO LIONS ROAR

Beyond our hedges we see a corner of a native mud hut, mango and paw-paw trees, and a lonely coconut palm that raises its head against the sky. Across the road the roof of the fort shows; below it is the house of the president of El Salvador, the national museum, and the zoological garden, from which last, at night, we hear the roar of lions. Beyond, across the city, rises the impressive bulk of the Volcano of San Salvador, usually blue-gray now in the heat haze of the dry season.

We notice other visitors from the north spending the winter here. An olive-sided flycatcher that was perhaps hatched in Canada perches in one of the pines. Except for being silent it looks quite at home. Baltimore and orchard orioles visit the flower trees; yellow warblers flit through trees and shrubbery, gleaning for insects; flocks of cedar waxwings, demure and quiet as always, perch in our trees in passing; and dull-colored little flycatchers that might be least flycatchers or wood pewees sit up without giving a call note as a clue to their identity. And silent, small, grayish-olive flycatchers are hard to identify, not only when alive but even when they are museum specimens.

MEET FEATHERED NATIVES

But having acknowledged the winter visitors, we'll go on to what really interests us, the natives. Our first morning in San Salvador we were awakened by a three-note, thrush-like song that we quickly came to associate with dawn and dusk. Its author, we found, was a thrush that, except for its dusky color, would pass for an American robin, with the same size and shape, the same way of sitting, hopping, and flitting its tail. But it was a bird of the dark places. It never came out on the lawn but delighted in haunting the ground in shady nooks and corners, indicating perhaps that before it became a garden bird it lived in the forest. A late riser but a noisier and more persistent songster is the white-bellied wren. These wrens are always in parties, and a party includes our garden in its beat. They leave no cranny unexplored, hopping about through the shrubbery, on the ground, and on tree trunks (one that I saw exploring a hole in a tree forty feet up I at first mistook for a woodpecker). They don't neglect the house, either, and go poking about the tiles and the crevices of downspouts, looking for their insect food. One bird will start singing several rollicking liquid notes that are repeated over and over, and other birds of the party will join in until we have a

pleasing medley that fills the garden. They are typical wrens in behavior, hopping about with tail cocked up, but they are large for wrens, larger than an English sparrow, and as such less fussily nervous and jumpy than many of their smaller relatives.

The great-tailed grackles, not unlike our bronze grackle but with much longer tails, are the noisiest if not the most musical of our garden birds. The male, all black with a contrasting white eye, displays with fluffed-up feathers and a squealing whistle or a chirping chuckle; the female, more brownish in color, answers with a chatter and a flickering of wings. And at all hours of the day their whistles, squeals, chirps, and chatterings burst out.

MYSTERIES TO SOLVE

We usually associate nest-building with the breeding season. But the white-bellied wrens I've mentioned carry on nest-building throughout the year, even though they nest during only a short season. Right now, one party of six or so is building two nests in a fan-palm by our door, and by watching them I hope to unravel some of their mysteries. Though it's still the dry season some birds have begun nesting, perhaps influenced by the greenery and the watering



VILLA MARGARITA GARDEN SCENE

This is the setting in which the members of the Museum's Salvadorean Project are housed in San Salvador. Photo by Sharat K. Roy, Chief Curator of Geology and a member of the project.

in our garden. A pair of kis-ka-dee flycatchers, bold brown and yellow birds with conspicuous eye-stripes and about the size of a kingbird, are building in one of the araucarias on our drive. The call of the querelons, from which they get their name,

bursts out periodically, at any time of day, especially when a neighboring pair visits them. Several female grackles are carrying grass for nests into feather-palms and mango trees. A pair of yellow-billed blue pigeons sit side by side, the male cooing as it rocks deeply back and forth; then the pair peck fondly at each other's heads and necks and finally visit a certain branch on the other araucaria, where I hope they will place their nest.

The flowers, of course, attract many birds. Hummingbirds dart in and out, though as yet I have not identified these vivid-emerald living jewels, and I don't know how many kinds there are. The red-flowered pito tree is the favorite of the Baltimore oriole and of another black-and-orange oriole that is resident. They feed by plucking a bloom, holding it under one foot, pecking a hole in the base, poking there for a moment, perhaps for nectar, and then letting it drop and picking another flower. A big dull-colored sparrow with white eyebrows and a white stripe in its throat is also fond of these flowers, but it feeds in quite a different way. It picks the flowers and swallows them, after some manipulation in its bill.

It is not birds alone that eat these blooms. Through the country one sees the local people climbing into pito trees or breaking off the blooms with poles. These blooms, I'm told, are used in flavoring their frijoles. I've tasted pito blooms and find them much like green beans. The bottle-brush tree next to the pito tree is favored by a different class of birds that feed in a different manner. They poke into the blooms for insects or nectar. The chestnut-and-black orchard oriole is one of the most persistent visitors; it tries to drive out the other species so that it can keep the whole tree to itself. But little green warblers also swarm there. Most surprising to me is that the white-bellied wrens can turn into flower-birds. Clinging right side up or head down, they compete with the orioles in feeding at the blooms.

These are some of the thirty or more birds I've seen in our garden. Others include two tanagers that come occasionally, a little dove that walks our drives and coos from our shrubbery, swallows and swifts that fly overhead, and, toward evening, screeching flocks of parrots that pass on swiftly beating wings.

VULTURES ALWAYS PRESENT

Vultures, strictly speaking, are not garden birds. But no El Salvador scene is complete without them. In the mornings when they're sailing low, looking for breakfast, their shadows cross and re-cross our lawn. No doubt they would come down if there was food, for we see them on main streets and perched in yards of the houses in the poorer parts of town, playing their role of scavengers.

There are other interesting things in our garden besides birds. There are lines of parasol ants carrying bits of leaves to their homes. There's a crested climbing lizard more than a foot long that lives in our hedges and a small gecko-like lizard with a brown head that lives in our garage. One night a rustling in a feather-palm made us shine a light there to find a beautiful, bright-tawny, big-eyed and big-eared mouse that climbed up into our trumpet vine and disappeared. There are a few yellow butterflies, but so far not many, and none of the big, brilliant, blue ones that I've seen in the country.

It's still the dry season. Not a drop of rain has fallen in the month we've been here. At midday it's intolerably bright, but clouds are coming up today from the low country. The other night we smelled rain. Soon the wet season will start and then, I expect, we'll find that our garden, its inhabitants, and its visitors will change with the season.

GIFTS TO THE MUSEUM

Following is a list of the principal gifts received during the past month:

Department of Anthropology:

From Mrs. Fred L. Starbuck, Northbrook, Ill.—a copper spearhead.

Department of Botany:

From: Dr. Margery Carlson, Evanston, Ill.—51 cryptogams, southern Mexico; Dr. E. C. Cocke, Wake Forest, N.C.—3 algae, Carolinas; Dr. Violet M. Diller, Cincinnati—20 algal cultures, Cincinnati; Dr. Sidney F. Glassman, Chicago—23 cryptogams, Caroline Islands; Albert Greenberg, Tampa, Fla.—a *Cryptocoryne Griffithii* in flower, Florida; Ray Grow and Simon Segal, Chicago—a *Lycopodium*, Indiana; Dr. Faustino Miranda, Mexico City—6 plants (isotypes), Mexico; Dr. Reuben Lasker, Coral Gables, Fla.—3 algae, Gulf Stream, Florida; Linda Newton, London, England—2 algae, Anglesey Island, England; Oregon Wood Chemical Co., Springfield, Ore.—a sample of raw Douglas-fir wax, Oregon; V. W. Proctor, Columbia, Mo.—2 algae, Boone County, Missouri; Dr. Albert Saeger, Kansas City, Mo.—a *Chlorochytrium*, Missouri; Dr. E. E. Sherff, Chicago—119 negatives and 23 descriptions, Hawaii and Mexico; F. A. Swink, Chicago—2 plant specimens, Illinois; F. A. Swink and A. S. Rouffa, Chicago—a *Trillium nivale*, Illinois; Dr. L. O. Williams, Tegucigalpa, Honduras—a *Pinus caribaea* and 3 plant specimens, Honduras; Instituto Agronomico do Norte, Belem, Pará, Brazil—4 phanerogams, Brazil.

Department of Zoology:

From: Department of Zoology, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville—2 bats, Arkansas; Arkansas Game and Fish Commission, Little Rock—2 wolves, Arkansas; Theodore F. Beimler, Brownsville, Tex.—a snake, Texas; Chicago Zoological Society, Brookfield, Ill.—a bird skin (cage bird) and

MAY GUIDE LECTURE TOURS, DAILY EXCEPT SUNDAY

Tours of exhibits, under the guidance of staff lecturers, are conducted every afternoon at 2 o'clock, except Sundays and certain holidays. On Mondays, Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays, general tours are given covering all departments. Special subjects are offered on Wednesdays and Fridays. A schedule of these follows:

Wed., May 2—Bag and Baggage—Travel Kits from Primitive Lands (*Harriet Smith*).

Fri., May 4—Baby Animals. Illustrated introduction in Meeting Room (*Lorain Farmer*).

Wed., May 9—Indians of Prairies and Woodlands (*June Buchwald*).

Fri., May 11—The Flowers that Bloom in the Spring. Illustrated introduction in Meeting Room (*Marie Svoboda*).

Wed., May 16—A Spring Walk in the Woods (*Miriam Wood*).

Fri., May 18—Our Migratory Birds. Illustrated introduction in Meeting Room (*Jane Sharpe*).

Wed., May 23—"There's No Place Like Home"—Housing Through the Ages (*Marie Svoboda*).

Fri., May 25—The Roaming Romans—Ancient Rome and Her Empire. Illustrated introduction in Meeting Room (*Anne Stromquist*).

Wed., May 30—No tour. Memorial Day holiday. Museum open as usual, 9 A.M. to 6 P.M.

a mammal, Cuba; Harold A. Dundee, Lawrence, Kan.—4 salamanders, Arkansas; Rev. Brother Hermano Daniel, Medellin, Colombia—35 frogs, 4 lizards, and 13 snakes, Colombia; F. Gaerdes, Okahandja, Southwest Africa—250 moths and butterflies and 35 beetles, Southwest Africa; Joseph La Pointe, Harvey, Ill.—2 salamanders, Indiana; Lewis E. Long, Bluefield, Nicaragua—300 insects, Nicaragua; R. H. Ness, Tower Lake, Ill.—a mammal, Lake County, Illinois; A. J. Nicholson, Billings, Mont.—20 batflies, New Caledonia; Peabody Museum Near East Expedition, 1950—a collection of marine and land shells, Near East.

Motion Pictures:

Indiana University, Division of Adult Education, Bloomington—2 16mm color sound-films.

Library:

From: Dr. Walter Briesse, Santiago, Chile; Mrs. Hedwig Mueller, Chicago.

The development of Egyptian civilization from before the tenth dynasty (about 2200 B.C.) to the Roman period (about A.D. 200) is shown in Hall J.



Rand, Austin Loomer. 1951. "Birds of a Garden in San Salvador." *Bulletin* 22(5), 6–7.

View This Item Online: <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/25639>

Permalink: <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/partpdf/370797>

Holding Institution

University Library, University of Illinois Urbana Champaign

Sponsored by

University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

Copyright & Reuse

Copyright Status: In copyright. Digitized with the permission of the Chicago Field Museum.
For information contact dcc@library.uiuc.edu.

Rights Holder: Field Museum of Natural History

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>.