

The Bird Page . . .

SNAKE-SKIN LININGS IN BIRDS' NESTS

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CURATOR OF BIRDS

THERE are occasionally discovered behavior patterns of birds (habits of birds, an earlier generation of naturalists used to call them) that are so unusual as to make one stop and wonder. They are unusual for birds generally, but in a species here and there they are the regular thing. Such is the placing of a shed snake skin in their nests by some birds.

A bird like the English sparrow, or the road runner, that uses a variety of material coarse or fine, would be expected to use shed snake skins occasionally, as it came across them. But there are a number of species that seem to use snake skins regularly in their nests. It would seem that the birds deliberately sought out the skins for this purpose, as though they were as much a part of the nest as the mud in the bottom of a robin's nest or the fresh green grass-heads ornamenting the entrance to some weaver birds' nests.

SOME HABITS BAFFLING

I have long since given up thinking that every aspect of a bird's life must serve a useful purpose. Indeed, I can point out some definite maladaptations. But usually every type of behavior has a logical origin. By considering its occurrence in various species and against the background of the bird's everyday life, some correlations usually can be found. But this doesn't seem to work with the use of snake skins in nests.

The list of birds habitually using snake skins in their nests is short, as follows:

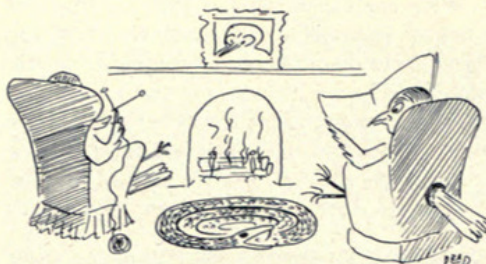
1. Great-crested flycatcher—belonging to the New World flycatchers, breeding in eastern North America and nesting in holes.
2. Arizona crested flycatcher—a relative of the great-crested variety, with similar habits.
3. Blue grosbeak—an American member of the sparrow family, making an open nest in bushes.
4. Black-crested titmouse—a member of the chickadee family, living in western North America and nesting in holes.
5. Bank mynah—a starling, living in southern Asia and nesting in holes in banks.
6. Rifle bird—an Australian bird of paradise, making a cup-shaped nest in trees.
7. Madagascar bulbul—making a cup-shaped nest in trees.

LIKE A DECORATION

Twenty or more other species of birds have been recorded as using snake skins more or less commonly, or occasionally, perhaps on the basis of availability or of chance. But with the above they're an

essential part of the nest. In some of the species the snake skins are arranged as a rim around the edge of the nest almost as a decoration; sometimes the snake skins may make up most of the nest.

Now as to possible correlations. The species are not closely related. Except for the two flycatchers, the other five represent five different families. The distribution over the world is wide, too: America, Asia, Madagascar, Australia. Various explana-



tions for the behavior have been advanced. It has been suggested that it's correlated with hole-nesting, but three of the seven do not nest in holes. The most common theory is that it's to frighten away possible predators by making them think there is a snake in the nest. However, this is not very likely, and, too, one wonders why the birds that use the snake skin are not frightened themselves. Indeed, one writer, surely not seriously, has suggested that the fright in early life of crested flycatchers at finding a snake skin in the nest accounts for the up-standing crest in this species!

'BURGLAR ALARM' THEORY

Another suggestion is that the snake skin, by the rustling noise it makes when touched, acts as an alarm bell or a burglar alarm to warn the rightful occupants of the nest when an intruder approaches. This also seems a rather weak explanation.

We are left, then, with the fact that this curious habit has been developed in a few birds, not closely related, that live in various parts of the world and that have very different habits. It is usual with them. A number of others occasionally have this habit. As to what its significance is we have no idea.

EXTINCT BIRDS ACQUIRED IN LAYSAN COLLECTION

Three extinct birds are included in a Laysan Island bird collection made by Commodore George B. Salisbury years ago and transferred to Chicago Natural History Museum by the University of Missouri and Colonel Sam T. Salisbury.

The collection, totaling some 22 species, was originally presented to the University of Missouri. When Professor Rudolf Bennitt initiated a course in ornithology there, he found this well-made, well-preserved, and well-cared-for collection. But Pacific Island

birds did not fit into any scheme of collegiate activity that he could envisage, and, recognizing the scientific value of this fine collection, he thought it would be more appropriately housed in one of the larger museums with an active interest in birds of the world.

Professor Bennitt at once thought of Chicago Natural History Museum and wrote to ask if we were interested. Indeed we were. Then he wrote the donor of the collection, Commodore Salisbury, to see if such a program would meet with his approval. Both Commodore Salisbury and his brother, Colonel Salisbury, agreed to the proposal that the collection become a part of this Museum, and our collections are now enriched by this important representation of Laysan Island birds.

Laysan Island is American territory, a tiny islet in the Hawaiian Archipelago. The Museum has a habitat group portraying the two species of albatross, the frigate bird, and other oceanic birds there, which are spectacular and for which the island is famous. But it is also famous for its endemic land or fresh-water birds: a Laysan teal, rail, finch, miller bird, and two honey creepers. The Laysan Island birds have had more than their share of vicissitudes: the introduction of rabbits, the depredation of Japanese plume hunters and guano seekers—but especially the rabbits. The seabird colonies were ravished, but these birds nested elsewhere as well. The small endemic land birds, however, were found nowhere else. As a result of the introduction of rabbits, four species disappeared from Laysan. They are gone forever to join the growing list of birds and other animals that have become extinct in historic times. Such extinct forms can now be known from the specimens carefully housed in museums.

The most brilliant of the extinct trio just received is the Laysan Island honey creeper. It is small, the size of a sparrow, but clad in scarlet feathers, with only the wings, tail, and belly duller and brownish. Its bill, as one would expect in a honey creeper, is somewhat elongated, curved, and fairly slender. The miller bird, one of the Old World warblers, by contrast is dull indeed. It is pale olive above and pale yellowish below, about the same size as the honey creeper but with a straight bill and a longish tail. The Laysan rail is also small and dull. It's only about 5 inches long, sooty or brownish on the underparts, and olive, streaked with blackish, above.

Dodo Model

"Dead as a dodo" is an adage. The dodo, a strange, flightless relative of the pigeons, was confined to a single small island in the Indian Ocean. It became extinct within a century after the discovery of the island in 1598. A model of the dodo may be seen among the exhibits in Hall 21.



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