

NESTING OF THE NIGHT-HAWK IN OTTAWA

A BIT OF NATURE-STUDY ON ONE'S OWN HOUSETOP.

By G. EIFRIG.

The first night-hawks or bullbats (*Chordeiles virginianus*) of the season 1904 that came to my notice, I saw sailing about over the eastern part of the city on May 11th. This interesting bird has of late years changed its nesting habits to accommodate itself to the encroachments of civilization. Many individuals of the species have forsaken their natural nesting or rather breeding places—since they build no nests whatever—that is, dry open fields and rocky ledges, and now simply deposit their usual set of two eggs on some of the many flat-roofed houses in the cities. My house having a so-called deck-roof, with a balustrade around the gravel-covered “deck,” I wondered whether this might not prove attractive enough for one of the night-hawk couples to go to house-keeping on it. However, on account of an absence from the city I did not get to look until May 28th. As I lifted the cover from the manhole leading up to the deck, away flew a night-hawk from the gravel. I looked at the place vacated by her, but for several minutes saw no eggs, until I finally discovered one right before me, where I had been looking all the time. It measured 1.20 x .86 in., the ground color was dull olive-gray, irregularly blotched and spotted with blackish-brown and thus being very difficult to detect among the variously colored gravel.

The bird had not flown far, but squatted lengthwise, as this bird and the whippoorwill usually do, on one of the ridges of the roof nearby. No other egg was laid, perhaps, because the bird evidently had been hurt on one wing; some of the greater wing coverts over the secondaries were missing as through a pebble or bullet had passed through, which however, did not incapacitate her from flying. After several visits she did no longer fly off, but allowed of close approach, and as a perfectly quiet sitter before a camera, though only three feet away, would have delighted any photographer. The male, much more conspicuous and pretty than his demure little mate by reason of the white band across the throat and the white spots on wings and tail, would sometimes

come from some nearby large willows or houses and utter some queer rattling or clucking notes of alarm or protest. In the evenings, when the air was full of bullbats performing their marvellous aerial evolutions and incidentally catching their insect prey, this male bird would sometimes dart down right near to me, producing the loud booming for which these birds are known, the female even then sitting at my feet.

The female was faithfully brooding her solitary egg, rain or shine, early in the morning and late in the evening until the morning of June 11th, when, before my eyes, out of the shell a young tiny bullbat emerged into the world. It was covered with grayish down, some black being sprinkled over all, and this combination of neutral tints made it again difficult to detect in the gravel. It was able to wobble about immediately. The mother now lost some of her former good nature, she hissed with wide open mouth—which in these birds is really cavernous—in the most startling manner. During the next three days she always brooded her offspring whenever I looked at them; as late as 10 o'clock in the evening the mother was there. The feeding must have taken place later in the night. The youngster grew fast and gave every promise of becoming a valiant boomer amongst his kind, when, alas, a stroke of bad fortune blasted my and, I suppose, more so the faithful mother's hopes—if night-hawks ever have any. As the lives of Ernest Thompson Seton's animals end in tragedy, so did this one. When I looked up on the morning of June 14th, the mother was there, appearing different than before, however; disconsolate it seemed; but the young one was gone. The lower bar of the balustrade being several inches above the platform, the young bird had fallen from it onto the steep roof, and I found its lifeless little body in the grass below. The old bird stayed about the roof for a few days longer, as though still hoping for the appearance of her offspring, and then she disappeared.

A week or so after this I again noticed a night-hawk prowling around my roof. On June 29th I looked on the platform above and found another female bullbat sitting on her eggs. These were greener and more densely spotted than the former one, and, like this one, laid on the bare roof between the gravel without any nesting material whatever. It was not the same bird as before, as

could easily be seen. Perhaps this one too had suffered some misfortune at her first nesting place, because this was certainly too late to be her first attempt. I found this bird off her eggs the first time on July 4th at 8 o'clock p.m., but she soon came after I had come near the eggs. The male also flitted around me, noiselessly, like a huge moth. In the greatest heat at mid-day, when the gravel and tarred platform about her exhaled still more heat, this faithful bird was always sitting on her eggs. On July 11th her labors were rewarded by the appearance of two healthy looking young birds, looking like pepper and salt as the one before. To prevent a recurrence of the tragedy aforesaid, I had placed boards along the open under border of the balustrade. The young ones were lively, trying to get away from a person already on the second day. The old one showed correspondingly bad temper. When she was not brooding them, she would always be next to them, always in such a position that her shadow fell over the small birds, which during the hot noonday hours certainly must have been a great protection for them. Whether this was "purposely" or accidentally done, who knows? July 17th, the young showed the first signs of feathers; the male from nearby showed much wrath when the young were approached. On July 22nd one of the young had more feathers than the other; was also livelier, sturdier. By July 26th their downy natal dress was entirely replaced by feathers. The next day the more precocious young one had gone from the platform and the other one almost flew into my face. However, even now, when all dangers seemed to be over, one of the young, and that the stronger one, nearly came to grief. It must have perched low down somewhere, for all at once a neighboring cat was seen carrying it in the mouth. When chased she dropped it and it had luckily not been damaged. The next morning, July 28th, all three were again assembled on the deck of the roof, but at our approach they all flew away. They remained about for a few more days, when they disappeared, most probably on their long migration southward, which is begun early by some of these birds.

Like the first, these two latter ones were also fed at night only, and when we consider how quickly they grew and matured, we can imagine what an enormous amount of food, and this all noxious insect food, must be supplied by the old ones. They are worthy of every protection in our cities and should not be made the target of the air-gun and sling-shot of the boys on the street.



Eifrig, Charles William Gustav. 1905. "Nesting of the Night. Hawk in Ottawa."
The Ottawa naturalist 19(2), 56–58.

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