BIRD APARTMENT HOUSES

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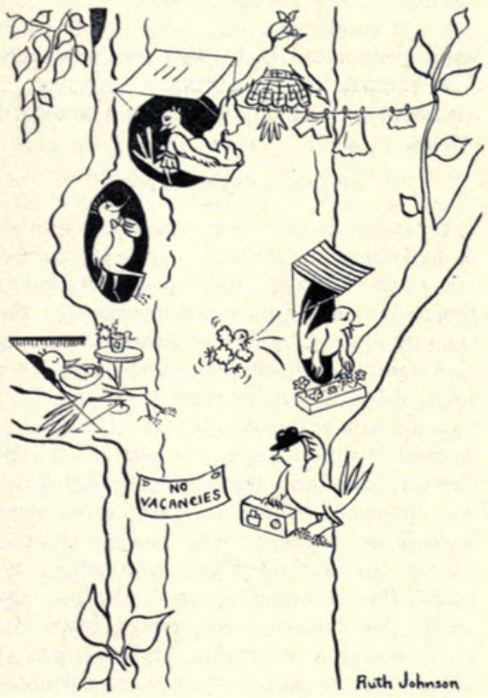
EVERY NOW AND THEN, in our press, appear blasts against crowded living conditions in our cities, especially the tenements where people are crowded together. Often there is the implication that this type of thing is unnatural and abnormal. And yet when we look about us in the bird world we see that gregariousness is a common trait. We have only to remember the great flocks of starlings and blackbirds in the autumn or the massed flights of water fowl. Not only in traveling



and in feeding but also at nesting time birds may gather together, and some birds nest in such close association that the terms "apartment house" or "tenement" are really applicable.

The martins' house on our lawn with perhaps dozens of closely spaced rooms (some houses have as many as 200 rooms) is a case in point. The neat martin house of boards is a man-made thing; but before the white man came to this continent and before the Choctaw Indians hung up groups of hollow gourds for the martin colonies to use, the martins nested in colonies. Even in recent years certain colonies that we might consider unprogressive have been reported as using such diverse nesting situations as among the boulders of a lake shore in Minnesota and the closely spaced woodpecker holes that riddled a dead pine in Florida. And probably it was always thus. The martins like company at nesting.

CLIFF DWELLERS, TOO

Perhaps it would not be proper to consider a colony of bank swallows, each with a separate burrow in the same small cut bank that is roofed with the same few square yards of turf, as a real apartment house of cliff dwellers. But the term has been used in connection with a West Indian woodpecker, where a dozen pairs were nesting in a single dead tree and "the trunk was a veritable apartment house" (Wetmore and Lincoln, 1934). A similar situation exists in the naked-faced barbet of West Africa. This bird, too, makes a hole in a dead tree for its nest, like a woodpecker, and colonies of 30 to 50 birds may be found nesting in a single dead tree, while other dead trees near-by, apparently equally suitable, are untenanted. Colonies of hundreds of nests of cliff swallows, the nests touching and overlapping, may be under the eaves of a single barn or, as they used to be and some still are, on the sheltered side of a cliff. But as these birds had nothing to do with the making of the roof, perhaps these, too, do not deserve to be rated as apartment houses.

In southern South America there is a monk parakeet that makes a real tenement. It nests colonially in tree tops, and the nests of sticks are placed so close together that they merge and form a single mass, up to 9 feet across, in which each parakeet has its own nest. Similar to this is the palm chat. This West Indian bird is small and thrush-sized, dull in color, brownish with a streaked breast, and nothing remarkable to look at; but it carries amazingly large sticks, a little thinner than a lead pencil and up to two feet or more long, to the top of a palm tree and there makes its bulky community nest.

BUILD NESTS CO-OPERATIVELY

These stick nests, which may be four feet and more across, are conspicuous and regular features of the landscape in Hispaniola. The colony consists of four to eight pairs of birds, and each has its own apartment in the bulky structure and its own passageway to the outside. But in the parts of the community nests that hold the individual nests together and cover them, there are roughly defined passages running through the interlacing twigs of the top of the nest so that the birds can creep almost under cover. Apparently some of the work is carried on in common, for as many as half a dozen birds may be working close together, pulling and twisting twigs more firmly into place (Wetmore and Swales, 1931).

The sociable weaver is the most advanced apartment builder. It, like the palm chat, has little of distinction in its appearance, being mostly dull brownish with a black face. But in its home country, on the savannas of Rhodesia in South East Africa, its huge community nests in the savanna trees may be seen from afar. The largest community nest Friedmann saw, when he was studying the bird there, was about 25 feet long, 15 feet wide, and 5 feet high and contained about 95 nests. This might have been still bigger, for part of it had broken the branch on which it rested its weight and fallen to the ground.

Sir Andrew Smith, the early ornithologist of South Africa, has written that when these birds start a colony they first make a roof of coarse grass. The group to which the sociable weaver belongs gets its name from the remarkable ability some of them have of weaving their nesting materials. But the sociable weaver neither plaits nor weaves its roof. It puts the roof together in the form of a well-made hay rick with a fairly definite thatching arrangement so that the water runs off. This is a community effort. Under this roof each individual pair makes its own separate nest. These apartment houses are used year after year, but last year's chambers are not used, new ones being made under the roof each year. And so the apartment house grows bigger and bigger until the weight of the mass may break the branches and cause a part or the whole to fall to the ground.

LECTURES ON SATURDAYS CONTINUE IN APRIL

The Spring Course of free lectures on travel and science illustrated with natural-color motion pictures will continue through April on Saturday afternoons in the James Simpson Theatre of the Museum. The lectures begin at 2:30 P.M.

Limited accommodations make it necessary to restrict these lectures to adults. Members of the Museum are entitled to reserved seats on application. For children, free motion pictures will be presented on the mornings of the same Saturdays by the Raymond Foundation.

Following are the dates, subjects, and lecturers:

April 7—VENEZUELA VENTURE
A trip to the world's highest waterfall
Nicol Smith

April 14—EARLY AMERICAN INDIANS
1950 archaeological work of the Museum
Paul S. Martin

April 21—ANCIENT AND MODERN MEXICO
A biologist tours a popular vacation land
Harry J. Fuller

April 28—THROUGH THESE DOORS
A glimpse of this Museum's activities
John R. Millar

No tickets are necessary for admission to these lectures. A section of the Theatre is reserved for Members of the Museum, each of whom is entitled to two reserved seats. Requests for these seats should be made in advance by telephone (WAbash 2-9410) or in writing, and seats will be held in the Member's name until 2:25 o'clock on the lecture day.