

The Bird Page . . .

SOCIAL PARASITES
AMONG BIRDSBY AUSTIN L. RAND
CURATOR OF BIRDS

THE MOTHER who would leave her infant on a stranger's doorstep to be brought up an orphan, never to know its own parents, is a despicable character in human society. But when we leave man-made society we must leave man-made rules of behavior and man-made prejudices behind. Morals are human. The rest of the animal world is not immoral; it is amoral. It cannot afford criteria beyond survival and reproduction. So when we call certain birds "social parasites," we attach no stigma to them. They represent several groups: the cowbirds; the weavers; the cuckoos; the honey guides; and the ducks.

Carelessness in egg-laying is common even in birds that ordinarily lay their eggs in their own nests and care for them themselves. This accounts for the robins' eggs that you may find on your lawn (which of course are wasted, addling and rotting). Perhaps the fate of the eggs of pheasants and ruffed grouse that are found in the same nest is happier. Ducks usually make their own nests, but many species occasionally lay eggs in the nest of another species, and one South American duck no longer makes any nest of its own but is a social parasite not only on other kinds of ducks but also on coots and some other birds.

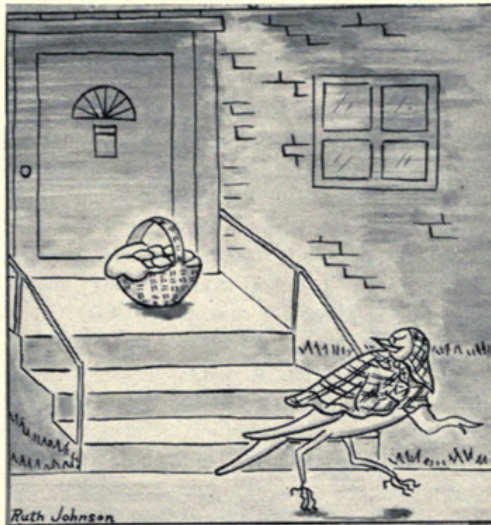
The small, well-marked family of honey-guides, of Africa, notable in other ways, is also remarkable for social parasitism. The favorite host species, chosen to look after the eggs and young, are the close relatives of the honey-guides, the barbets (which themselves are most closely related to our woodpeckers). The nesting of certain African weaver-birds was long a puzzle to ornithologists until it was found they, too, were social parasites on other weaver-birds.

VARIED NESTING HABITS

The cowbirds, numbering several species in North and South America, belong to a family notable for variation in nesting habits. Their nests vary from the elaborate purse-shaped structures of the oropendola and orioles to the meadowlark's dome-shaped nest on the ground and the simple cup of the bobolink and red-wing—while the cowbird makes none. The cowbirds' eggs are laid in the nests of a wide variety of other species and left for the foster parents to care for. Here those who discuss the relative importance of heredity versus environment can profit by considering these social parasites. The young cowbird, hatched and brought up by, say, a yellow warbler remains a cowbird. As soon as it no longer needs its foster parents' care it flocks with other cowbirds, with all their mannerisms

and characteristics, and next season it mates with another cowbird. There is nothing left of its early environment.

The cuckoos of the United States and some of those of the Old World make their own nests in normal avian fashion. But a number of Old World species are social parasites, and their behavior has long been a subject of study and discussion. Specializations indicate that here perhaps we have the highest stages of social parasitism. Whereas the cowbird may grow up with nestmates that are the young of the foster parent, unless by chance it crowds them out or starves them if it is larger, the young



cuckoo gets the rightful occupants of the nest on its back and throws them out of the nest to perish.

EGGS LOOK ALIKE

Another refinement in social parasitism by the European cuckoo is that apparently certain individuals, and apparently certain strains, lay their eggs only in the nests of certain host species. And these cuckoos' eggs resemble the eggs of the particular species in which the cuckoos' eggs are laid. For example, if certain cuckoos lay their eggs only in the nests of meadow pipits these cuckoos' eggs would resemble those of meadow pipits, while another group of cuckoos specializing in hedge-sparrows would have eggs resembling those of hedge-sparrows.

Another Oriental cuckoo has a color adaptation in the young. In southern Asia these cuckoos parasitize crows, and the nestling cuckoos have black feathers like the young crows. In the Australian area, where the same species of cuckoo occurs, it parasitizes grayish-brown honey eaters and the young are brown, more like the rightful nestlings. Both these resemblances apparently reduce the chances of the cuckoos' offspring being rejected by the foster parents.

Your vacation photographs may be suitable for the coming Nature Photo Contest.

A 'MYSTERY' PEACOCK
FROM THE CONGO

A specimen of the rare African or Congo peacock has been received by the Museum as a gift from the New York Zoological Society. Although we sympathize with the New York Zoo in the loss by death of one of its prize birds, we cannot help but be delighted to have this specimen in our study collections.

Its interest lies partly in the recency of the discovery of such a large and showy "new" game bird. The African peacock is the only true pheasant in Africa and is perhaps most nearly related to the Oriental peacocks, as its name implies. The account of its discovery and description reads like a detective story. Of course, there is the added satisfaction of filling a gap in the already fine collection of game birds in the Museum.

The African peacock is a large and beautiful bird of the pheasant tribe. Somewhat smaller than the Oriental peacock, it lacks the long train of that bird but is handsome in its own right. It is blackish, glossed with green on the back and with purple on the lower neck and chest. The sides of the neck are red, and a stiff upright tuft springs from the top of the head.

CLUE IN NATIVE'S HAT

The real-life detective story surrounding the bird's first discovery began when Dr. J. P. Chapin of the American Museum of Natural History was in the Congo in 1913 and found in a native's hat a wing feather of a bird he could not identify. He labeled the feather and saved it. One never knows when such a datum will serve a purpose.

For twenty-four years the feather lay unidentified in New York's museum. Then in 1936 Dr. Chapin was in Europe, continuing his study of African birds in the Congo Museum near Brussels. In passing through a corridor there he saw two mounted pheasants the like of which he had never seen. They were new to science but lacked any indication of origin. Remembering the unidentified feather he had collected in 1913, he compared the feathers. They were the same. This established that they came from the Belgian Congo, and Chapin described the bird as a new genus and species, *Afropavo congensis*.

On a flying trip to Africa, with the clue of the 1913 feather indicating the forest of the Congo as locality, Chapin was able to get specimens and to show that the bird was fairly numerous in one of the little-frequented areas of the Upper Congo forests. Chapin's account of the discovery appeared in 1937 in *Natural History*, magazine of the American Museum.

When Charles Cordier, well-known live-bird collector, was in the Congo for the New York Zoological Society, early in 1949 he collected the male bird that has just come



Rand, Austin Loomer. 1952. "Social Parasites Among Birds." *Bulletin* 23(7), 6–6.

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