

A PROBLEM IN INDETERMINATES

By P. M. SILLOWAY

WITH THREE PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR

GIVEN: a man with a hobby; a box filled with cotton; a camera; and a bright day in the collecting season. Question: what will be the probable results? To the plain, matter-of-fact citizen, whose soul is bound by the chains of conventionality and commercialism, the problem seems impossible and well-nigh incomprehensible. In the first place he can not understand how a man,



TYPICAL NESTING SITE OF THE LONG-BILLED CURLEW

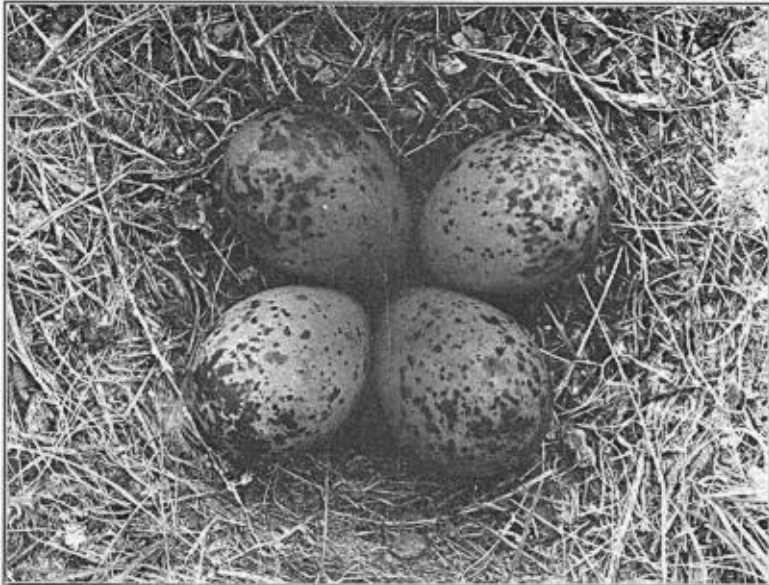
a full-grown, sensible man, can have a hobby. If at length, however, it finally dawns upon him that a man can have a hobby and still be a man, the aforesaid citizen can not possibly comprehend the box of cotton. The idea that a grown-up man should be seen wandering over the prairie or along streamside or thru the woods with a box of cotton (and intentions not so evident), is to the aforesaid citizen prima facie conviction of deep-seated dementia. And the camera, why what on earth is there to be seen worth photographing? The bare idea of a man going around photographing birds' nests—what can you get out of it? And the bright day in the collecting season—what has that to do with the question? And so the problem assumes hopeless proportions.

And yet to you, gentle reader—you who have a hobby yourself, you whose soul is free to go forth from its sordid surroundings and occasionally invigorate itself by drinking at nature's fountain, you who once at least were not ashamed to be seen afield with a cigar box tucked under your arm or at least a baking powder can stowed away in your coat pocket, you who appreciate somewhat of the pleasures of kodaking and picture-making, you who see everywhere around you many things worth photographing, you who love the birds and flowers and the sunshine and the breezes—to you the problem is not only comprehensible and possible, but easy. Let us consider one solution of it.

It happened last spring that a stranger came to our town—a man with a hobby. Upon his inquiry for anybody in town to sympathize with him, he was

directed to me. Perhaps you know what it means to be a markt man in your community—your hobby is your brand, so to speak. Well, I was branded, and so the stranger soon rounded me up; and in our first talk-fest we arranged to get afield, for the stranger actually wanted to get some pictures of nests of western birds. Strange, isn't it, how peculiarly his dementia ran, poor man?—wanted to get pictures of birds' nests. At any rate it turned out that I could accommodate him; peculiar, wasn't it, that a poor demented fellow who wanted to photograph birds' nests should straightaway find some one who could tell him where the nests were?

To be candid I must say that I had been out over the prairie the day before, and had chanced on a nest of Lark Bunting just ripe for photographing, so I was sure of that for him anyway. Moreover I had aroused a male Curlew into swooping angrily at me, and I knew what that meant. You understand, then, that when



NEST AND EGGS OF LONG-BILLED CURLEW

I told my new-found friend I could show him something to photograph, I felt sure of delivering the goods. So we went afield.

My friend didn't know much about birds, for his hobby was *pictures*. A nest of the Lark Bunting was to him as great a prize as a nest of the Curlew. Not so with me, however, and on our way across the bench I explained to him what great opportunity had befallen him; for it is an opportunity to photograph a nest of the Curlew, if one has just dropt into Montana and never even saw a Curlew. In fact, it is not often that a tenderfoot is granted an opportunity to gaze upon one of the greatest treasures of our great Treasure State, a nest of the Curlew; such an experience is reserved only for the initiated—it is one of the rites of the thirty-third degree of bird nesting, so to speak. All this I explained in fullest detail to my fellow-hobbyist, and be it said to his credit that he appeared to grasp the value of the opportunity.

My first objective point was a solitary fence-post, marking the stalking ground

of the male Curlew I had angered on my preceding trip across the prairie. The post, remnant of a removed fence, was in the midst of a long knoll-side, stretching a mile in either direction, and served as a vantage point for the Curlew in guarding his home. I explained to my *particeps criminis* that while the female Curlew is sitting on her eggs, the male is loafing somewhere within sight of the nest, ready to defend the premises in case of threatened danger to his home. We found the male there, feeding carelessly. The first thing, in order to impress upon my friend's mind (that is, such portion of it as was not occupied with picture) the great difficulty in finding a nest of the Curlew if one doesn't know how to do it, I directed him to make a mental note of the place where we first attracted the Curlew, so as to make an estimate of the distance from it to the nest (if we should find it). From the place where the Curlew settled down near us and angrily cackled the first time, my friend afterward guessed the distance to the nest to be over a half mile. And you who live in the west know how deceptive distances are out here.

The general theory of finding a Curlew's nest lies in this fact: the male, while the female is sitting, will follow you if you go toward the nest, or leave you alone if you veer away from the general direction toward it; and the nearer you get to the nest, the more angry and threatening becomes the male in showing his dislike of your presence near it. Now, finding a nest of the Curlew is a trade secret; and while willing to show my friend the nest, it wasn't necessary that I show him *how* to find the nest, for his hobby was *pictures*, you will remember; so why strew one's pearls before the unappreciative? If he ever becomes an egg-crank and wishes me to show him how to find the nests, I shall be glad to offer him the courtesies of the profession. In this instance, however, having ideas of his own, he proposed that we separate, upon my explaining to him that all depended upon the actions of the bird and that we must be guided solely by those; if the Curlew chose to act up, all right; and if not, there was not the remotest likelihood of our finding any nest.

In my own course, separated from him, I followed my usual tactics, gradually getting into closer quarters with the gallant old bird and calling my friend to me often enough to keep him in the fighting and to allow him to draw his own conclusions regarding the *modus operandi* of locating the nest. The knoll, which was only of very slight grade, was crossed by a road about a quarter of a mile from the starting post. We crossed the road and continued the chase in the adjoining pasture. At length, an hour and fifteen minutes after the chase began, I saw the female spread closely upon her nest ahead of us. Ah, there was the picture—no, the reality in every interesting feature—for where can you show an egg-crank a more pleasing sight than a live Curlew hovering her nest? That was the picture we didn't get, and I still believe I saw the real picture, and what we carried back on our plates was a mere suggestion of what the bird-lover saw and carried home. Look at the picture and judge for yourself. As I write this I see in memory that mother Curlew flattened over her eggs, and I long for the days to come again when the Curlews will lead me a merry chase.

Several days later that same old egg-box and camera were concerned in another affair worth mentioning. My fellow-hobbyist was absent, having gone out of town to take some *pictures*; but the original man with a hobby was there. I was wandering along a dry water course, having frequent patches of weeds and sprouts, suggestive of nests of Marsh Hawk or Sharp-tailed Grouse. In fact, I had seen several times a Hawk quartering along over the locality, and I started in to search the rose-patches for a nest. You understand how a fellow, when he once gets

started and doesn't find anything, will keep going. After awhile I found myself far beyond the locality I had spotted for the Hawk's nest, but as it seemed I ought to stumble on a nest of Grouse, or something, I kept going. Nests of the Lark Bunting were there in plenty, but as I had room in my collecting box for only a good set of Hawk or Grouse I didn't bother the Buntings. Once I startled a female Bunting from a nest with seven eggs, and when I saw five males at once settle in the bush in which she took refuge, I was prone to question the code of ethics governing a Bunting household. Then I thought how queer it was that nature is so capricious; if Lark Bunting eggs were quite rare and worth two dollars each in exchange, more than likely the Bunting's nests would be located in the tops of the highest pine trees on the hillsides, and I could never find one in a day's travel. It seems strange that Mr. Emerson omitted this little point from his essay on "Compensation."

As I was saying, presently a little patch of weeds caught my eye, over on the bench. It was just a little patch, no more than eight or ten feet in diameter.



NEST OF THE SHORT-EARED OWL

Disappointed and leg weary, I brusht threateningly against it to alarm any possible tenant; and what happened? A great cloud of grayish brown feathers floated almost into my face from between my feet, and drifted noiselessly away over the bench. My first impression was that the entire patch of shrubbery had taken wing in my startled imagination. Then all the catalog of owls rusht thru my mental vision, and I realized that for the first time in my life—the first time, mind you—I had chanced on the nest of the Short-eared Owl. Yes, I, too, was once a barefoot boy, but I did not experience all the pleasures of life in that limited boyhood; there was something left that had just fallen to my lot—a new experience in bird nesting. No doubt some of you who are getting as gray-headed as I am can imagine something of my exultation as I peered at the opening in the shrubbery at my feet. Eight eggs, large and pearly and shiny—no, that was all in my imagination, for as I examined them I found them dirty and blood stained, yet I knew that a little water would remedy all that. Did I leave them in that damp opening,

hoping that eight little owls would later emerge from that dark cavity and thus augment the bird population of that section? Nay, verily, for I have the eight, now pearly and shiny and clean, where they can do much more good than as well developed and mature owls. To the man with a hobby, a set of eggs in the cabinet is worth more than a flock of birds in the bush.

And now you have two very easy solutions of the proposed problem—a problem in indeterminates, and hence capable of many answers.

Lewistown, Montana.

THE USE OF MAGPIES' NESTS BY OTHER BIRDS

By ROBERT B. ROCKWELL

WITH ONE PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR

MUCH has been said (and much has been left unsaid) regarding the manifold depredations of the Black-billed Magpie (*Pica pica hudsonia*), and these incriminating utterances are built on a firm foundation of truth. It is consequently with a sense of relief that we are able to turn our attention to a topic in which this interesting bird does not play the role of heavy villain, and particularly in view of the fact that in this instance he appears as the benefactor of the other birds, a condition of affairs diametrically opposed to his normal attitude.

It is in the construction of a fairly permanent place of refuge for many species of birds that the magpie does much toward counter-balancing his many bad habits, and predatory tendencies. The great heavy nests, so beautifully cupped and lined inside, so wonderfully domed over and walled up outside, and withal so remarkably constructed as to withstand the ravages of the elements for years, constitute a veritable bird palace for a number of species whose natural ability as architects is a negligible quantity.

As a haven of safety during sudden storms or unlookt-for spells of severe weather, there are indeed few species of perching birds that do not find in the abundant abandoned magpie's nests an important addition to the many protected safety stations a wise Nature provides for her feathered children. During severe rain or hail-storms robins, blackbirds, bluebirds, warblers, and in fact all those species that frequent the timbered creek-bottoms in the territory where the magpie is common, make frequent use of these great nests.

A few species utilize the abandoned nests continuously, but these birds are necessarily few in number, as they are birds that restrict themselves to a given locality. To this class belong the Western Horned Owl, the Long-eared Owl and the Rocky Mountain Screech Owl, the two former of which spend nearly their entire time during the day in these welcome retreats, while the latter species makes frequent use of them when not occupying a cavity in a tree. It is a rather amusing spectacle to see a round, fluffy little screech owl (dislodged from his cosy corner in a hollow tree) making desperate efforts to reach the nearest magpie nest before the noisy throng of mischief-loving magpies overtakes him, and even more comical to see the plain look of disappointment and incredulity upon the "countenances" of the pursuers, as the owl reaches the welcome refuge and instantly merges himself into his surroundings; for strange as it may seem magpies will not