

Finally, becoming tired of the wait, and cringing from the blasting heat of the summer sun, we scoured the neighboring grassy jungles in an effort to rout out the owner of the nest, but not a "hide nor hair" did we see.

The characteristic birds of the two-acre marsh were raising a considerable disturbance. A pair of Kingbirds had a nest in a small locust tree by the side of the railroad track on the edge of the marsh, and were quite solicitous about the two young which it contained, flying and twittering about our heads. A few nests of the Florida Red-wing still contained eggs, probably second settings. One held four eggs, rather unusual for the bird in the vicinity of Houston. Now and then a Florida Nighthawk would float lightly by. And the Scissor-tailed Flycatchers, Southern Meadowlarks, Orchard Orioles, Western Lark Sparrows, Western Grasshopper Sparrows, and Dickcissels were twittering, singing and buzzing, and probably all were nesting near at hand.

A hundred yards north of the nest of the Louisiana Clapper Rail, and just outside the limits of the marsh, we did indeed flush a Southern Meadowlark from her arched or domed nest containing four nearly fresh eggs. It was cunningly concealed under a tussock of grass, slightly sunk in the ground and well lined with dry grasses.

The rails evidently deserted the nest after our careless handling of the eggs; for, though several trips followed that of June 11, not a bird was seen in the marsh. The nest gradually acquired a deserted air, soon appearing weather-beaten and rough. The eggs, by the way, are still in the nest, abandoned to the mercy of the elements. Let us trust that next season the rails will have less hardships and nest under more favorable conditions.

Houston, Texas, August 19, 1914.

THE NESTING OF THE BLACK SWIFT

A Vindication

By WILLIAM LEON DAWSON

WITH FOUR PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR

ALL THE TRADITIONS and expectations of ornithologists were set at naught when A. G. Vrooman, of Santa Cruz, announced (*Vide Auk*, Oct., 1901, p. 394) that he had taken the single egg of the Black Swift (*Cypseloides niger borealis*) from the bare damp earth of a sea-cliff. It seemed incredible, and the writer was among those who indulged in cheap witticisms at the expense of this newest aspirant to oölogical honors. Not even with the announcement of a second discovery, July 9, 1904 (reported in the *CONDOR*, Nov., 1905, p. 176), was our unfaith shaken, although that astute connoisseur, Col. John E. Thayer, of Boston, made haste to secure the eggs and was so delighted that he wanted more. We thought we knew our Swifts and we did not know Mr. Vrooman. Moreover, we had been disappointed once before (see last volume of *CONDOR*, p. 95), and did not propose to be hoaxed again. Vrooman's announcements fell coldly, therefore, upon the public ear; and their author, a sensitive and conscientious man, relapsed into pained silence.

For this unpublished naturalist, be it understood, was no upstart. At the

time he wrote he had neatly labelled skins of *Cypseloides niger borealis*, *Aeronautes melanoleucus* and *Chaetura vauxi* ranged alongside in his cabinet. A keen eye and unquenchable enthusiasm for field work, together with twenty years experience at Santa Cruz, had left this man of forty the possessor of a nearly complete collection of both skins and eggs of the local birds. He was in a position, therefore, to know, and to know that he knew when he spoke of Black Swifts. It was double pity, too, that we heard him first with unbelieving ears, because this patient student of nature proves to be a man of many pleasant qualities. Hospitable and generous to a fault, he is also vivacious and humorously picturesque in speech. His mind is well stored with incident and example of bird-lore, and his enthusiasm in things out-of-doors is so contagious that he makes an ideal field companion. For all this, Mr. Vrooman has never traveled largely, save to and from his old home in New York State, and he has kept his ornithological light under an ancient bushel.

But if Mr. Vrooman fell silent over the skepticism which greeted his announcements, he did not remain idle. Every succeeding June found him searching the sea-cliffs of that indented shoreline west of Santa Cruz for a



Fig. 5. A BIT OF SANTA CRUZ COAST

stretch of thirty miles. Battling with the unceasing wind which rages along that coast, he crept along ledges, peered over precipices, shook his rattle-can down wave-lashed hollows, or else lay on his back for hours at a time, trying to unravel the purposes of some wandering *Cypseloides*. Failure attended his early efforts as often as success. Of the thirteen seasons spent in this quest since the original discovery, four went unrewarded. Nevertheless, as the years passed, and acquaintance with this bird of mystery deepened, the patient seeker was able to determine certain laws which govern the Black Swift's movements and choices, insomuch that he is fairly confident of being able to make at least one nesting location each season. What these laws are, it is no purpose of this present article to inquire; for we hold it self evident that the discoverer deserves his luck,—in this instance at least; but we will give an unvarnished account of what befell us under the guidance of this genial naturalist on the 22nd of June last.

The June location of the season of 1914 was made some dozen miles west of Santa Cruz. Even Mr. Vrooman did not know the precise spot from which

the bird would emerge, so we ranged ourselves along the crest of the cliff (Mr. V's son Benjamin and my son William accompanying), while our guide proceeded to make diabolical noises with a "contraption" rigged up for the purpose. Nothing happened for a long time, but finally from some invisible portion of the undercut cliff beneath our feet, a dark form flashed downward, and glided, with strong wing-motion, close to the surface and straight out to sea. It was a Black Swift undoubtedly; but what extraordinary behavior for a land bird! With 8-power binoculars I watched it out of sight. Then we drove a steel pin, shook out a rope ladder which did not quite reach the bottom of the 65-foot declivity, and set about the systematic search of the under-cut seawall. An hour later V. announced his success, and I hastened down to view the treasure—a great white egg, evidently fresh, but somewhat discolored by



Fig. 6. VROOMAN AT THE SWIFT'S NEST

contact with the moist floor of a clinging root-lashed earthen bracket, from the edges of which wiry green grass grew luxuriantly. I had barely re-ascended when a shout apprised us of the approach of the recreant bird. She came winging splendidly over the water, rose with a sweep toward the nest, saw the swinging ladder hard-by, and swerved sharply. Before we could relieve the situation she had fainted several times and even lighted for a moment on a neighboring cornice; then retired. Hurriedly drawing up the ladder and hastening to a point of vantage, we threw ourselves upon the ground and had the satisfaction of seeing her, a moment later, sweep back and settle upon the nest. The whole situation was as plain as day, but the grasses of the earthen cornice invested the sitting bird so closely that telephotography was out of the question. I could only choose a water-background, therefore, and set my

Graflex for a snap at the flushing bird. Anticipating some speed I did not trust myself to release the shutter after recognizing the bird on the mirror, but held on the water and watched the nest instead. It was well I did so, for when V. let down his "devil-box" abreast of the bird, I pressed the button upon the instant of her emergence. Even so I caught her, a mere black smear on the plate, over the water and some forty feet away from the nest. Again our benefactress winged straight to sea and passed from sight. It was a Black Swift, no doubt of that; but it took the sight of other birds hurtling about another sea-cliff in amorous (and as yet unfruitful) pursuit, to confirm the impression of reality.

After "snapping" the egg *in situ* with the Graflex, I packed it away securely and lifted the nesting cornice, earth, grass, rootlets and all, clear of its limestone moorings.



Fig. 7. EGG (NO. 11) OF BLACK SWIFT, *in situ*

The egg, figured herewith in comparison with that of the White-throated species; is seen to be about three times larger. This, in view of the fact that the birds themselves are approximately the same size, is a sufficient commentary on its *singular* number. The bird could not take care of many such. The nestling, too, must be much further advanced at the time of hatching than in the case of those species which raise four or five at once. But it is passing strange that this aberrant Swift should ape the sea-birds, notably the Murres, in this respect of having a single large egg.

But although this bird has been caught thus "dead to rights" posing as a sea-bird, I do not for a moment believe that sea-cliffs constitute its habitual nesting site. The Black Swift is properly a bird of the high mountains, and it will be found nesting in the crevices of lofty mountain walls. To cite only re-

cent examples: the writer saw detached pairs of Black Swifts in Kearsarge Pass at an altitude of about 9000 feet, on the 5th day of July, 1913; and a company of forty birds very much at home in the basin of the Little Yosemite River below Nevada Falls, on the 16th of June, 1914. Indeed it is probably only because this stretch of coast above Santa Cruz offers essentially the conditions of cold and moisture

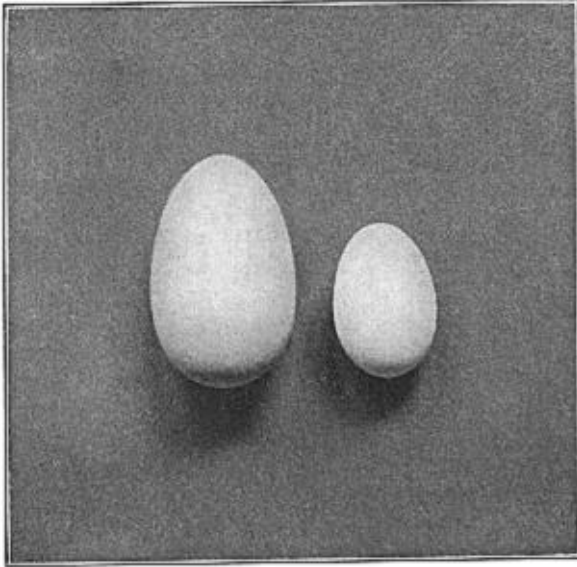


Fig. 8. EGGS OF BLACK SWIFT (THE LARGER) AND WHITE-THROATED SWIFT; BOTH NATURAL SIZE

found elsewhere only at higher altitudes that the birds have descended to this station. Moreover, the birds, although regularly breeding, are very scarce at Santa Cruz. Mr. Vrooman has never seen the large flocks which are commonplace to experienced mountain students. Ten or a dozen birds at most are as many as he ever saw at once, and these probably represented the entire population of Santa Cruz County. Otherwise he has never secured tangible evidence of the nesting of above three pairs in one season.

The egg taken on June 22nd measures 1.18x.73 inches, and is the eleventh

of this Santa Cruz series. Nos. 1 to 7 inclusive were secured by Mr. John E. Thayer. The only other perfect egg extant is in the possession of Mr. H. F. Bailey, a close personal friend of Mr. Vrooman; while the discoverer himself retains two broken specimens. To A. G. Vrooman of Santa Cruz belongs the exclusive and distinguished honor of bringing this rare egg to box; and my hat, for one, is off to him for a pretty piece of work.

Santa Barbara, California, July 5, 1914.

THE KERN REDWING—*AGELAIUS PHOENICEUS ACICULATUS*

By JOSEPH MAILLIARD

WITH SIX DRAWINGS

SOMETHING over a year ago the sight of a couple of specimens of redwings from east-central Kern County, California, created in my mind the desire to obtain sufficient material from that locality to compare critically with other forms of *Agelaius*. Finally, last spring, unable to go myself, Mr. Adriaan van Rossem was commissioned to do the necessary field work,