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## THE BUFF-BREASTED FLYCATCHER IN THE HUACHUCAS

(WITH FOUR PHOTOS)

By FRANK C. WILLARD

EARLY in June, 1897, I was climbing the last slope up to the main ridge of the Huachuca Mountains in Cochise County, Arizona. During a pause for breath, a small bird flitting about among some young pine trees five or six feet tall caught my eye, and a few moments of observation convinced me that it was another of the numerous strangers to me. This was my first year in the West, and nearly every day was bringing new acquaintances. While I was debating the probable identity of this flycatcher, as its actions and appearance betokened it, the bird dropped to the ground, picked up a fine rootlet, and flew up into one of a group of tall pines about seventy-five yards away. I could not locate the exact point of alighting and, fearing to disturb its nest building, hurried away with the determination to return later, locate, and collect the nest, establishing the identity meanwhile. That night Coues' Key solved another problem and I knew the Buff-breasted Flycatcher (*Empidonax fulvifrons pygmaeus*) by name as well as by appearance. A week later I was standing near the pine tree where the bird had been last seen. A club thrown among the branches flushed her, as the alarm note she uttered announced; but I could not see her, nor could any sight of the nest be obtained. Strapping on my climbers, I was soon astride the first branch forty feet up. A careful scanning of all the nearby branches failed to reveal the nest, and I stood up and clasped my arms around the trunk of the tree preparatory to climbing higher. Something soft gave under my hand and I knew without looking that it was the nest. Hastily climbing to the branch above, I looked down into a small, deeply hollowed cup, snug against the trunk and saddled on a short stub about three inches in diameter. Another longer stub was a few inches almost directly above it. Three cream colored eggs were the contents. While I was busy packing them, the female came close, scolding vigorously.

Few other opportunities for observing the buff-breast presented themselves and until the year 1907 I saw but one other nest. In July, 1899, a set was secured from a nest, similarly situated, by O. W. Howard and me. This nest contained four fresh eggs. The two foregoing nests were at an altitude of 8500 feet, on the ridge at the summit and in an open pine forest.

May 6, 1907, while I was photographing a giant mescal stalk, the unmistakable call of a Buff-breasted Flycatcher caused me to suspend operations. It was repeated and while I noted the direction, a bird was seen to fly from a small white oak some distance above me on the steep mountain side. In a few minutes she returned to the same tree and alighted near the tip of a lower horizontal branch. Focusing my opera glasses on the spot I saw her busily arranging material on the edge of a half-completed nest. I was



Fig. 51. TYPICAL NESTING GROUND OF THE BUFF-BREASTED FLYCATCHER; ELEVATION 7000 FEET, IN THE HUACHUCA MOUNTAINS, ARIZONA.

unable to revisit this locality until the 23d. The male then proclaimed my approach and flew from tree to tree up the mountain, calling at short intervals. I was soon at the tree and saw the female on the nest. Her big, bright eyes were watching anxiously, yet she remained on the nest until I was almost within reaching distance. She left the nest as it was jarred by my approach, and I was presently rejoicing over a set of four beauties, in-

cubation well begun. The nest was twelve feet up from the ground, saddled on the lower prong of a fork, the upper prong forming a protective overhang. A photograph of the nest and eggs *in situ* was obtained.

On the 28th, I was doing some exploring with Mr. W. A. Johnson in an adjoining canyon. Our eager ears soon heard the wished-for call, and we scrambled up the steep slope as it sounded from tree to tree above us. Suddenly it ceased, and we had not caught a glimpse of the bird. We waited, but heard no further sound. While scrambling up we had carefully examined each oak but found no signs of the nest. Returning to the bottom, we had scarcely picked up our outfit, when we were again saluted with the call of



Fig. 52. COLLECTING A NEST AND EGGS OF THE BUFF-BREASTED FLYCATCHER.

warning given near us, and a hasty look in that direction showed us the male in the top of an oak. The proceedings of the previous minutes were repeated, but this time with the bird in sight. When we were well up the slope again and nearly winded, the sly fellow ceased his 'quit-quit' and soon returned to a tree near his point of departure. Sliding and falling, we hurried down, but he flew out of sight. A careful search of each branch of every nearby oak was without result except the discovery of a Hepatic Tanager's nest in one of the few scattered pines which towered above the oaks. While I was col-

lecting this, we were again tantalized by that 'quit-quit-quir-r-r.' The male tanager was hopping about among the topmost branches of a pine tree not far from the one in which I was perched. He was being followed and scolded by the flycatcher in which we were so much interested. As I watched, the tanager flew away, and soon the flycatcher dropped down to a lower



Fig. 53. BUFF-BREADED FLYCATCHER ON HER NEST IN A WHITE OAK.

branch, well out toward the tip, and disappeared. I knew what that meant and lost little time in making my descent. There, in plain sight, was the nest, about forty-five feet from the ground. With the aid of a rope, I secured this set while Mr. Johnson took a snapshot of the operation. This nest was saddled on the lower prong of a fork and overhung by the upper,

as was the other nest. All nests examined were similarly located. Incubation was fresh in every instance where the set was collected, except the one taken on the 23d. Nests were taken on the 28th and 29th and on June 7, in 1907. On June 7, also, a nest with eggs about to hatch was found.

The nest is composed largely of lichen-like leaves, dark gray in color, of a small low growing weed. These are held together with cobwebs. The lining is of fine grass, rootlets, and hair, with a few feathers near the rim, which is slightly incurved like a hummingbird's nest. It is rather insecurely fastened with cobwebs to the branch on which it rests. In appearance, it is much like a Western Gnatcatcher's (*Poliophtila caerulea obscura*) nest.

Observations made during 1908 and later lead me to believe that the Buff-breasted Flycatcher suffers considerably from having its nest robbed

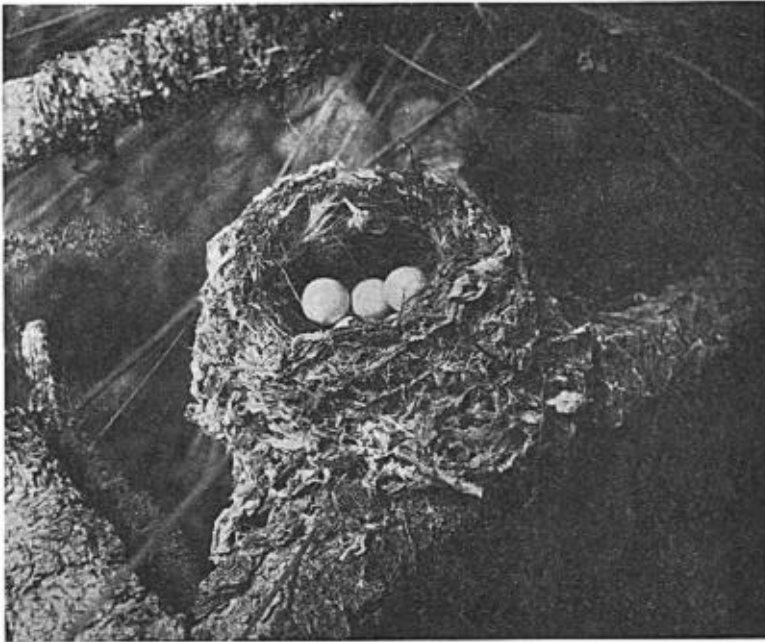


Fig. 54. NEST AND FIVE EGGS OF BUFF-BREASTED FLYCATCHER, IN SITU, 60 FEET FROM THE GROUND.

by the Long-crested Jay (*Cyanocitta stelleri diademata*), and also from its being blown down by severe winds. A heavy wind on May 29, 1908, blew down two nests of this flycatcher and two of Coues Flycatcher (*Myiochanes pertinax pallidiventris*). The buff-breast is also given to deserting an unfinished nest when even slightly disturbed. If there are eggs in the nest, however, she will not desert it, even if it is frequently investigated. The photograph of the bird on the nest was taken at a distance of four feet and is from one of several exposures made at varying distances. It was taken with a 4 x 5 camera which required careful focusing after each move, but the bird did not seem particularly worried except by a ray of sunlight which struck her when the wind moved the leaves which shaded her.

In leaving a nest built high up from the ground, the female drops almost straight down to the brush below and does not make a sound for some time. The male seems to give the signal to her and he does most of the scolding, flying from tree to tree and endeavoring to lead the intruder away. When the nest is discovered, and the birds realize it, the female becomes very bold and alights on the nest where she remains, frequently until nearly touched. The male takes his departure about this time.

During the nest building the male stays pretty close to the nesting tree, but offers no assistance except to drive off intruding birds. He is good at that and can also put big squirrels to flight. The female works persistently and rapidly, but the nest requires a lot of material and she often takes ten days to build it. She sits on the nest for short periods before the eggs are laid, and also as the eggs are laid, but does not seem to make a real business of it until the set is complete. Four eggs comprise the usual clutch. In a few instances I have found but three eggs, and in one instance, only, did the nest hold five.

One of the illustrations shows the usual character of the country where the buff-breast nests. A pine tree is by far its favorite choice, but the white oak which grows among these scattered pines at the lower levels of its range is well liked. From an altitude of 6500 feet up to the tops of the ridges which reach 8500 feet is the range of this species, usually in the lower 1000 feet, however. An open mountain side, well covered with brush and with a few scattered pines, is typical nesting country.

Other species are likely to nest in the same tree with the Buff-breasted Flycatcher. I have found the following species thus associated: Hepatic Tanager, Grace Warbler, Rivoli Hummingbird, Lead-colored Bushtit, Western Evening Grosbeak, and Coues Flycatcher.

During the season of 1922, I revisited some of my old haunts in company with Mr. A. C. Bent. Several of the pairs were found just where I used to find them eight years ago. There was not so many as there used to be and I was able to collect only one set of three, from a typical nest in a pine tree. Another nest was located, but jays or squirrels destroyed it. The eggs taken this season are normal in size and measure  $.66 \times .51$ ,  $.67 \times .52$ , and  $.69 \times .53$  inches.

*Farmingdale, Long Island, New York, April 18, 1923.*