

IN MEMORIAM: GEORGE FREAN MORCOM

MARCH 16, 1845—MARCH 25, 1932

WITH PORTRAIT

By HARRY S. SWARTH

If in the following pages the narrator's personality seems unduly to intrude itself the explanation lies in the fact that the relations between the subject of this biography and the writer thereof were such as ordinarily obtain between father and son. Events that affected one inevitably affected the other as well, and this continuously throughout the years. Some of the particulars of Mr. Morcom's early life I have obtained from his sister, Mrs. Julia Davey, of Plymouth, England; the greater part of this account is derived from memories of what he has told me regarding his boyhood, and from my own memories of his later years.

Quiet and retiring as his life latterly had been, Mr. Morcom's decease constitutes the breaking of a link with the past that to some of us suddenly makes ornithology of the middle nineteenth century seem very remote indeed. Laying no claim to leadership at any time, he was acquainted more or less intimately with many of the leaders of the period. Throughout his life he retained the attitude of the interested amateur, an attitude that is perhaps more commonly found among naturalists of his native England than in America.

George Frean Morcom, one of ten children of Michael and Anna Morcom, was born at Aberystwith, Wales, on March 16, 1845, but the home of his remembrance was "Rosemundy," at St. Agnes, Cornwall, where he was taken at an early age and where his childhood and young manhood were spent. His father was interested in Cornish mines; his middle name came from another branch of the family that was connected with the well-known firm of biscuit manufacturers, Peek, Frean & Co. He was educated at Taunton College, and his library still contains a book given him as a prize at that institution.

Following student days there ensued a period of some delightful years in which field sports loomed large in importance. With the lovely south-of-England countryside over which to wander, with shooting and fishing privileges on certain large estates, and with a growing interest in natural history to give point to his rambles, it is no wonder that the mental picture of that period constituted a memory that remained vivid throughout all the years of his long life. Family ties brought him back again and again to revisit familiar scenes in Cornwall and Devon until advancing years rendered the trans-Atlantic trip too wearisome an adventure.

It was paleontology, I believe, that was first of the natural sciences to arouse his interest, an interest that was in rather curious contrast with his reluctance to accept the Darwinian concepts which were disturbing the English peace of mind so outrageously at that time. At any rate, the Cornish cliffs and mines yielded a fascinating harvest of fossils, a collection that was disposed of before he came to America, all but a few beautiful small ammonites, kept as paper-weights or table ornaments.

It was during this period that he became acquainted with the ornithologist and artist, John Gatcombe, a considerably older man, who may first have inspired the young George Morcom with an interest in birds. They remained close friends until Gatcombe's death, and Mr. Morcom forever treasured the memory of this association. One of his valued possessions, now passed on to my care, was a painting of a Garganey by Gatcombe. Another friend who chanced to exert a great influence over the course of his life was Professor Edward H. Day, an older man again, and

perhaps a college instructor, who taught him the rudiments of paleontology. Professor Day moved to America, to take a position on the faculty of Columbia University, and when a little later circumstances arose which made it necessary for George

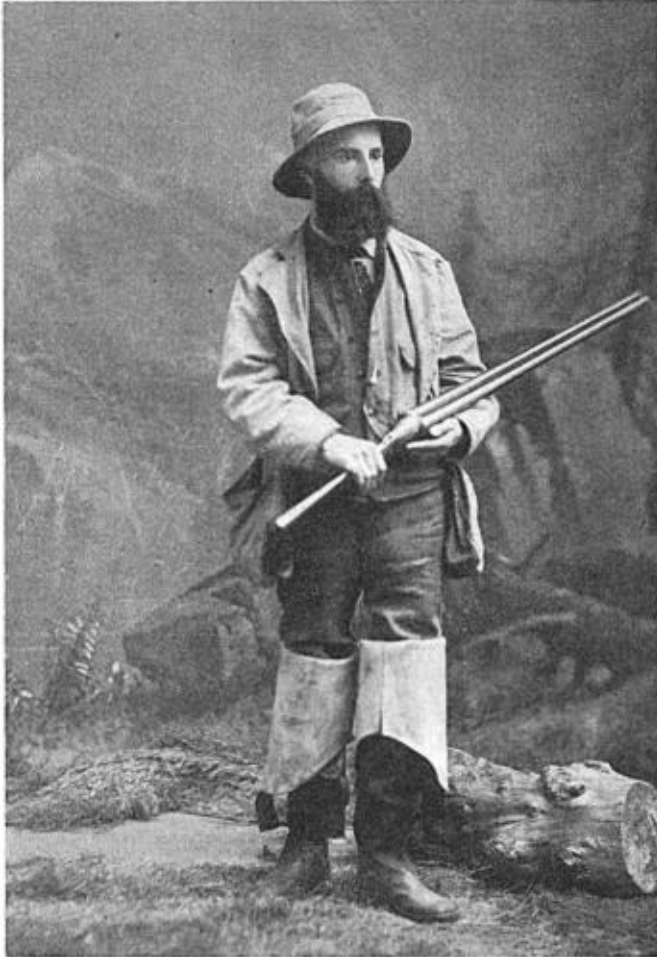


Fig. 2. George Frean Morcom

From a photograph taken at Los Angeles, winter of 1885-'86.

Morcom to make his own way in the world, it was Professor Day who wrote urging him to come to America and take advantage of the opportunities there.

It was assuredly a tremendous adventure for a conservative young Englishman from a country town to venture into the commercial struggle of an alien world; and it must have been as great a shock for a young man devoted to field sports to settle down to the dull routine of a business career. Once started, however, he never turned back. The friends of his middle age and later, seeing only the increasingly indolent and easy-going routine into which he ordered his days, could form no conception of the inflexible determination with which the younger man had pursued his settled

course; or of the shrewd business judgment that enabled him to hold his own in as bitterly competitive an environment as could be found the country over. Though all of his life he was in a sense an exile longing for home, and although he made occasional visits to that home, he never wavered in the determination to continue his labors until he could retire financially independent. He did for many years indulge in a vision of a final residence in England, but growing older, he declared very definitely that he could not give up the charms of the southern California climate in favor of any other place.

Just why he left New York for the even more barbarous surroundings of the Chicago of that period I do not know, but he did move westward after a brief visit with Professor Day. In Chicago there probably was—must have been—an unhappy period of boarding-house existence, but apparently the search for employment offered no great difficulty. He obtained a situation as a book-keeper almost immediately, on his own assurance that he was an expert in that line; that he had never before entered a single item in a set of books affected him not at all beyond inspiring a hurried and intensive study of the subject during the following evenings. The firm into whose employ he entered, A. S. Maltman & Co., commission merchants, comprised his entire business career, for he became eventually partner in the business and later on the sole owner. With characteristic conservatism he never changed the original firm name. His relations with his employer were of the happiest; during their entire lifetime they remained the closest of friends and eventually it was this employer's son who became executor of his estate. The commission business in Chicago at that time was a large and important industry, concentrated in a few blocks along South Water Street. The writer's childhood memory of the place is of a chaotic jumble of horse-drawn delivery wagons clattering over cobble stones; sidewalks intolerably crowded with sacked groceries, chicken coops and the like; drivers and clerks insanely hurried over their mysterious occupations; dingy and cluttered stores offering occasional glimpses of fascinating commodities, for the agricultural staples that must have formed the bulk of the trade made no such impression upon me as the occasional bear or deer hanging by a doorway, the bunches of ducks and geese, sometimes even ptarmigan and swans, or the occasional non-game bird or mammal, marvellous to see; the whole bordering alongside the amazing Chicago River, whose slowly bubbling, viscous surface and astounding smell formed a civic adjunct that was not to be forgotten even by a small child who was happily disposed to take everything for granted.

Once settled in business and it was the natural thing to look around for places to shoot, and Illinois and Indiana of the 1870's offered upland game and water-fowl in such abundance that a possible future scarcity entered into no one's calculations. Mr. Morcom's occupation brought acquaintance with farmers in the surrounding country, brought invitations to visit and hunt, and generally made him familiar with the game of the region. The Kankakee River became a favorite resort, and he has described to me how, on early trips, he saw Sandhill Cranes there in the spring time performing their remarkable courting "dances." Eventually, with certain Chicago associates, the Mak-saw-ba Club was organized, on the Kankakee River, at Davis, Stark County, Indiana, and there for many years he found his greatest pleasure, shooting and collecting. During the duck season his usual routine was as follows: To leave the office on Saturday in time for the evening's shoot. To enjoy the shooting Sunday morning and evening, catch a midnight train to the city, and, after perhaps a nap on the piled-up mail bags (the train crews were all friends), make a direct return from the railroad station to the office early Monday morning.

Some of his gun club associates took him on a deer hunt to the northern peninsula of Michigan, an expedition that was pleasant enough and successful enough (with a net bag of some thirty-odd deer!) but big game hunting made no appeal to him. He never repeated the experience nor did he ever take advantage of other such opportunities elsewhere.

Soon after Mr. Morcom settled in Chicago there occurred the great fire of 1871 that destroyed most of the city. He had already become acquainted with the families of Ernest and Auguste Swarth, and with them fled northward, to camp in the cemetery that later became Lincoln Park. From that time on they dwelt together. At different periods two houses were occupied, both adjoining Lincoln Park, and in each Mr. Morcom occupied the uppermost story. He was building up his collections during these years, both of birds and eggs, and the bulky cabinets took much space. The walls of his rooms were lined with shallow cases of mounted birds, the taxidermic work being done mostly by Dick Turtle, an old-time Chicago taxidermist who died in 1931. Many of these mounted specimens he had shot himself on his hunting trips, but among the others there were a number from Florida that were collected and mounted by Dr. J. W. Velie, curator of the Chicago Academy of Sciences, whom he had befriended. These cases of birds, after many travels (including exhibition at the Midwinter Fair, San Francisco), have wound up, some of them in the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology, some in the California Academy of Sciences, and some in the Los Angeles Museum of History, Science and Art.

In 1883 the Ridgway Ornithological Club was organized in Chicago, in which Mr. Morcom took an active part. The local membership included such enthusiastic ornithologists as Ruthven Deane, H. K. Coale, and B. T. Gault, besides others whose names are not so familiar to us today. Two issues of a "Bulletin" were published, a neat and creditable journal. The first number was given over to one paper, "Bird Migration in the Mississippi Valley," by W. W. Cooke and Otto Widmann, the first appearance of what was later on much enlarged in its better known appearance as a government publication. In the second issue there were two long articles, one on the birds of the Corpus Christi region, Texas, one on the birds of southern California and Arizona, both being based upon the results of field expeditions sent out by Mr. Morcom. Coale published the description of *Dendrocica aestiva morcomi* in this Bulletin.

During this decade field work was carried on with fair regularity, on the Kankakee River, Indiana, and in the Chicago region. There were two younger men in the Ridgway Club whose services were utilized in various ways, Henry K. Coale and Joseph L. Hancock. Mr. Morcom shot many birds on week-end trips, but lacked time to prepare them, and Coale and Hancock, both excellent preparators, skinned the birds that he shot, and sold him, besides, many more of their own take.

In March, 1884, Mr. Morcom sent Hancock to Texas to collect birds. The trip was cut short before it was well begun, as Hancock contracted a severe illness, but the two weeks spent at Corpus Christi resulted in a surprising amount of excellent material. Hancock, in later years a practising physician in Chicago, gradually turned from ornithology and became an entomologist of standing. His excellent "Nature Sketches in Temperate America" is a well known book.

A son of Mr. Morcom's old friend Professor Day had settled in Colorado, and from this source various desirable birds were received, sent frozen during the winter months and skinned by Chicago assistants. Other correspondents in northern Michigan and Maine sent specimens that were similarly handled.

During his busiest years in Chicago, from 1880 to 1890, Mr. Morcom established many interesting contacts. Major Bendire, traveling between Washington and various western army posts, stopped at the house several times; among the present writer's vague childhood memories is a recollection of guiding a burly figure in a heavy overcoat upstairs where his arrival was awaited. Acquaintance was made with Dr. R. W. Shufeldt, and Mr. Morcom, being in a position to help him, supplied Dr. Shufeldt with many specimens of western birds in the flesh for use in the anatomical studies that the latter was then prosecuting. There was correspondence with Robert Ridgway also, though whether the two ever met I do not know. In his room there hung a painting, by Ridgway and received from him, of two Kamchatkan Sea Eagles. Mr. Morcom's liking for Ridgway and admiration for his accomplishments led to his sending to the National Museum various specimens from time to time, birds that he believed might be especially desired. Among his effects I find formal acknowledgments from the Smithsonian Institution, one, under date of April 18, 1889, listing "a goose supposed to be a hybrid between *Branta canadensis hutchinsi* and *Chen caerulescens*," another, April 8, 1890, mentioning "a series of U. S. water fowl (ducks, geese and mergansers) in the flesh." Another gift of later years was the puzzling hummingbird that afterward became the type of *Atthis morcomi* Ridgway.

For a long time after leaving England correspondence was continued with different British ornithologists. To Gatcombe there were sent thrilling accounts of new birds, new experiences and wonderful shooting. Letters were exchanged, too, with Howard Saunders, for whom Mr. Morcom had always an intense admiration. One such letter written in February, 1887, may be inserted here, if for no other reason because of the information it contains of the authorship of a review in the *Ibis* of the first edition of the A. O. U. Check-List.

Dear Mr. Morcom,

Your letter of the 5th ulto was shortly followed by the box of bird skins, which I examined, and as there was nothing amongst them to tempt me to avail myself of your kind offer, I took the entire contents down to the British Museum. You may perhaps have received an official letter of thanks as this was a long time ago.

I envy you the power of acquiring the root of all evil, but it is to be hoped that you will not do as so many of our Indian officers and civilians do: stop a little too long in harness. I have just lost two good friends that way.

You ask what I think of A. O. U. Code and C. list. See the 'Ibis' review of it which is far more gently worded than it would have been had I not visited the U. S. and learned to like many of the authors. Stejneger is a nuisance in this respect, although personally I like him much.

Thanks for your excellent photograph. I hope a letter of mine has not gone astray, but you do not mention it, so I do, because I am such a bad correspondent that I cannot afford to lose the credit of a single letter!

I have not heard from Gatcombe lately; my own fault, no doubt. That's a horrid business of the train at White River, and coming so close on this other, too. Matters look black over here, but good things keep up their price.

Yours very truly

Howard Saunders

? Can it be that you do not see the *Ibis*? !

Saunders and P. L. Sclater both visited Mr. Morcom during their trip to America in 1884. In 1896 there was correspondence with J. H. Gurney regarding the California Condor. The Morcom collection contained two Condor eggs, of which Gurney desired photographs for the Norwich Museum. These, of course, were supplied.

In the fall of 1885 the Swarth families, accompanied by Mr. Morcom, made their first visit to Los Angeles, remaining there until late in the spring of 1886. He had then his first experience of California Quail shooting, magnificent sport in those days, with some duck shooting on historic Nigger Slough; a little bird collecting was also accomplished. Of greater importance was the contact made with Frank Stephens, whom he sent on a collecting trip that lasted from April 1 to July 1, 1886. During that period Stephens crossed the Colorado Desert from Palm Springs to Yuma, and visited also San Gorgonio Pass, the San Bernardino Mountains and the Mojave Desert. He made a magnificent collection of birds which formed the basis for a report that was published in the Bulletin of the Ridgway Ornithological Club, referred to above. This was the beginning of a strong friendship, for though the two men did not meet very often, Mr. Morcom to the end of his life cherished the acquaintance and never lost an opportunity of praising Frank Stephens, both for his personality and his achievements.

When the results of Stephens' field work were received a generous selection therefrom was sent to the British Museum. At about the same time he purchased from Stephens the type specimen of the recently described *Colinus ridgwayi* and sent that to the British Museum also. There are few bird species the description of which has aroused more acrimonious published discussion than in the case of this very distinct and attractive quail. Anyone interested in the historical side of ornithology could spend some pleasurable hours in reading in chronological order the various contemporary papers on this subject, written by several individuals and published in several different journals.

The period from the summer of 1886 to the end of 1891 was spent in Chicago. For two or three years his collection received a good deal of attention; but business responsibilities became heavier as time passed, becoming eventually so burdensome as to leave little time and less energy for recreation. His health visibly failed, and when he finally sold his business, at the end of 1891, he was on the verge of a serious nervous and physical collapse. In the interim the southern California "boom" of the eighties had waxed and waned. Mr. Morcom and the Swarths had all acquired real estate during their first visit to Los Angeles, but had sold most of it a little later, being of the very small minority that profited in that extraordinary episode. So the charm of the country remained with no bitter alloy of resentment, and a general return to California was decided upon.

It was a very quiet and subdued California indeed, southern California of the early nineties, and we settled down in a country-side, at the western edge of Los Angeles, where grain fields which had been real-estate "sub-divisions" were checkered with cement sidewalks and rows of shade trees; where stately mansions stood empty far from any community; and where rusty railroad tracks extended for miles to pleasant but deserted termini. "Business" was given up, once and for all, and the course of his life now was not unlike what it might have been in a quiet English village.

I (the writer of these lines) was in the grammar school stage. I could not remember a time when I had not had the run of rooms where bird skins and birds' eggs were being handled, I had always had available books about natural history, and, altogether, to investigate animal life, particularly birds, seemed not merely obvious but the inevitable course of existence. I learned to make bird skins of a sort and thus became useful, for Mr. Morcom never did make a satisfactory specimen. The surrounding country was surprisingly rich in bird life and we explored it together. My own routine, followed for some years, was to arise at dawn and

take a two-hour walk before breakfast and departure for school. Whatever I shot was placed on Mr. Morcom's study table for inspection; then, with occasional additions of his own shooting during the day, examined by us together on my return in the afternoon, and skinned by myself before the day was over. Together we learned California birds, one by one, with the aid of an excellent library.

The British Museum "Catalogue of Birds" was on his shelves, complete so far as issued, and the handling of these volumes was, for me, in itself such training as I could not otherwise have obtained. For rough-and-ready identification, though, our stand-by's were Baird, Brewer and Ridgway's "Birds of North America," Cooper's "Ornithology" (with colored illustrations), and the octavo edition of Audubon's "Birds of America." Say what you will of "keys" and other such aids to identification, there is nothing to equal good colored pictures! And so, species by species, the middle-aged man and the youngster learned to recognize the birds under a variety of circumstances. One could never forget, for example, the Wren-tit and the Black-headed Grosbeak, after having found unfinished nests in distant Laurel Cañon, and then enduring the nerve-racking wait, counting the days until it would be time to go and collect these heretofore unknown marvels.

Our collecting grounds were varied. A narrow-gauge "dummy line," occasionally in operation, terminated near a cross-roads post-office labelled "Hollywood," and the brush-covered hills and cañons nearby were thoroughly explored. In the mountains behind Pasadena, Millard's Cañon and the Arroyo Seco were most readily accessible from Los Angeles. Along the sea shore, Santa Monica, Redondo, San Pedro, and Long Beach were small communities, separated by many miles of intervening beaches that were ordinarily deserted except for an occasional fisherman. The cross-roads signal station Cerritos, on the Long Beach railroad, was the gateway to an enormous area of willow-grown bottom lands that had a very distinctive avifauna. But the place he loved best was the San Fernando Valley, an ideal quail country and a region that never ceased to yield surprising novelties so long as natural conditions were suffered to remain. The immediate environs of our home supplied the subject matter for the present writer's first published writings; our joint observations thereabout materialized in the inevitable local list, this entitled "Avifauna of a 100-acre ranch."

While attending school in Los Angeles I soon became acquainted with other boys who also collected birds and eggs and who were to constitute some of the first membership of the Cooper Club. These new acquaintances came home with me, they were cordially received, and friendships were then made that endured throughout Mr. Morcom's life time. He was sympathetic toward our efforts in forming first the Southern California Natural History Society, and later the Cooper Ornithological Club, though he did not join the latter club until years later, and he was skeptical as to the possibility of supporting a journal. The "Bulletin of the Ridgway Ornithological Club" had not been a financial success, and he had been called upon to help Taylor with the "Nidiologist" and Hoffman with the short-lived "Avifauna," so that although when the time came he contributed to the new "Bulletin of the Cooper Ornithological Club" it was without undue optimism as to its future.

In the early nineties A. M. Shields, an insurance broker in Los Angeles, was energetically building up a collection of birds' eggs, and he and Mr. Morcom soon became acquainted. In 1895 Shields employed O. W. Howard and H. G. Rising to undertake a trip to the Coast Ranges of San Luis Obispo County after the nest of the California Condor. The trip was successful (see *Nidiologist*, vol. 2, 1895, pp. 148-150) and an egg collected, but in the meantime Shields found that the

expense was more than he cared to assume (those were "hard times" in California) so Mr. Morcom took over that responsibility, and, later, the results of the trip. At about the same time he acquired a second Condor's egg from H. R. Taylor, but the particulars of this deal I never heard; it was doubtless incidental to financing of the "Nidiologist."

In 1895 we began to discuss Arizona as a collecting ground, and correspondence ensued with Major Bendire, who urged the Huachuca Mountains as by far the most promising section for exploration. The trip was planned and carried through to a satisfactory conclusion. Four of us participated, O. W. Howard, W. B. Judson, H. G. Rising and myself; the time occupied, February 29 to July 20. We drove from Los Angeles across the deserts to our destination, but returned by train. As a result of the summer's experiences, Howard returned to Arizona that fall, and remained resident there for most of the time during the next few years. I, myself, with Mr. Morcom's assistance, made collecting trips to Arizona from time to time, gathering specimens and data for a list of the birds of the territory, which he was urging me to write.

He was anxious to see me settled in museum work, but public natural history museums were non-existent in California at that time. So, in 1904, when he made another trip to England, he took me with him to Chicago, and in some way best known to himself saw me established as an assistant in the Field Museum. This marked the end of our joint field excursions, and it was, in fact, near the end of his own active work. Not that he did not remain physically sound for many years more, but the country about Los Angeles was changing rapidly, and the particular sections that he favored were soon altered beyond recognition. Shooting in southern California was no longer a sport that could appeal to one who had known former conditions. Then, too, with the passing years he lost the urge to kill for sport; in fact, taking life for any purpose became increasingly distasteful. He had always encouraged birds about the house, and this interest was never lost.

Ever since retirement from business he had been devoted to tennis and he continued playing for many years after shooting was given up. Golf, too, attracted his attention when the game began to factor as an important element in American life, but it did not make the continued appeal of tennis. As actual collecting of birds and eggs was gradually abandoned he exerted himself even more than heretofore to keep in touch with others who were doing active field work. He attended Cooper Club meetings regularly during this period, serving as president of the Southern Division from January, 1907, until the end of 1912. He was elected an Honorary Member of the Cooper Club, November 30, 1922. It was a matter of pride with him that his set of the *Bulletin of the Nuttall Ornithological Club* and the *Auk* was obtained by subscription dating back to the first issue of the *Bulletin*. He became an Associate of the American Ornithologists' Union in 1886; in later years he became an Honorary Life Associate. In 1929 his collection of bird skins, some 3,000 in number, was donated to the California Academy of Sciences; he consequently was declared a Patron of the Academy.

The last ten years of Mr. Morcom's life witnessed a gradual cessation of activities, a gradual, almost imperceptible, physical decline. Always enjoying good health, he was resentful even of the suggestion of consultation with a physician; the even tenor of his existence during these later years was probably instrumental in his continued freedom from serious illness. Even at the end there was no definite disease, but a final slipping into unconsciousness, of a mind too weary to remain longer awake.

Mr. Morcom's greatest contribution toward ornithology lies in his aid and encouragement to others in the accomplishment of what they might not otherwise have done. In the case of my own efforts in this field, whatever the results achieved the opportunity came from him. Let this writing be my testimony thereto.

California Academy of Sciences, San Francisco, September 1, 1933.

AN ABNORMAL LITTLE FLYCATCHER

WITH TWO ILLUSTRATIONS

By WALTER W. BENNETT

Counting on the fingers of one hand, it only takes a few digits to number strange albino birds seen during his whole lifetime by almost any one ornithologist. So few are their numbers and so little understood are they that ornithological literature on the subject is far from replete. Hence, this study.

The uncommon attracts attention. One of the strange birds of the season of 1932 in Yosemite National Park, California, was a Little Flycatcher (*Empidonax traillii brewsteri*) that was not like others of her kind. If she had been rightly created, her colors would have been dull—harmonious with the willows she occupied not far from the foot of Yosemite Falls. She would have been rather olive above and whitish below, with light eye ring and wing bars. But she differed—because the crown, an area in front of the eye to the bill, and the auriculars were largely white. The nape and rest of the plumage were like others of the species. The eye was normal.

The cause of this white is not easily to be determined. It might have been partial albinism that was hereditary, transmitted by a parent that had this trait. Or it might have been caused by some disease that turned the particular feathers white just as the hair of a man may sometimes change prematurely. The white did, however, indicate that the color pigment usually present in feathers was lacking in part of the head plumage. The difference this white made in the life of the bird was, perhaps, worth noting.

She was discovered and shown to the writer June 30, 1932, together with her nest which contained four eggs. The bird's mate was apparently perfectly normal as to plumage; she was on the nest at the time. The nest was about five feet high in the vertical crotch of a small willow tree on an island bounded on one side by the swiftly flowing Merced River and on the other by overflow some three feet deep from high waters of the same stream. The nest was apparently the usual structure in size, shape and composition. There was another Little Flycatcher nest some hundred yards downstream, used by birds of normal colors which gave a good comparison in this study.

The first thing noted in approaching the nest was how conspicuously the white head gleamed in the sunlight. Normally the color of flycatchers is so dark as to constitute splendid protective coloration. It must have made her presence on the nest very evident to enemies and how she had escaped hawks and owls was a miracle, as both hunters were present.

The next peculiar circumstance was her extreme nervousness and great activity after leaving the nest. The bird could not sit still longer than a few seconds, but was continually darting here and there in seeming excitement. Day after day the