

## CALIFORNIA CUCKOO IN THE SAN BERNARDINO VALLEY, CALIFORNIA

WITH ONE ILLUSTRATION

By WILSON C. HANNA

It was my good fortune and pleasure to live in the San Bernardino valley when there was always a substantial stream of water in Warm Creek and when the Santa Ana River had some surface flow most of the year. Both of the streams flowed generally toward the southwest and were between San Bernardino and Redlands, the creek being north of the river. The creek joined the river at Colton and the stream then continued south of Colton and on west of Riverside. The heavy floods of some winters spread water over large areas and provided miles of cottonwood and willow thickets along both streams. It was a delightful place for birds and an ideal one for the California Cuckoo (*Coccyzus americanus occidentalis*). In fact, it was in a willow tree here that Frank Stephens first found this species nesting in 1882 (Bendire, Life Histories of North American Birds, vol. 2, 1895, p. 25).

In contrast with those good old times we now have very little water in Warm Creek and seldom any surface water in the Santa Ana River, the large thickets have been replaced by farms and pastures, the trees cut down, and the evergrowing population has crowded in on the old haunts of the cuckoos to such an extent that if they come here now at all they must be exceedingly rare. I have seen none in over four years. Forty and more years ago most of the boys had collections of eggs and we all were acquainted with the cuckoo, most of us having an egg or so. I remember that I paid Wesley H. Beach, an older boy, fifty cents for my first egg and as this was exactly twice as much as my daily wage as errand boy at the fruit cannery it is evident that I considered this kind of egg to be rare even then.

My experience with the California Cuckoo in this valley indicates that it nested only between about 850 feet and 1100 feet above sea level and never more than a few hundred yards from water; in fact I have never seen the bird outside of this range. Ideal thickets for nesting seemed to be damp willow thickets mixed with cottonwood trees and with heavy underbrush of nettles, wild-grape vines, and cat-tails. Among abundant nesting birds in these thickets with the cuckoo were usually Western Traill Flycatcher, Willow Goldfinch, Russet-backed Thrush, Black-headed Grosbeak, California Yellow Warbler, California Least Vireo, San Diego Song Sparrow, Coast Bush-tit, Long-tailed Chat, San Diego Towhee, Black-chinned Hummingbird, San Diego Red-wing, Western Mourning Dove, House Finch, and, in more recent years, the Dwarf Cowbird. Among the mammals were rabbits and skunks, the latter not being as common as we thought.

Mr. Fred Frazer has given me great assistance in locating nests of the California Cuckoo. Our usual procedure was to go into thickets that looked promising and listen for the cuckoo as we looked for the nests. If we heard a cuckoo we made a most diligent search for the nest and if not we moved on to another thicket. The sound of a cuckoo was, we thought, like the rapid pulling of corks out of bottles and we were often surprised to find that the bird was not far away when the sound actually seemed to be distant. The only other call we noticed the birds give was heard once when a bird flushed to the ground crying rapidly like a cat and at the same time feigning an injury. We could not find nests by seeing birds go to them; but their excited actions often indicated that a nest was near and encouraged us to go through the shrubbery infested with caterpillars, which sometimes raised lasting welts on our arms and necks that were not soon forgotten. Numerous other birds' nests were examined

in these thickets and in no case did we find any cuckoo eggs in them, or damage that we could attribute to the cuckoo; neither did we ever find the cuckoo using an old nest of another bird, with the possible exception of a dove. We never found any cowbird's eggs in a nest of the cuckoo.

I have rather complete notes on twenty-four nests that I have examined in the field, six along Warm Creek and eighteen along the Santa Ana River, and with two exceptions all were in willow trees. In one case the nest was 11 feet up in an alder tree next to the trunk, and in the other case 30 feet up in a cottonwood tree on top of a bare limb partly supported by a few twigs and therefore conspicuous. The last mentioned nest was ten feet higher than any other nest I have seen. Six of the nests in willows were either partly supported by or covered with wild grape vines, another nest was well concealed in the center of live mistletoe, while still another was well hidden in poison oak that was growing over the dead willow tree. A few nests were placed next to the trunks of trees, but by far the most common location was well out on a horizontal or leaning limb. The average height above ground or water was less than thirteen feet and two were only four feet up. A good supply of rope and a ladder were necessary for examining some of the nests without disturbing them or the surroundings.

Nests were always loose structures, of coarse twigs for a foundation, sometimes with a little superimposed grape-vine bark, cottonwood bark, or rootlets. In some cases there was no other lining and eggs could be seen through the bottom of the nest; but usually there were fresh or old leaves, bark strips, or willow cotton. In only one nest was there a feather in the lining. Often the nests were much longer in one dimension than the other, in one case four inches wide and twelve inches long. The average outside diameter was 8.2 inches, inside diameter 2.6 inches, outside depth 2.7 inches, and inside depth 0.8 inches.

The eggs have thin, dull shells and are pale niagara green in color, without markings, except sometimes for a faintly mottled appearance. They vary in size and shape, often in the same nest. The most common shape was elliptical oval but in some one end was more pointed. From two to seven eggs have been found per nest, with an average of 3.96. The most common numbers were three and four and there are single records each of six and seven. The earliest nesting date that I have is May 29 (1923), the latest is July 10 (1921), and the average is June 23. Eggs in a nest often show different degrees of incubation. The average weight of ninety eggs was 9.76 grams. The smallest egg was in a set of five with these weights in grams: 10.11, 9.84, 8.57, 7.96, 3.54. The largest egg was also in a set of five with these weights: 12.64, 12.35, 11.86, 9.24, 8.76; the largest egg measured 1.37 by 1.02 inches.

The most unusual set of seven eggs deserves more than passing mention and it is still a mystery to me how such a nest could hold the eggs. Mr. Fraser discovered the nest when we were searching along the Santa Ana River, on June 20, 1924. The nest was only four feet above water, on a horizontal limb of willow sapling among cat-tails. The weights of the eggs in this set were 12.31, 10.67, 10.37, 9.91, 9.47, 9.06, 8.79 grams, and the largest egg measured 1.37 by 1.02 inches. The photograph showing this nest and set of eggs could not be taken until they were removed from the tree (fig. 19). This set and nest were collected and preserved.

Some brooding birds would not flush until twigs near the nest were moved, but I was never able to touch a bird. Most of the birds flushed when the nest was approached within a few feet and three resorted to the "broken wing" deception often practiced by doves. Birds usually returned to the vicinity of the nest within a few minutes after leaving and they were often joined by their mates in making some fuss

in the near-by shrubbery. While birds upon flushing from nests often slipped to the ground, I do not remember seeing them on the ground at other times. They are usually seen among the branches of trees, but one I saw perched on a high telephone wire.

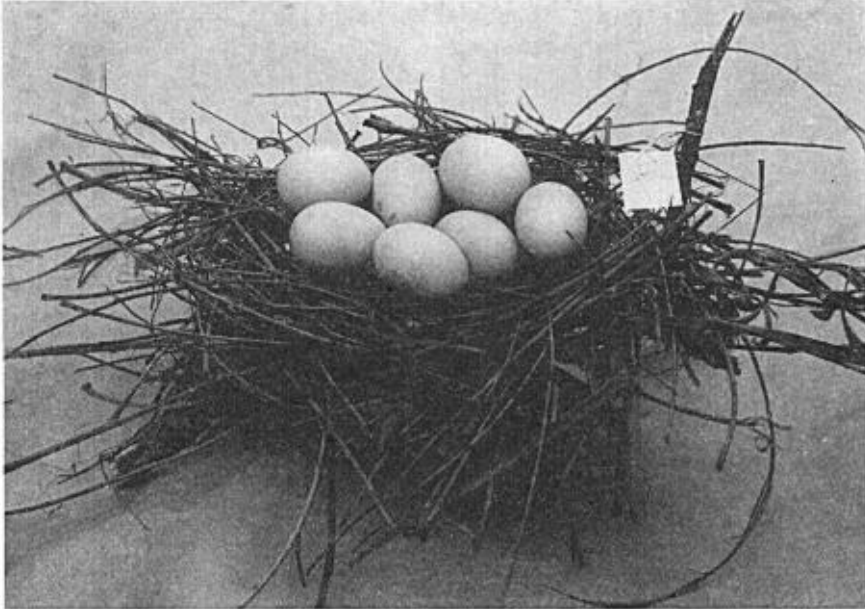


Fig. 19. Nest and eggs of California Cuckoo, taken June 20, 1924, at Colton, California.

One late afternoon Mr. Frazer and I, when in a mixed grove along Warm Creek, had an opportunity to see some of the courting actions. We had been hearing the cuckoos and had searched in vain for the nest; finally seated on the ground we wondered where the nest could be. We would hear one cuckoo and then another at different points; then one bird came and perched on a horizontal limb about fifteen feet above us and gave its usual call which was answered by its mate. Soon both birds were side by side on the same limb and the male mounted the female. After what seemed a very long time I took my watch to time them and we both agreed that the coition had lasted about eight minutes. The male returned to its perch on the limb for a few minutes and then mounted several times but for shorter periods. During this activity they did not utter their calls but began again after flying back to other parts of the thicket on their quest for caterpillars. We could not find the nest and thought that it had not yet been constructed.

It is my opinion that the greatest enemy of this bird in this vicinity is man who, by clearing the land and using the water, has destroyed its food supply and breeding territory. Wind probably destroyed a number of nests, or at least accounted for some eggs that were found on the ground. A few nests were probably upset by cattle pushing through the thickets and pulling at grape vines growing over willow saplings. We blamed cats for the lack of birds in some likely looking thickets, but we had no positive proof for this. It seems improbable that the California Cuckoo can ever again occur plentifully here as formerly, and I sincerely hope that other places inhabited by this interesting bird will long remain suitable for it.

*Colton, California, September 10, 1936.*