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THE TURQUOISE-BROWED MOTMOT

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To come out of the dark interior of a Mayan building and to see twelve Turquoise-browed Motmots (*Eumomota superciliosa*) perched in one small tree is a memorable ornithological experience. It was thus that I was first introduced to this handsome species at Chichén Itzá in Yucatán. The motmots share the unusual nesting opportunities afforded by these Mayan ruins with Cave and Rough-winged swallows (*Petrochelidon fulva* and *Stelgidopteryx ruficollis*), and like them, here at least, can be said to be colonial. Over the surrounding flat, arid plain covered with deciduous forest, where the land is not cultivated, these motmots are less concentrated but are by no means uncommon.

Like the Russet-crowned Motmot (*Momotus mexicanus*) of México and the arid interior of Guatemala, the Turquoise-browed Motmot is a confiding species of dry regions. According to Paynter (Peabody Mus. Nat. Hist. Bull., 9, 1955:158), it makes contact with the Blue-crowned Motmot (*Momotus momota*) where the low scrub forest intergrades with higher, wetter forest. Skutch (Animal Kingdom, 61, no. 1, 1958:8), writes that it mixes more freely, as might be expected from the greater similarity in respective habitats, with the Russet-crowned Motmot in the Motagua Valley of Guatemala.

Of the eight species comprising this distinctive and attractive Neotropical family, the Turquoise-browed Motmot is the most beautiful in color (see frontispiece) and its racquet-shaped tail the most highly developed. The denuded portions of the middle rectrices begin about midway or at the end of the next longest pair. The terminal paddles are larger than those of other species as the webs are longer at the tip than toward the base of the same feathers. In the field these feathers look slightly recurved. The turquoise superciliaries are so lustrous that in sunlight they seem almost white, and so elongated that they obscure the forehead and most of the crown when not compressed.

Highly colored and unretiring as they are, these motmots are often surprisingly hard to locate. In the nesting season at least, they are as much in evidence by sound as by sight. From the thorny brush their distinctive voice is heard—a slightly upslurred *quark*, fairly loud though low in pitch and husky in quality, a rather fluty sound as of two notes given together. When excited they have a longer call.

Like other motmots this species sits motionless for long periods except for an occasional jerky tick-tocking of its tail or a rapid shift to face the other way, effected by whipping its tail up and over the branch with an easy flourish. When finally it darts away, it flies low and swiftly for no great distance in long shallow undulations.

Ordinarily these motmots dig burrows about five to eight feet long in a bank where the identically marked female deposits four roundish white eggs in late April or early May. The pair shares incubation for about three weeks. The young, born naked and blind, leave the nest in about a month—a nest by that time verminous, fouled with droppings and littered with the regurgitated remains of past meals. Upon their emergence, writes Skutch (*op. cit.*, 1958:11), the plumage of the young birds "is as fresh and neat as if they had grown up in a nursery that had been kept scrupulously clean. One marvels that such loveliness should have come into being in a putrid hole in the ground."

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