

GENERAL NOTES

An unusual colony of Little Blue Herons.—There is an unusual colony of Little Blue Herons (*Florida caerulea*) on the farm of Mr. John Horner, in Mississippi County, Missouri, about 7 miles east of Sikeston, that should be of interest to ornithologists traveling in the midwest in early summer.

The colony is in a rectangular pine grove measuring less than 200 by 300 yards situated in the middle of Mr. Horner's farm and almost precisely in the northwest angle of the junction of U.S. 62 and County Road O. The soil is sandy and dry; the fields surrounding the grove are sometimes planted to crops and sometimes used to graze cattle. The Mississippi River, about 8 miles away, and the many drainage and irrigation ditches in the area apparently provide ample food for the herons, who seem contented to roost in this fairly populous neighborhood.

For the past 3 years the population of the heronry has been fairly stable, containing more than 1,000 breeding pairs and perhaps almost half again as many nonmated sub-adults. About 80% of the birds are Little Blue Herons and the rest are Common Egrets (*Casmerodius albus*) and Black-crowned Night Herons (*Nycticorax nycticorax*). In the summer of 1963 about a dozen pairs each of Snowy Egrets (*Leucophoyx thula*) and Cattle Egrets (*Bulbulcus ibis*) nested in the pine grove. The former had been seen in 1961 but no nest was located.

The heronry has been in existence for about 10 years, but until 6 or 7 years ago it was fairly small. There was then a rapid increase for several years until it reached its present, seemingly stable, size.

On my first visit to the heronry, 9 June 1961, I calculated the number of birds by estimating the number of active nests. This was the easier because the grove consists of pines, about 20 feet high, planted in regular rows. There were no nests in the two outer rows all around and only a few in the third row; thereafter the nests became numerous until, in the center of the grove, there were three and four nests in every tree and five in some. I eventually arrived at an estimation of 1,000 to 1,200 active nests of all kinds, and a total of 4,000 to 4,500 birds of all kinds; breeding adults, subadults, and nestlings.

On 6 and 7 July 1961, Lee Jenkins and William H. Elder, of the University of Missouri, visited the heronry. Dr. Elder subsequently reported his observations (1961, *Bluebird*, 28:13). The population they obtained by counting the evening flights into the grove corresponded closely with that which I had determined by estimating the number of active nests. Both estimates are decidedly conservative.

The herons begin to arrive at the pine grove about the first of April and continue to build up for about 3 weeks. The eggs hatch about the third week of May, and the heronry remains at a peak of activity until about the middle of July. By the end of July things are relatively quiet in the pine grove, although quite a few herons are still present and some remain in the area until the end of the summer. They do not seem to be especially troubled by the mere presence of humans, and predation is apparently slight. The loss of nestlings that fall from nests or fledglings that wander away from the nest area and starve does not seem excessive.

Although the herons seem to thrive in their unusual location and their number has apparently stabilized for the time being, the future of this colony does not seem especially bright. The birds are a nuisance to Mr. Horner, even if he does regard them with a certain pleasure and pride. He has in the past contemplated some legal method of breaking up the heronry. The birds are injuring the trees in the grove, and they are a temptation to trespassers who may damage fences. It is unfortunate that some organization such as

the National Audubon Society can not be persuaded to give Mr. Horner some kind of aid or at least moral support.—CLELL T. PETERSON, *Murray State College, Murray, Kentucky, 21 February 1964.*

Stylized behavior in the Turkey Vulture's courtship dance.—Mating among Turkey Vultures (*Cathartes aura*) is often preceded by a gregarious "dance." V. Coles (1938, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Cornell University) has described such a dance: a number of vultures gather on a cleared area where they go through a series of hops with wings outstretched; one bird hops toward its neighbor, which in turn hops until it approaches a third, etc. E. L. Tyson (MS.) has described this act as one bird lowering its head and chasing another, which in turn goes through the same actions to chase a third, etc.; meanwhile, other vultures perched in nearby trees drop down to join the dance, while some dancers break away.

In early March 1961, the authors came upon such a gregarious dance of the Turkey Vulture on a sandbar in a small Florida Panhandle river. The birds flew away immediately as we approached them. However, we examined the "dancing ground" and discovered evidence that these dances may be much more elaborately stylized than had been suspected.

Examination of the vultures' well-marked tracks on the sand disclosed two discrete, contiguous circles which formed a figure eight. One of the circles was about 6 feet in diameter, the other about 8 feet in diameter. They were well defined, with marks of trailing wings at the periphery. Each trail was approximately 15 inches wide. There were no tracks visible within the circles and very few at the outer margins. The general impression was that vultures participating in the dance obviously performed within the 15-inch width of these contiguous circles, neither breaking into the center nor standing close to the sidelines.—HORACE LOFTIN, *Florida State University Canal Zone Program, Ft. Clayton, C.Z.*; AND E. L. TYSON, *Dept. Biological Sciences, Florida State University, Tallahassee, 4 June 1964.*

American Oystercatcher and Black Skimmer nesting on salt marsh.—On 30 June 1963, my wife and I discovered a pair of American Oystercatchers (*Haematopus palliatus*) nesting on a salt-marsh island that was devoid of the sand substrate usually associated with this species. The island, called locally Ham Island, is located in Little Egg Harbor Bay, Ocean County, New Jersey. The nest was found in the upper driftline of dead grasses and eelgrass about 15 feet from the western edge of the island. The drift was situated atop *Spartina* grasses, which in turn, were growing in salt-marsh peat. There was no sand or similar material anywhere in the area. The nest itself consisted of a very slight depression in the drift grasses and contained two eggs. Common Terns were nesting in similar situations about 35 feet away.

We returned to the island on 14 July. The birds were stationed about 100 feet north of the nest location and were very agitated at our presence. The nest was empty. Despite considerable searching, we were unable to locate any young birds.

During June and July, we visited most of the islands between Barnegat and Beach Haven Inlets. At a number of these we discovered Black Skimmers (*Rynchops nigra*) also nesting in the driftline over salt-marsh grasses without association with sand. The nests were slight depressions in the drift material. This type of nest site was even used on islands which contained some areas of sand beach in addition to the salt marsh. It was also used on islands composed entirely of salt marsh. The skimmers were successful in hatching and raising young in these locations.