

An Amateur Experience and Observations of a Nesting
Red Eye Vireo

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Since this is the story of an amateur's first attempt to study nesting birds, many observations and comments will no doubt appear inquispicious to the professional ornithologist.

My first observation was that birds build their nests without regard to the wishes of the student who ~~wishes~~ ^{desires} to study their activities. Finding a nest ideally located, in perhaps possible but not when some nine other students are staking out claims to nests by right of discovery.

I thought I had located an ideal nest when I discovered a Kingfisher hole in a bank opposite the entomology laboratory. There was a fine view from a large window only some 40 feet away from the nest. Kingfisher nests however are a problem since all that can be seen is a black hole. My attempts to enlarge this hole and to straighten it resulted in the death of the young birds as I discovered later by digging down the side of the bank at a point about six feet from the entrance. ~~Enter~~ The possibilities are that in attempting to alter the burroughs I loosened stones in the sand bank which fell on the young birds and killed them. What was the cause the old bird abandoned the nest and I started a search for another.

A report from a fellow student next took me to Bryant's Bog where a Purple Finch was nesting about 4 feet from the ground. This appalled me because I know the Purple Finch in Ohio only as a migrant visitor. The distance from camp; the fact that the owner of the bog seemed not to favor the idea of a tent on her property and the difficulty of erecting a stand via bog all made the necessity of finding a more suitable nest for study.

For several days I had been hearing a Red Eye Vireo

singing persistently and lustily in the tree just back of my cabin. After many hours of watching and inquiry from many students I finally located the nest about 90 feet up in a small maple tree. The nest almost overhung the path and was just in the process of construction. The rim was in and secure but the bottom very thin. Most of the trimmings of Vireo were in place.

I perched myself behind a nearby cluster of bushes and as it was Sunday spent a good part of the day trying to find out how Vireo nests were built. Just once during this time did one of the birds return to the nest. It brought no building material to and about all I could make out of the visit was a thorough inspection first with one eye then with the other.

The following day - Monday - I was busy all day and visited the nest only to make a casual inspection. To all appearance the nest was impuished and I began thinking that once more I'd have to begin my search for another nest. Three days later I secured a ladder and discovered two Vireo eggs and a cow bird egg. This latter was removed.

From this time until time for the eggs to hatch I observed the nest daily from behind the bushes nearby. Either I did not spend enough time at the nest or my presence disturbed the bird for on only one occasion did I see both birds in the nesting tree at the same time. A small bird sang regularly several hundred feet away but I was never able to identify this bird as the mate for the faithful bird on the nest. Students passed the nest every few minutes - sometimes singing - sometimes gossiping and not infrequently on the rim. But this human activity did not attract any more attention than the activity of other animals in the adjoining trees and on the ground below.

In fact she - I presume it was the female - was so fearless that I could climb a ladder and stand independently within two feet of her. On one occasion I was able to touch her tail but a flash and she was gone.

A platform was erected a little at a time. A white square - large, blind erected and on the 13th day after the discovery of the egg the first one hatched - The next day the other egg hatched - Both birds emerged from the shell at night - a diligent search failed to turn up the shells -

From this time for nine days the birds were observed at periods of various length of time throughout the day - The longest period spent in the blind at one time was four hours.

The young birds were helpless - at first they could not raise their heads. During this time they lay on their backs and held their mouth open for food every time a wattle of the leaves stimulated their desire for food.

The food for the very young birds must have been small insects or larva for even tho I was within three feet of the nest all I could see was the act of feeding and not the food - The second day, however, small green worms - or parts of worms were brought at frequent intervals - When the bird took up the task of feeding it was evident that she did a thorough job and on one occasion returned with a nice juicy green caterpillar to find both young sound asleep. A peck from one eye looking sideway down and in a flash the worm was eaten by the parent bird, which quickly settled on the nest - where she sat until my patience wore thin and I left the blind -

There were certain periods of the day when feeding the young seemed to be a scheduled duty - Morning early - about ten o'clock and again and finally about four in the afternoon. On one occasion the nest was visited during a shower but ~~the~~ steady rain during what had already been

observed on a feeding period - 4 P.M. The nest was deserted and seven minutes elapsed before one of the birds returned with a worm - always a green worm - Feeding continued until the young would take no more. In spite of the rain, I doubt whether the young suffered since a heavy fringe of broad maple leaves sheltered the nest. It would be interesting to know whether Vireos look for a roof when they select a site for a nest. Something other than factors that human eyes and ~~of~~ judgement can evaluate must have entered into the selection of this particular branch out of the many thousand apparently more secluded and substantial sites.

From this study - my first - I have learned, I believe a few valuable lessons for future use. First of these is that the desire to locate the bird in the nest is an amateur mark of ignorance - The desire to get close to birds is an almost uncontrollable one for this individual - But it is a desire that defeats its own end. I could not see the tree - I could not observe the action of the bird except when it was on or very near the nest. I am sure that one of the parents - I think the male - remained a stranger to me because of my intrusion. He would circle about the bird even above it and ~~out~~ on one occasion I am positive he pecked through the ventilation vent in the roof above. ~~the~~ Hence I found myself the object observed rather than being the observer.

Second I am convinced that handling the young is a factor in causing them to leave the nest early. Something seems to change all at once - and what had been a helpless baby before weighing and massaging turns into a stubborn and determined boat. Crawling and clambering to the rim of the nest he tetter for a brief instant and with feeble wings jumps for a nearby twig which he

misses and a dull thud announces his contact with the ground. He squawks and chirps and keeps in continual motion ~~with~~ in circles until a wise parent orders him to shut up. He ~~then~~ obeys and it takes him time to find the crouching youngster. Returned to the nest the same performance is repeated - a half-naked, immature bird unable to fly ventures suddenly into the brush and weeds while above a scolding parent gives orders in one breath and attempts to attract attention to ~~himself~~ himself and away from the young with the nest -

I discovered ~~the~~ in this one case at least - that one bird - the male I think - makes much ado and does little besides clean the nest. He regularly followed his pitiful spouse to the nest empty mouthed himself to devour what appeared to be half digested fecal sacs. These sacs are voided at feeding time a worm in at one end and a sac out the other - On one occasion when ~~the~~ I reached out and removed the sac the male appeared to think that something was surely missing. He remained on the nest for some time, peering deep into ^{it} and going so far as to catch hold of parts of the nest and attempting to pull it loose - He may have gone without food for that evening, and yet I wonder what is the cause of this strange habit? Surely more food is not sufficient reason. What nutrient might these sacs contain that could not be secured easily from insects?

Daily gain

