

Helene Dedrick 1933

Least flycatcher

The morning of Sunday, June 24, was warm, clear, and sunny, with little if any breeze. For two hours I had, with very indifferent success, been scouring the hill above the Biological Station for just one of the many nests reported to be there. Four, to be sure, I had found, but the kingbird's nest was much too high, the cedar waxwing's nest was the especial property of a "problem student", and the other two nests were decidedly of nineteen thirty-two vintage.

But luck must turn. There in a bush, shoulder high, was a nest, - a big nest, - a solid nest, most likely a robin's nest, ideally located for study. Cautiously I approach, snapping no twigs underfoot, and found -- another empty nest! I ploughed off through the underbrush, damning my luck, birds in general, and a branch that caught my hair in particular, going to the extent of turning my head to do a thorough job of the last. And there, about ten feet in on the branch in an upward slanting crotch I saw, suspended hammock-wise, a few fresh strands of birch bark. The light of day could be seen through them, and the breeze could slightly lift them, but they were faintly suggestive of a nest, and not an old one.

When I found the strands firmly anchored by cobwebs, I silently retreated to the bush that bore the robin's nest,

settled deep in, and waited, not long. A "tsip" sounded behind me to the right, another behind me to the left. The call notes were sharp, clear, and reminded me much of the alarm notes of the song sparrow. But a song sparrow doesn't build in oak trees, and doesn't use birch bark, so I looked over the pigeon holes of my mind for birds that build with birch bark and sound like song sparrows, and found none at all. When two small dull greenish birds with two light wing bars and distinct white eye rings came into view, I felt that I had learned something new about least flycatchers, for that they obviously were.

Though the birds were aware of my proximity, as evidenced by frequent repetition of the alarm note and the circuitous method of approach to the nest, they did not seem particularly frightened, for they worked diligently all the while I remained. From the rate at which materials were brought, that is at intervals of one to two minutes, I judged that both the male and female were working. One of the birds, however, frequently mounted a dead birch about twenty feet away and energetically che-bec-ed from the topmost limb, so it may be that, as usual, the male was giving moral support only. As the work progressed I heard another quite unflycatcher-like note used only when the birds were near the nest - a single, low, sweet note. The birds seemed content, and I was content, for I did not yet know that another "problem student" had chosen least flycatchers as his particular problem.

That evening I slipped back to see whether I had disturbed or stopped building operations by my morning's ^{observation} ~~operation~~. Neither bird was in evidence, so I examined the nest and found that it was now a frail shallow cup. Some stronger fibers had been added, but little seemed accomplished for so much energetic work.

Monday offered no opportunity for observation, but on Monday evening at about seven-thirty I visited the nest again. There were no che-bees, no tsips, no low soft notes, but the nest was considerably deeper. A rim had been added above the level of the branches in which it was hung, and the whole structure was considerably reinforced. As yet there was no lining and no trimming had been added, but the resemblance to the finished nest was marked.

Tuesday was a profitable day, for the "problem student" agreed to let me use the nest, provided he could also make observations and records. An all day field trip prevented my observing the nest until seven-thirty that evening. No birds were to be seen or heard, but evidences of labor were sufficient to assure me that they had been there during the day. The nest was lined with plant down and hairs, and some hanging strips of birch bark had been added to the outside. It was complete - ready for house-keeping; so I took a large sheet of white paper, wrote my "Beware", fastened it in a prominent position and went merrily and innocently on my way expecting to find one little

white egg by Wednesday evening. Imagine my consternation on finding, on Wednesday evening, everything just as I had left it on Tuesday evening. Likewise on Thursday morning, and Thursday afternoon and Thursday evening there were no songs, no birds, no eggs. I had it all figured out by bedtime that it was the big white paper that was the root of the trouble, and nobody told me otherwise. So Friday I studied Systematic Botany.

Saturday afternoon I started out to examine the hill again for one, just one, of the rapidly mounting number of nests reported to have been seen^{there}. After an hour of so of snakily stalking "chippies" through the tall grasses, hoping they would hop onto their nests out of sheer goodness of heart, my feet took me back to the scene of my disappointment. And there, crouching on the nest and headed due northeast was the bird that had deserted, and on a limb near by was her mate. She didn't move, but he immediately flew to the dead birch and voiced with the sparrow-like "tsip" his disapproval. So, making a hasty mental note of the position of the female on the nest (I assume it was the female, for to me the birds were indistinguishable), I slipped away, fearing to discourage a good thing started.

Sunday (just a week from the time I had first noticed the nest) I spent an hour at the foot of the "robin-nest bush". It was a dull, gray, cold morning with a rather strong wind from the northeast. The bird was on the nest, heading

toward the wind, and she made no move to leave the nest during the time I was there. I neither saw nor heard her mate in the vicinity. We had a very quiet time, but I did not like to disturb her to find out whether the "blessed event" had occurred, so I left with my curiosity unsatisfied.

When on Monday evening (we were on a field trip during the day) I found her in the selfsame position with the selfsame glassy stare, and no mate in evidence, I thought it was time to encourage some nest activity, so I got two companions, a light ladder, dividers, ruler, pencil and paper, and gently but firmly suggested she leave. Which she did. Investigation revealed two small white eggs, very thin-shelled with the pinkish of the yolk glowing through. One measured .64 inches by .52 inches, and the other by inches. One was probably laid on Saturday and the other on Sunday. Knowing, from Chapman, that least flycatchers usually have three to five eggs, I assumed that the third would probably be laid before I could visit the nest the following night.

At the same time we measured the nest. The measurements which follow are fairly typical of least flycatcher nests. Outside diameter 3 inches; inside diameter $2\frac{1}{2}$ inches; outside depth $2\frac{1}{2}$ inches; inside depth $1\frac{1}{2}$ inches. The construction of the nest has already been described, but more can be said of the site. It was placed about six feet high in the crotch of two branches of a south extending limb of an oak tree, and was admirably concealed by the leaves surrounding it.

When the nest was visited on Tuesday, there was, as I had expected there would be, a third egg. But it was quite a bit larger and distinctly spotted with brown - a cowbird's egg. Whether the bird now felt satisfied that the quota of three was filled, or whether there would have been only two eggs, I don't know, but no more eggs were laid.

On Wednesday a specially constructed tower of aspen saplings, with a platform seven feet high, was erected. The actual building was done at a distance and the tower was then moved to a position southeast of the nest and four feet from it, to accustom the birds to its proximity. Although the bird now changed her general position to the south, she did not leave during the whole of the decidedly clamorous operation.

On Thursday evening the blind was moved in closer - within two and a half feet from the nest. The bird was alert but maintained her position facing us until with a thump the tower was finally placed, and then, with a frightened clatter, she left, and we did too. That afternoon I placed the canvas for the blind in a heap on the platform, and though she did not leave, I thought it better not to try her patience too far, for she had been incubating ^{the eggs} only two days and might still desert.

Saturday evening the side pieces of the blind were tacked up and on Sunday the top was adjusted. Although she was very nervous, and shifted at each stroke of the hammer, the female stuck to her post. It was now July 9, exactly two

weeks from the date on which the nest was found. For eight days I had neither seen nor heard the male. The female had been present each time the nest was visited, and assuming that she started incubating after the cowbird egg had been laid, five days of the incubation period had been completed.

I did not visit the nest again for any length of time until the following Thursday, the ninth day of incubation. The bird was still facing the blind, but was resting much higher in the nest, so that the whole edge of the wing lay along its rim. During the time I was there, she changed her position on an average of every ten minutes, moving in a clockwise direction. I was impressed at how busy she was doing nothing. She stretched her neck this way and that, plucked at her feathers, rose and settled in the nest, turned the eggs with her feet, and kept, always, a weather eye on me. Still there was no sign or sound of a mate. No bird save a cedar waxwing settled in the tree. The female was interested but unperturbed. After half an hour she silently left the nest, rising and flying off in an easterly direction, voluntarily exposing for the first time the two white and one speckled eggs. One of the flycatcher eggs seemed to be addled, but I did not at that time remove it. At the end of four minutes she returned from the north, giving the warning call described, ten times, and flitting from branch to branch about the nest. At the end of a minute the chipping ceased, and there she was,

poised on the edge of the nest. She melted into the nest and resumed her watchful waiting. Only once in the next forty-five minutes did she display any unusual interest, and that when we both heard a "che-bec" from a tree about forty feet away. But the interest did no good. The che-bec faded away in the distance instead of approaching. I wonder whether it was the missing mate.

Another fifteen minutes slipped by and then occurred an event which at the time I thought highly interesting, little suspecting that it foreshadowed tragedy for us both. The mother bird suddenly stood straight up in the nest, the better to stretch her neck far over the side and investigate the ground below. She seemed frightfully concerned, but I could hear nothing or see nothing through the knotholes of the platform and the rips in the canvas. With a beating of wings and an amount of noise that was startling in a bird so small, she plunged from the nest, and darted at the intruder, attacking him tooth, toenail, and wing, as he thoughtfully and unconcernedly ambled out along the main limb and then down the side path toward the nest. When it was apparent that the worst was about to happen, the bird gave up the attack, and retreated to a higher limb, loudly to lament the invasion of the red squirrel. The invader approached to within three inches of the nest, brightly investigated the eggs, paused a moment, and silently slipped back along the limb, jumped to the next tree, and was gone.

I breathed a sigh of relief that nature had not taken its course, at least at my nest, little realizing that the squirrel in the moment he paused had not been changing his mind but merely counting off on his fingers, "nine, ten, eleven, twelve - - -!" After a few chips from the next tree, the bird became suddenly silent, circled to the north, silently landed on the north edge of the nest, and settled on the eggs with a little hop. I waited twenty more minutes for the male to show up, and give the lady some sympathy and moral support if not food, but nothing happened. During an hour and a half, approximately, the incubating bird had left the eggs uncovered for four minutes only, and any breakfast she had must have been secured in that time.

On Friday, July 14, we sat together for an hour and looked at each other and silently communed, enjoying ourselves though the day was dark gray, drops of rain were falling, and the canvas flapped in the breeze. I thought of her husband, - that he must be dead, - that he must be a jelly fish of a bird to desert so easily, - that he must be an awful boulder, gone for eleven days and hatching about to occur! But her eye was inscrutable, and her wants apparently satisfied, for all she did was sit.

Saturday morning, when I arrived at eight twenty-five, the great event had already occurred. One of the eggs had hatched, at the end of eleven days, if my assumption concerning incubation was correct. There was one baby bird, - surprisingly

big - one white egg and one speckled egg. I marvelled at how a bird so big could come from an egg so small, but he looked weak and cold, and his mother was fussing, so I refrained from moving him. At the end of ten minutes she was still fussing, making no move to cover and warm the new born, so I sneaked away. Two hours later I came back with a companion, who was to wait a few minutes, and then noisily walk off down the trail, making the flycatcher think (since her ability at counting did not go as high as the number two) that both of us had left. If she did think that two had gone, she was sure a third party was there for it took her eight minutes of chirping and hopping to settle on the wide open mouth for which she brought no food. The young one was evidently not very comfortable to sit on for much of the next half hour was spent arranging and rearranging the contents of the nest. Both beak and feet were used in a very business-like manner, and it was probably no more comfortable for the baby than for her.

No more was she nicely settled at last than she suddenly and silently dropped straight over the edge of the nest. At the end of three minutes she chipped her way back, circled to the north, and landed on the edge of the nest. The young one made a low, sweet, *strecting* sound, - gaped, and she fed it the morsel she had brought; cramping any further desire for food by promptly squatting on it. For ten minutes she brooded and then was called to arms to defend the nest against a cedar waxwing. A few days before, when she was

incubating, a waxwing caused merely the cock of a head. Now it brought the whole bird into rapid action. She brought no food when she returned after five minutes and did not leave to forage until twenty minutes later. The young bird had been fed only twice in an hour, once toward the beginning and once toward the end of it. Again no male was present.

That night when I deemed him old enough to stand the operation, I removed what I thought was the young flycatcher and found that it was the cowbird that had hatched at the end of eleven days. The reason for my mistake was soon apparent. The shell of the cowbird egg had not been much damaged by the hatching, and it had not been removed, so that half the shell had slipped over one of the flycatcher eggs. I was very much disappointed with my infant, but weighed and measured him anyhow, and also the eggs that remained. The differences in the weights made me realize the vastness of my error, for the bird less than twenty hours old weighed 3.2 grams, and the not addled egg weighed only .8 of one gram - or only one fourth as much. The young one that would emerge in another day would, I realized, be quite a different looking thing from the dull red, gray downed affair I had in my hand.

By Sunday morning nothing had happened. Sunday afternoon brought no results. But Sunday evening, twenty-one days and ten hours after the first observation, and twelve days after incubation started, I found what I was looking for: a tiny yellowish pink creature with hoary down. There was no sign of any egg shell; and the addled egg, too, had been

removed. When I weighed the cowbird and found that it had gained almost three grams in a day, I promptly decided to do away with it, and took it down the hill to find a pail of water or a hangman. But his fate was not yet accomplished, for it was suggested that I put him in a nest of partly grown towhees; - which I gladly did.

The new little one was too brand new to handle, with his down still damp and my hands chilly in the evening air, so I left him to his mother's care until I should be able to return Monday after the field trip.

We got home at about four-thirty. Plenty of time, thought I, to see how the little one is progressing. Halfway up the hill I met Bob Brown. "I see," he said, "the baby flycatcher has disappeared and the mother bird's deserted."

"Oh, they're gone," said I, "both gone," and turning back down the path, I thought of the red squirrel pausing, counting "ten, eleven, twelve ----" before slipping down the tree.

I haven't been near the place since.