

FOR FARMERS, STOCK BREEDERS AND GARDENERS

Jack Miner And The Birds

By Jack Miner Himself—A History of This Notable Bird Lover's Life

CHAPTER XVIII HOW WILD DUCKS CONCEAL THEIR NESTS

Possibly there is none of our birds that can conceal its nest better than the wild duck. This may be due to the fact that she has to be father and mother both.

In the first place she selects a spot where the foliage, dry sticks or as herself. I once found a black duck's nest right beside an oak stump that was charred black by being partly burned away, and really if you weren't careful you might look at her all day and not see her, as she was exactly the same color.

Yes, I know there are a lot of people who will say "Oh, that just happened that way." I tell you right here it did not happen that way. This is a gift to help these creatures out, and there is no man on earth can conceal anything better than a wild duck can her nest.

An intelligent man once asked me how I hid when I hunted wild geese. I told him I covered myself with a blanket, and in a few weeks I saw him returning from a hunt carrying a red horse blanket.

After the duck has the spot selected she gathers a few twigs and so forth, but she lays the eggs right on the bare ground, going to her nest late at night and leaving long before the stars disappear in the morning.

As soon as the crows start scouring the country, she flies back to the vicinity of her nest. I have seen a duck give a crow an aerial battle three or four times a day. But of course two crows are one too many for her.

From the time she starts laying she covers the eggs very carefully with grass and sticks before she

leaves the nest, therefore they are absolutely out of sight and protected from a slight frost, such as we sometimes have after the wild ducks have started laying. When the eight to twelve eggs are laid she pulls down off her breast and covers them. Now comes the question, how can she pack these eggs in that down, and cover them with sticks and grass, and not leave a sign of down to indicate that there is a duck's nest within miles? This is certainly a piece of shrewd work.

Wild ducks seldom ever leave their nests in the daytime after they start to set. I often go back to the north pond and watch them come home to feed, just at dusk, and they are usually there at twilight in the morning. This compels me to believe they sometimes stay over all night. However I found this duck's nest, and one extremely hot day I saw her in the pond, so I slipped away with the kodak and got two photographs. After I took one, I removed the down and got another, which of course revealed the mystery. The down keeps the eggs warm until the old lady returns; you see the heat of her body gets the ground good and warm; then she packs the down carefully and firmly around the eggs, which holds the warmth there. She then puts the thatch of grass and sticks over the down and all is O.K., for she can stay away twenty-four hours if she sees fit.

Yes, we human beings invented a great thing when we produced the thermos bottle, but to the fowls of the air the invention is as old and as new as this beautiful earth.

Then when the young are hatched and old enough to catch insects, the mother starts off with her little sweethearts toddling after her in

A Dangerous Fumigant

Hydrocyanic acid gas is widely used in certain kinds of fumigation work, including grain. When inhaled it is extremely poisonous to human beings and to animals, and should be used only by experienced fumigators. In Ontario, indeed, provincial regulations require that disinfection by hydrocyanic acid, cyanogen or cyanide gas must be carried out only by operators licensed by the Ontario Department of Health. Moreover, the Dominion Entomological Branch points out, hydrocyanic acid gas, apart from its extremely dangerous character, is not very satisfactory for treating grain in bulk as it is lighter than air and does not penetrate very deeply into masses of grain.

single file toward home, where she knows she will be helped in raising her family.

Her feathers are slightly ruffled, but this is a wild duck's way when caring for its young. To me it is a beautiful sight, knowing she is on her way to the park where she will receive food and protection in time of need.

MY LAST DISTINGUISHED FAMILY OF PET DUCKS

At the present time I have only one grey duck of my own. She is pinioned and lives in the park. In the spring of 1919 she paired off with one of the wild ducks that came here, built a nest and laid eleven eggs.

I have a pair of Egyptian geese in the park, and of all the water-footed birds I know of on earth, these Egyptian geese are the worst. I know fully well I must not let this duck hatch her young there, so a few days previous to their hatching I stole the eggs and put them under a domestic fowl. She hatched the whole eleven and in about twenty-four hours I moved them all to the north pond, shutting the eleven pets in a playground about two feet square which I made in front of their own stepmother. The third day I gave them their liberty by quietly removing the three boards, but of course left the hen in the permanent coop. I sat for a few minutes and watched them as they saw water for the first time. Finally all apparently lined up along the sloping bank of the pond, looking and peering sidewise as they slowly advanced to the edge of the water, where all stood still for a few seconds, then as suddenly as anything could possibly be, they dove into the water, just like eleven frogs, and equally as quick, some of them coming up fully ten feet from shore.

The first week I fed them a little custard, then gradually tapered off to oatmeal, throwing the feed in the shallow water so they would have to tip up to get it.

They grew quite rapidly, but the thirteenth was their unlucky day for a snapping turtle took one. Fortunately three other wild ducks were raising their families there, and these old ducks gave the alarm and I arrived just in time to see this little duck's finish; but the other ten got along O.K. for that was the last meal that old moseback ever required.

In about a week I heard these old ducks' alarming cries again. I hustled back and shortened the career of another snapping turtle, but this time my nerve was not very steady and I missed his head, but the ball split the roof of his house, causing it to leak, letting in the water that gradually pushed his life out, leaving him just strength enough to walk to shore.

But here is what is interesting: Of these three old ducks two were tagged in 1916, and have migrated and returned three times to my personal knowledge, and have undoubtedly been shot at, time and again; one has part of her foot shot away. Yet when this rifle cracked, right above the three, not one attempted to fly, but all rushed right up to the muzzle of the gun. This was only a starter of them exposing their knowledge; for ten minutes

NEWSY NOTES

BY AGRICOLA

THE ORDERS OF INSECTS (8)

The second Order on our list is that of the Coleoptera or beetles. It is a very extensive Order, with about 75 families divided into numerous genera, which receive full exposition in Blatchley's "Coleoptera of Indiana," a compendious work published a few years ago. The beetles have been studied more than any other group, because a great many of them in both the larval and perfect stages, feed on vegetation, and often become a menace to the well-being of mankind. A few, like the "lady-birds" are beneficial, and keep down the numbers of other insects.

The primitive insects, which flew over the scaming swamps in the days when the world was young, were all four-winged, but their descendants have become modified in different directions. The Hymenoptera are still four-winged, but having thrown all the labor involved in flight on the fore-wings the hind wings are noticeably smaller. The Coleoptera have thrown the work of flight on the hind-wings, with the result that the fore-wings are degenerated into mere wing covers—the hard and horny "elytra." On the other hand the Diptera—the house-flies, for instance—typify the Parable of the Talents, for they have lost their hind-wings entirely, through ages of disease.

A very short description of a beetle is all that is necessary, for the families are universally recognized notwithstanding a great diversity of detail. Notice that the horny wing covers lie back horizontally over the thorax and abdomen of the insect, and when closed are divided by a line or "suture" running centrally down the beetle's back. (Beetles are often called "bugs" but the true bugs show the wings apparently crossed on the back.) In some few cases the elytra are united and the second pair of wings is absent; and more rarely both elytra and wings are wanting, and these departures from the normal render the insects incapable of flight. The mouth is furnished with mandibles for biting.

It would be impossible here to notice the various families of the Coleoptera, in any systematic classification, since down to a very probably contains a couple of thousand species. The best that can be attempted is to note some of the species likely to be encountered by the student, and to give interesting facts in their life history.

For a short time in July or August, when the days are hottest, an active grayish beetle may be observed on our sandy roads, running ahead, and when we get too close, taking to a short flight which lands it several yards away. As we go forward the performance is repeated, the insect keeping to the centre of the road. This is the tiger-beetle, a ruthless hunter of the denizens of the underworld. The commonest tiger-beetle here is *Chlaenius vulgatus*, a species of a metallic dark green beneath, and with several ornamental marks (always of one pattern) on the elytra. The tiger beetles are diurnal in their habits, a trait by no means usual among the Coleoptera.

We have a goodly number of what are known as ground-beetles in our Province. These are scientifically called, as a family, the Carabidae. Some of its members are quite large (over 20 millimetres long), all have long legs and are fast runners. They mostly live in the evening, the ground moths and insects upon which they prey. In color the larger ground beetles are mostly violaceous, but *Carabus maderae* is a brassy-bronze color, and *Chlaenius sericeus* a bright grassy-green which, however, fades when the beetle is mounted for preservation.

Blatchley says "In the quiet deep pools of streams and in ponds of stagnant water may often be seen large oval, flattened beetles, hanging head downward with the tips of the abdomen at or slightly above the surface of the water." These beetles belong to the genus *Dytiscus*, meaning "a diver." They are more or less aquatic and are strong swimmers. I kept one in a small aquarium for upwards of two years, but was obliged to pen him off from the other inmates, on account of his savage nature; he killed two "skeleton" fish by biting on their stomachs. The larvae of the diving beetles are just as predacious and have earned the name of water-tigers. They do not resemble the adult beetle. *Dytiscus verticillatus* is our commonest large diving beetle.

Now we come to a rather repellent group known as the carrion beetles. When a bird, a small mammal (as a mouse), or a snake dies, these beetles quickly make to the spot and commence their work as scavengers. Their eggs are first laid on the body, which is then buried. This is the beginning of their life on the soil beneath it, and carrying it away. Sometimes the body may be buried a foot in the ground. The larvae, on hatching from the egg, proceed to devour the putrid flesh. Several species of *Necrophorus* and *Silpha* have been taken here. *Necrophorus* is a long thick-bodied beetle with glossy black elytra ornamented with reddish marks. *N. orbicollis* being our commonest species. *Silpha* is a flattened beetle usually rounded in form. *S. americana* is the largest of our three species.

The short-winged scavenger beetles are a great group occupying 150 pages of Blatchley's book. They are slender-bodied insects with very

flexible abdomens, and truncate, shortened elytra. When the insect is disturbed it curves the abdomen upward as if about to sting—which of course it cannot do. The poor beetle had by some means or other acquired an ill-reputation in the North of England, where it was called the "devil's coach horse." These Staphylinid beetles vary greatly in size, ranging from one to twenty millimetres, by far the greater number being minute. They are beneficial insects, feeding on decaying animal and vegetable matter, and even "reducing manure" to a more available form of plant food.

THE GROANS OF THE BRITONS

It has been pointed out that the notes on Roman Britain contain no account of the appeal for help addressed to a "powerful Roman citizen" in a letter entitled "The groans of the Britons." This account appears in a number of books purporting to give the history of the times, and is on the authority of Gildas, a writer who is understood to have lived between the years 510 and 570. The tractate bearing his name is unfortunately, vague and obscure on every point he touches; so much so that it is not possible to give a collection of "fables," his writings are, however, vivid in character, and make excellent reading. "And now again," he says, "the Britons sent supplicants, ambassadors, with their garments rent and their heads covered with ashes imploring assistance from the Romans and like timorous chickens, cowering under the protecting wings of their parents, their stretched country might not altogether be destroyed, and that the Roman name, which now was but an empty sound to fill the ear, might not be classed as a relic of distant nations. Upon this, the Romans, moved with compassion, as far as human nature could be, at the relation of such horrors, sent forward, like eagles in their flight, their unexpected bands of cavalry by land, and mariners by sea, and planting their terrible swords upon the shoulders of their enemies, they now stand down like leaves which fall at the destined period." Then, before withdrawing, the Romans helped their suppliants to build a stone wall from sea to sea (the wall of Hadrian, built about three centuries before) and fortresses on the south-east coast. When the Romans had gone, back came the Scots and Picts and matters were worse than before. Then, according to Gildas, the famous letter was sent to "Agius (Aetius) consul for the third time, the groans of the Britons." Help, though implored in the most piteous terms, was no longer forthcoming, and the Britons were left to intestine wars, and barbarian invasions. The narrative which follows is too lengthy to quote here, but displays a profound ignorance of the period to which it refers.

BAD POLICY

There is a story current here that a considerable quantity of frozen turkeys has been shipped to market, and if this rumor is true, it is a fact to be deplored. There can be little doubt that dealers are making a great deal more profit than the price paid to the farmer warrants, but that is no justification for what practice is being followed. The old fowls used to say, never make a white. Besides the bluish left on the character and reputation of the individual practicing such fraudulent tricks, (which always have unexpected repercussions) there is the shaken confidence of the public and the loss of the market to be feared. Years ago, when our island exported little but lumber and oats—that was in the pioneer days—shiploads of grain were exported, and for a time all went well. Then "somebody" introduced a get-rich-quick scheme by putting some in the gun sacks as makeweights. That trick lost the British market.

While I am on the subject of markets let me point out that the Danish farmer pockets 70 cents out of every dollar that the consumer pays for farm produce. That is as it should be for the farmer has "the heavy end of the log." This desirable result is secured by putting out good stuff to inspire his markets in the first place, and secondly by a system of co-operation in which he takes the keenest interest.

FEED THE BIRDS!

This winter is going to be hard on such birds as are here all the year round, and it is to be hoped that the growing number of bird-lovers will act accordingly. For myself, I can look out of the window at any time of the day and see the bluejays—the only birds hardy enough for our bleak situation—pecking away at the food on their "table." The table is simply made of boards and is eighteen inches square, with a rim on like a tray about an inch deep. This was placed on the top of a stout post

and nailed on with a strong spline. Some grain was put on the "table" and the jays soon found it out. They are very active, moving about while feeding, and drive a good deal of the grain overhead, by the hammer-like strokes of their bills. Billed potato appears to be a special treat; they gouge out the tuber—never mind if it is frozen! And for a change they chug away at the woodlice of the table. There were six jays about the table at once, this morning. They won't look at an apple but enjoy crumbs.

IVY AND CLIMATE

I have a few plants of Ivy (*Hedera helix*) which are beginning to do well; they are variegated, and have leaves of diverse shapes. Used to less extreme climate—that of Surrey, England—they did not thrive so well under the all-too-sunny skies here. The ivy spindly, and the leaves were small. Now they spend a good part of the twenty-four hours in the cellar, where the air is moister and it just suits them. In an experiment I have planted an ivy in a shady part of the wood, where ferns delight to grow, and next spring will settle the question as to whether this plant can be grown outdoors all the year round. This experience led me to consider the effect of climate on living things. It is perhaps easiest to recognize in plant life. The cowslips and primroses have a hard struggle for life in our dry summers, and the old leaves are "burnt" up

by August; but a new growth appears, which survives the winter. The true "Blue-bells of Scotland" instead of growing in a diffuse and artistic manner, carry their bloom in a thick clump; and even the very introduced weeds have acquired differences which mark them off from their parents in Europe. As to mankind, I recollect reading (some years ago) that a scientific study in the U.S.A. credited the climate of this continent with producing two changes. The first was that the inhabitants had lost the character of those which ruled the character of their ancestors; which was perhaps to be expected in a land of superabundant electrical energy. The second change was that the race tended to become taller, and today we find the colleges to the south of us comparing three generations of students from the same families, and finding that equipment which tended to be smaller, whether this is of good omen is problematical; in geologic ages an increase in the size of any race of beings was always the prelude to its disappearance.

In Topinard's "Anthropology"

a most interesting work, it is noted that the Australians have developed very long legs, especially I think from the knees downwards—whence they (the Aussies) are called "Com-stalks." And when you come to the Kangaroo—has extra developed hindlegs and short forelegs. Has climate anything to do with this phenomenon, and if so, how?

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