Photographing Nests and Young Birds

A. Radclyffe Dugmore, 1900

Selected pages from Bird Homes.

A historical field photographer explains camera placement, tripod adjustments and choosing an angle on a nest.

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Chapter IV

PHOTOGRAPHING NESTS AND YOUNG BIRDS

In making notes on young birds the camera will be found to be most useful, as it shows exactly the growth of feathers and other points of interest ; but here again it is necessary to be particular as to the age of the bird. Guesswork will not do, as a single day often makes a great difference in the appearance of young birds. It is extraordinary with what rapidity they grow.

In order to secure good photographs great patience is necessary, especially so in the case of young robins and others of the thrush family, for they are very shy even before they can fly.

Any good long-focus camera with the regular lens will do, but of course a very rapid lens will give better results. The lens that has given me the greatest satisfaction, both on account of its rapidity and depth of focus, is the Goerz, series III.

My method of photographing the bird before it can stand is to place it on a piece of smooth white or light-gray paper laid on a flat surface and raised at the farther side so as to form a perfectly smooth blank background with no lines or creases ; this may be placed in the sunlight or shadow, according to the speed of the lens.

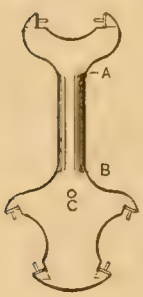
A very quick shutter is essential, owing to the rapid breathing of the bird when young and to its restlessness when able to perch (in a life-sized photograph the slightest movement shows unless the shutter works with unusual rapidity). Once the youngsters can fly, it is necessary to make some sort of enclosure ; this may be arranged temporarily by hanging some white cheesecloth in the sunlight, with a piece of mosquito netting at the top so as to allow sufficient light inside. Sunlight may be used to advantage in some instances to give striking effects of light and shade. (When sunlight is used, a developer rather weak in pyro will be found to give the best results.)

The dead branch of a tree makes a natural and effective perch for the bird to stand on ; it should be carefully selected, with no twigs that would be much out of focus. Then focus your camera on some particular point ; mark this lightly with a penknife and take the photograph when the bird stands on the marked place. When several birds are to be photographed together, they must be arranged so that each one shows in a different position from his companions. You may say that this sounds easy, but is most difficult to accomplish ; here is the time for the much-needed patience already mentioned.

Young birds may be photographed while in the nest, but this is not often satisfactory, since only the heads show. Especially in the case of the smaller birds is it difficult to get all parts in focus. Moreover, the location of the nest is generally in the shade, so that to get good results a time exposure is desirable. But the birds invariably move ; so, on the whole, I think the best results are to be obtained without anything in the way of accessories. This has been my experience, though others who have been more fortunate in getting good effects with the young in the nests think that is the better method.

When nests containing eggs are to be photographed it is better to choose a cloudy day, otherwise a screen should be used in order to soften the light, or the markings on the eggs will scarcely show in the picture, and the detail of the nest will often be lost in the strong light and shade. The screen may be made of cheesecloth or fine muslin, and a light, portable frame for it may be constructed of thin bamboo, arranged so as to fold and be carried with the tripod.

If the nest is photographed in bright sunlight, a piece of white paper or cloth may be used with advantage as a reflector in order to soften the shadows. When photographing ground nests the ordinary tripod is troublesome and difficult to tilt to the necessary angle. After trying various schemes, I am now using a device which works satisfactorily, its disadvantage being its weight. Three-ply wood should be used in making this, and the metal parts may be taken from an ordinary tripod top. The bar AB is cylindrical, ⅞ inch in diameter ; to this is clamped a ball-and-socket device, allowing the camera to tilt forward without moving the legs of





YOUNG RED-EYED VIREOS, READY TO LEAVE NEST



YOUNG YELLOW-BILLED CUCKOOS, TWENTY-FOUR HOURS BEFORE LEAVING NEST

Showing how late the feathers remain sheathed

the tripod. A hole may be made (C) so that the regular tripod screw can be used when taking photographs of other objects.

Occasionally it is desirable to take a photograph of the old bird on the nest, but this is by no means easy. The camera should be arranged and focussed on the nest while the parent bird is away, taking care to remove the leaves or twigs that would be out of focus in the immediate foreground. The instrument must be concealed to some extent by leaves and twigs, and the operator will have to take pains to see that nothing interferes with the working of the shutter. A long tube must be substituted for the short one, and either a large bulb or, if convenient, a bicycle hand-pump will answer the purpose admirably. In this way I have made time exposures with the camera fastened to the higher branches of a tree, where the shade made it necessary to give a five-second exposure and I found that the branch shook if I stood on it. Once a tube nearly forty feet long was used, and with the aid of the bicycle pump I got an excellent picture.

A very useful accessory to the bird-nest photographer's outfit is a pair of pruning clippers for removing small twigs and leaves.

The surroundings of the nest should not be disturbed more than one can help, since this gives an artificial appearance to the picture and is apt to frighten away the owners.