

Journal July 27-42

BLITZ COMES TO THE HUMMINGBIRD

by

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used Aug. 9-

Song birds are much more in danger in their daily lives than people. During their nesting season they are especially on the firing line. Many are in a constant state of terror. When they have a home with eggs or young, they have to be on guard day and night. They have been at war much longer than human beings.

One day at Bill Smith's country home called "The Squirrel Cage," we had the fun of watching a hummingbird darting about in the air with the swiftness of an arrow, sipping honey from the flowers. It was fortunate that Bill found this hummer's nest as he was anxious to get a series of colored motion pictures of the life history of this bird. Since it was about fifteen feet from the ground and hanging near the corner of his log cabin, the only chance for pictures was to build a platform on the sloping roof so the camera could be set up just opposite the nest. The first thing was to set the camera up in position and let her get used to it.

There is a striking difference between the hummingbird family and other birds. In the average bird household, the male and female work together in building their home, hatching the eggs, feeding and taking care of the children. The male rufous is an enthusiastic lover during the days of courtship. He goes crazy-mad in love. But when the cottony cup is finished, he always disappears, leaving the widow to hatch the eggs and raise the twins. It is hard to believe the father hummer is an intentional shirk and deserter. However, somewhere back through the generations of hummingbird experience, it may have been found that his brilliant colors and unmistakable devotion about the home were clues for enemies. It is, therefore, the law of family protection that he keep away entirely during the period of incubation and the rearing of the young.

There were two eggs in the nest and the mother soon regarded the camera as a part of the house. She also soon became accustomed to people on

the platform, and the next chance of getting colored pictures was to tie up another limb just above the nest so later in the afternoon the sun would light up the nest and eggs. When the mother noticed that the sun was on the eggs, she realized that she had to prevent them from getting too hot. So even though the camera man was nearby, she sat unafraid on the nest.

Throughout the farm and along the hills were many trees, hundreds of places where the hummingbird might have nested. However, she knew it was safer to have a home close to a farm house as she knew she had many war enemies like hawks and owls, and they were not likely to come in near a house. Another important factor in the hummingbird building a nest was to have it carefully hidden under another limb where it could not be seen by other war-like birds.

The tiny nest was tied very tight on the end of a long, sloping limb, and when it was raining it was protected by the limbs above, and during windy days the limb swung back and forth. The hummer enjoyed this the same as a child likes to swing.

The first motion pictures Bill took were some of the nest and eggs. As Bud, his son, was holding the limb down a little so the eggs could be seen, the mother hummer came right in unafraid and sat on her nest when the boy's face was only a foot and a half away. By using a three or six inch lens, Bill could shoot at a distance of six or seven feet. The next series of pictures was after the eggs hatched and these tiniest of all birds had to be fed. It was interesting to watch the mother come in, put her bill down the throat of the tiny birds to regurgitate the food.

Many young birds are ready to leave the nest within about ten or twelve days after they are born. But it takes longer in regard to hummingbirds as they do not leave until about eighteen days. Some of the most striking motion pictures were to be taken as the two little hummers were older and ready to leave the nest.

Bill had secured a hummingbird feeder, which is filled with sweetened water and hung on the tree just above the nest. The mother soon discovered this and was getting plenty of food for her children. This was the chance for

an interesting picture of the hummer mother feeding on full buzzing wings.

However, one never knows what is likely to happen in war time. As the Smiths were coming in from the garden one late afternoon, they saw a screech owl in one of the trees near the house. This bird as a rule lives on field mice and other small animals, yet the robins are always screaming and warning their young and other birds to guard against any war-like bird.

The next morning Bill discovered a tragedy. On the ground he found one dead young hummingbird. The nest was torn out, the mother and the other young bird had evidently been killed and eaten perhaps by the screech owl. This war-like creature had perhaps had his attention drawn to the hummer nest near the house. Generally, the screech owl is not considered a robber among birds, yet it is the same problem we have in human nature. We have to keep armies prepared to protect our nation and people. We also have to hire policemen to protect people because there are certain human robbers and murderers, who in turn have to be arrested and killed. It is the same among birds and mammals. Many song birds have to be protected.

The series of pictures that Bill Smith started was to be a part of the life history of a hummingbird that has not been fully recorded in colored pictures. He didn't get the scenes of the building of the nest, which is one of the first difficult records to picture, but he got the bird in flight, nest and eggs, the mother hatching the eggs and feeding the tiny young on up to middle life. This is a part of an interesting story that has not been completed on account of destruction that is liable to come to any bird family. It may take two or three years before the photographer can get the life history of the hummer.