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Poor-wills nesting in southwestern Oregon

Otis D. Swisher

Poor-wills (*Phalaenoptilus nuttallii*) are considered to be rare to uncommon in Oregon east of the Cascades (though of unknown status in a broad north-south belt extending from the foothills of the Cascades east to the juniper-sagebrush desert), accidental west of the Cascades, and rare in the vicinity of Medford in southwest Oregon (Bertran and Scott, 1973). Gabrielson and Jewett (1940: 354, and references therein) state that Cooper and Suckley first reported Poor-wills for Oregon in 1860, and that Bendire (1877), Woodcock (1902), Miller (1904), Peck (1911), and Walker (1917) have documented Poor-wills for various eastern Oregon counties.

Poor-will nest records for any part of Oregon are so scarce that Gabrielson and Jewett (1940:354), when referring to the nominate race (*P.n. nuttallii*) specifically mentioned finding a nest on Hart Mountain in southeast Oregon 14 June 1926, and added, "So far as we can learn, this is the only nest of the species actually discovered in Oregon."

Gabrielson took a specimen of a Dusky Poor-will (*P.n. californicus*) at Brownsboro, Jackson County, 21 June 1929. This specimen seems to be the only evidence of this race for Oregon up to 1940 and is a part of the Gabrielson Collection (No. 1884) (Gabrielson and Jewett, 1940:355). Browning (1975) verifies another Poor-will collected 5 August 1970 at Prospect in the Cascades about 55 km from Brownsboro, and 70 km up the Rogue River from Medford. This specimen — a female — has no race indicated, but it is likely *P.n. californicus* which breeds from the Rogue Valley south to Lower California along the western slopes of the Sierra Nevada and the coastal ranges (A.O.U., 1957).

Poor-wills have been heard and seen regularly in summer on the slopes of Roxy Ann Butte, 16 km south of Brownsboro and about 15 km east of Medford, Oregon since the late 1960's but little information is available on their nesting. In June 1978, two nests were located and two individuals banded.

Located in southwest Oregon's Bear Creek Valley, Roxy Ann Butte is a prominent butte of the foothills of the Cascades. It is about 40 km north of the Siskiyou Mountains, which lie on an east-west transect along the Oregon-California border. This southwest region of Oregon, referred to in most writings as the Rogue River Valley, is in reality a juncture of the Rogue River Valley and the valley of one of its main tributaries, Bear Creek. Roxy Ann Butte is near the intersection of these valleys.

Bear Creek Valley, approximately 50 km long and running north to south, is similar to and a continuation of the Sonoran-type life zone as found in central and northern California. Because of this, Roxy Ann and its environs are known to birders of Oregon as the northernmost edge of the range for such species as Blue-gray Gnatcatcher (*Poliophtila caerulea*) and Black-chinned Sparrow (*Spizella atrogularis*).

The height of Roxy Ann (1090 m = 3571 ft) places its summit well above some spots which are locally classified as being in the midst of the Cascade Range. Yet, by road it is nearly 80 km from those Cascade locations. Its rainfall, averaging less than 50 cm annually, is not enough to encourage the growth of Douglas Fir (*Pseudotsuga taxifolia*). Trees found here are Ponderosa Pine (*Pinus ponderosa*), an occasional Western Red Cedar (*Thuja plicata*), an abundance of large Pacific Madrone (*Arbutus menziesii*), and dense stands of White Oaks (*Quercus garryana* and *Q. kelloggii*) which because of their small size are called "scrub oak." The most prominent shrubs are Ceanothus (*Ceanothus* sp.) in varying stages of development and in varying amounts of ground coverage, Hairy Manzanita (*Arctostaphylos columbiana*), and an abundance of Poison Oak (*Rhus diversiloba*).

The northeast slope of Roxy Ann, which faces the Cascades, has a large meadow of native grass. In spring it is densely covered with Camas (*Camassia leichtlinii*). The soil is shallow, rocks protrude through the grass, and where a seasonal stream

Adult Poor-will on nest of moss,
2 July, nest 2



traverses a shallow but wide meadow arm the soil has been removed by natural forces and bed-rock dominates. Moss is present in patches. It was in this section of Roxy Ann, at about 750 m elevation that two Poor-will nests were found in June 1978. The first was located as I ran a Breeding Bird Survey for the Department of Fish and Wildlife, and the second while on a field trip of the Rogue Valley Audubon Society.

Nest number 1 (see illustration) lay in an exposed condition on bare rock. One nestling of an estimated age of 4 days, and one egg, made up the nest contents. Discovered on 12 June, the nestling was no longer at the nest site 17 June. The unhatched egg was still there. Nest number 2 was discovered 17 June and was about 75 m from the first nest. Positioned so that the adult bird could be partially protected by a rock of about .5 m on an edge, live moss made the bed on which the eggs were laid. The adult Poor-will held her position on the nest remarkably long in the presence of the field trip participants. It was incubating, and left the nest only when two people, unaware of its presence, stepped on either side of the rock which protected its nest and their feet came to within .5 m of it. As it left the nest, it gave a vigorous "broken wing" act in which the tail was widely spread and for up to a distance of 8 m the wings beat vigorously on the ground before the bird became airborne. This was in contrast to the flight of the bird on nest number 1 which, when disturbed, rose vertically for 2 m and then descended on a long line of flight until it was able to dive into some open brush.

When I returned to nest number 2 on 24 June, I found the adult on the nest. The bird permitted an approach to approximately 3 m. Its eye appeared to be shut. Closer examination showed it to be open, although only a slit. Pictures of Poor-wills have shown that a wide-open eye is shiny. The squint in bright daylight may have provided additional camouflage.

Between 24 June and 2 July the weather held to a

regular pattern: cloud build-up from early morning to mid-afternoon, steady to heavy rain from then to dusk, and a general clearing during the night. Consequently, it was not surprising that the 2 July visit to nest number 2 showed that the two new nestlings had been removed from the moss nest beside the rock to a small bed-rock bald spot about 1 m away. The moss held water as a sponge might. The rich buff-brown color of the nestlings matched the description given by Aldrich (in Bent, 1940) for the Dusky Poor-will at the age of a day or two.

With nestlings present, the adult chose to stay fully exposed on an elevated rock less than 10 m away after leaving the nest. I took a few pictures of the nest site and left. In less than 5 minutes, two Poor-wills called and answered from the nest area. Their calling continued for nearly 5 minutes. I was reminded of the position calls of quail when a covey is trying to re-form after being scattered. The adult had returned to the nest and covered the nestlings by the time I returned to make a nest check 15 minutes later. Fortunately, the rains held off until the adult had reoccupied the nest.

Since I did not wish to disturb the nest or risk the possibility of providing a scented path for some predator to use to disturb the nest, I waited until 7 July to make my next visit to the nest. By then the adult and the 2 nestlings had moved back to the original mossy nest site with its protection beside the rock. The 2 young were partially covered by the adult. Only their heads and shoulders showed from under the adult's shoulder.

I attempted to capture the adult with the use of a fishing net such as is used on northwestern streams for landing salmon (see illustration). An over-sized net with a handle 1.5 m long and an opening of about 1 x .75 m, it has a pocket about .75 m deep. It seemed a suitable instrument to be placed over the bird with a minimum chance of injury. The adult did fly into the pocket of the net when the net was dropped around it. However, the safety of the

nestlings forbade that I push the net completely to the ground. It became lodged against the rock which protected the nest. The net's webbing is of stiff nylon; consequently, the Poor-will was able to recover from the initial contact with the net pocket, and it exited through the opening between the net frame and the ground.

On 7 July I banded the 2 nestlings with Fish and Wildlife Service bands No. 821-79415 and -16. Color photos were taken which show the stage of development of the feathers and the body size. I was not able to return to the nest site again until 19 July. By then the nest was empty. The seasonal stream encourages willows to grow along its banks, and I feel that the young may have been moved from the openness of the original nest site to the seclusion and protection of the willows less than 15 m away, and that they were raised there.

Few nests of the Poor-will have been found in Oregon. Roxy Ann Butte in southwest Oregon has Poor-wills present and presumably nesting each year. Additional studies, observations, and bandings in future years may provide the

opportunity to add to our understanding of this interesting and uncommon bird.

I wish to thank Dr. Charles T. Collins for his suggestions and helpful comments about this manuscript.

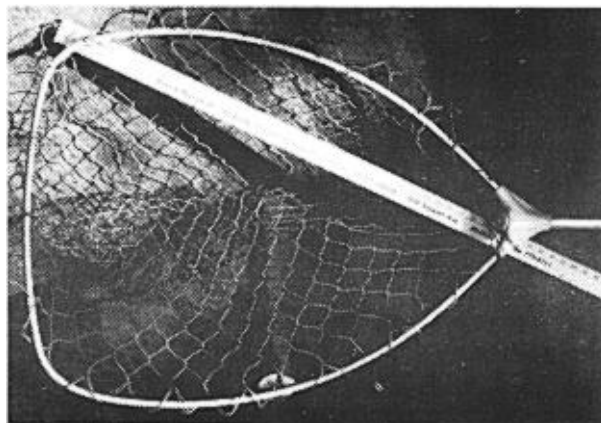
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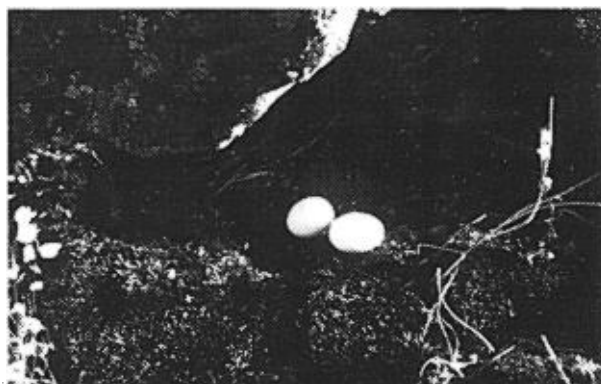
1002 S. Oakdale, Medford, OR 97501



Roxy Ann Butte near Medford, Oregon



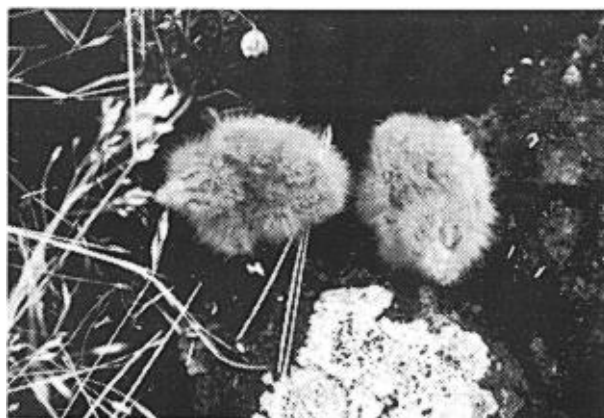
Long-handled net used to attempt capture of adult



Two eggs, nest 2, 17 June



Nest 1, 12 June, with one chick and one egg

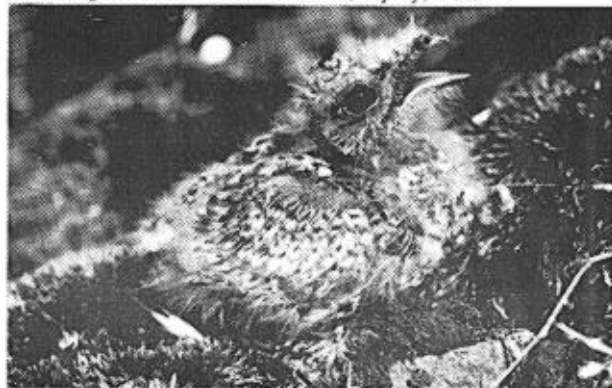


Nestling Poor-wills, 2 July, in nest 2



*Nestling Poor-wills
on dry spot
near mossy nest site,
2 July, nest 2*

Nestling Poor-will on moss nest, 7 July, nest 2



Nestling Poor-will on date of banding, 7 July, nest 2

