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Otis D. Swisher

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Poor-wills nesting in southwestern Oregon: A sequel

Otis D. Swisher

In June 1978, I studied two nests of Poor-wills (*Phalaenoptilus nuttallii*) that I discovered at 750 m elevation on the northeastern slopes of Roxy Ann Butte, 15 km east of Medford (Swisher, N. Amer. Bird Bander 3:152-155, 1978). Poor-wills are considered to be accidental west of the Cascades and rare in the vicinity of Medford in southwest Oregon (Bertrand and Scott, 1973) so a nest record for a second consecutive year has some significance. See my earlier paper for the description of habitat on Roxy Ann Butte.

On 11 June 1979, I discovered a third Poor-will nest in 2 years on Roxy Ann. This date agrees closely with the 12 June date of the original discovery. The nest was identically situated beside the same rock where nest No. 2 had been placed in 1978. As in 1978, moss provided a cushion for eggs and nestlings. No other nest materials were used. The two nestlings in 1979 appeared to be 6-7 days old (2-3 days older than the estimated age of the young birds when first found in 1978). Since my attempt to capture the adult in 1978 was not successful, I cannot be sure that this adult was the same bird.

I next visited the nest on 14 June at 1500. In the 3 days since their discovery, the adult and two nestlings had moved about 10 m from the original nest rock to another rock of approximately the same size (about .5 m on each edge). This rock, like the original, had a slight overhang on the east, was shaded from direct morning sunlight and had a bed of live moss for the nestlings. In addition, a 6 m tall scrub oak (*Quercus* sp) shaded the entire rock from afternoon sun. When found, the adult was covering the young. I assumed it to be a female.

The 10 m change of nest position put the adult female and young closer to a rather dense "edge" of ceanothus (*Ceanothus cuneatus*) and scrub oaks. Proximity to this "edge" may have been why the adult flew to this dense brush area when flushed, whereas the adult seen in 1978 had flown as often to the willow-lined stream on the opposite or downhill side. In leaving the nest on 14 June the adult fluttered more prominently than on the previous occasion; but, unlike the adult in 1978, she did not strike the ground in her "broken-wing" flight. She stayed less than 1 m above the ground as compared with the 2 m heights recorded in 1978.

During my 14 June visit, I banded the nestlings (now 9-10 days old) and recorded the following data:

#821-79418 — an active bird in hand

Weight: 22 g

Total length: 73 mm

Longest primary sheath: 31 mm

Middle toe length: 13 mm

#821-79419 — a passive bird in hand

Weight: 15 g

Total length: 63 mm

Longest primary sheath: 23 mm

Middle toe length: 13 mm

A Pesola Scale with measurement to the nearest gram was used for weighing.

In 1978, the adult had returned rather quickly to the nest after being disturbed; so after banding the nestlings, I retreated 50 m and watched the nest site, hoping to observe the adult as she returned to the nest. The adult failed to return, however, and after ½ hour I walked back to the nest. Earlier, the nestlings had been completely separated from the rock, but by now they had moved 20 cm and were touching the rock, indicating that Poor-wills are able to move about voluntarily by 9-10 days of age.

I again visited the nest site on 16 June. The nest sites at both rocks were empty. I searched unsuccessfully for the birds in both the open areas surrounding the rocks and in the thick brush. By using a criss-cross pattern I was able to cover the area in .5 m sections and feel certain that if the birds had been present, I would have found them. On 21 July, with Steven Summers of the Oregon Bird Records Committee, I returned for another check. The nest site is located on private land. The native grasses do not grow thickly on the rocky soil, and by this time cattle had eaten the grass down to bare ground and had severely trampled that portion of the nest area within a 25 m radius. The mossy cushion on which the nesting took place had been partially destroyed. We saw no birds at the site. However, we flushed a single bird 200 m uphill from the nest site at the southernmost part of the creek basin through which the summer stream flows. The Poor-will burst from the

base of a ceanothus bush, and although it did not leave the general area it did not allow us to approach closer than 25 m. It escaped us by fluttering low over the ground and diving into a shady spot at the base of a ceanothus bush. We could not determine whether the bird was an adult. This 21 July sighting was the last sighting recorded for Roxy Ann during the summer of 1979.

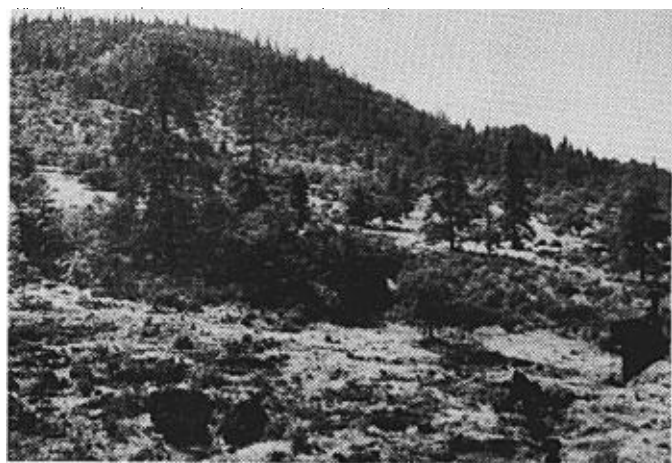
On 7 and 15 June, 1980 I again searched for nests of Poor-wills on Roxy Ann Butte. At the rock where the 2 nests had been discovered in 1978 and 1979, cattle had completely obliterated the moss from the nest site. Only bare ground remained. I created a 14 x 25 cm bed of moss on 7 June in the hope that Poor-wills would be late to nest and might be attracted to this previously used site. On 15 June no evidence of nesting was found. Again, an intense search by criss-cross method was used. In a discussion with the only resident of the area, and a person familiar with the Poor-will call, I was told that the birds had been heard but not seen. My schedule did not permit me to spend an extensive amount of time in the area in June or July.

I wish to thank Dr. Martha H. Balph for reading and making numerous comments about this manuscript. ♦

Literature cited

- Bertrand, G.A. and Scott, J.M. 1973. Check-list of the birds of Oregon. Museum of Natural History, Oregon State University, Corvallis, Oregon.
Swisher, Otis D. 1978. Poor-wills nesting in southwestern Oregon. *North American Bird Bander* 4:152-155

1002 S. Oakdale, Medford, OR 97501.



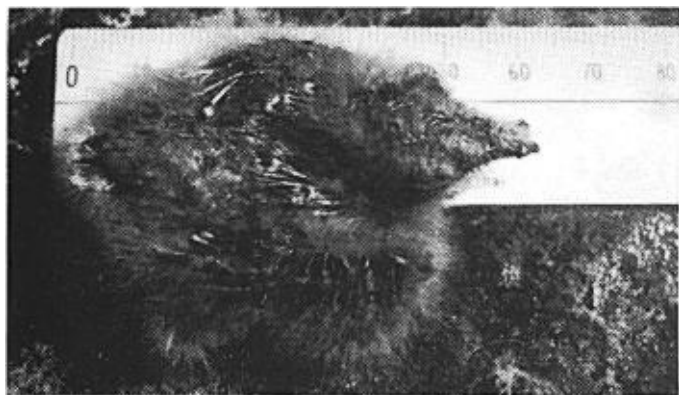
Roxy Ann Butte near Medford, Oregon. Found 3 nest of Poor-wills in 2 years — 1978 and 1979.

#1 — 2 nests at the same rock

#2 — spot to which adult and 2 young moved from original rock, 1979



#821-79418. Banded 14 June 1979 (9-10 days old). Active in hand. Weight: 22 g.



#821-79419. Banded 14 June 1979 (9-10 days old). Passive in hand. Weight: 15 g.



Rock to which adult and 2 young moved from original nest, 1979. Shows "edge" to which adult flew in 1979.