



MONTEREY NEWS

May 2022
Est. 1970 Vol. LII • Number 6



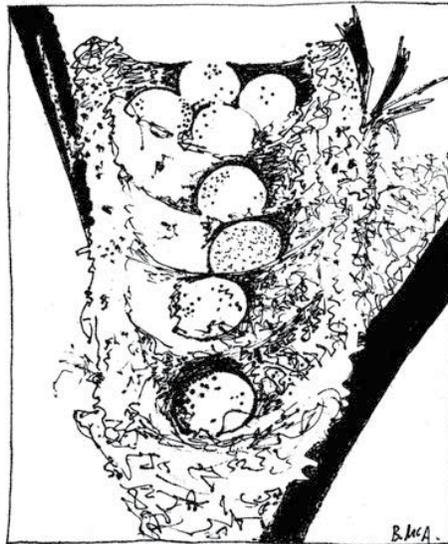
Romancing the Buffalo Bird

We have a daily visitor, coming always in social groups, gleaming in the sun. He delights us. We are so fortunate, so chance-chosen, to welcome him into our lives and imaginations. These days he is called brown-headed cowbird, cow blackbird, cow bunting, cow troopial. Or we can say "buffalo bird," as he was once called, and here comes the romance. To look at an active blackbird-sized creature in the feeder and be transported to a long line of associations, some mythical, some familiar in oral tradition, is a pleasure anytime.

Not only are the buffalo gone, but they, too, have been renamed. For them this is done in the name of taxonomic accuracy. To the Latin speakers among us, they have always been *Bison bison*, but we would say "buffalo" in plain English, and we knew what we meant. Great woolly creatures of the plains, always on the move, striding through the long-departed tallgrass prairies. We'd sing that song, wistfully, as kids in our once-a-week singing class in grade school. "Oh, give me a home, where the buffalo roam, where the skies are not cloudy all day. . ." We knew what it meant. Where the deer and the antelope play! Even the antelope have a new name, and it is not better. Try singing, "Where the deer and the pronghorn play." There is not much romance without that third syllable, just like the buffalo.

I thank the bird because he carries me back to a time I never knew except in song and story. I've read the story of the buffalo birds and how they travelled with the great herds. How they had developed a way of life that let them stay on the move and yet be assured of a next generation of offspring.

They do it by laying their eggs in the nests of other birds. Wherever she is, the female buffalo bird looks for a locally nesting bird, a place to lay her egg for someone else to incubate and feed. There are said to be 220 species of nesting birds the buffalo bird has tried out, and of these 144 different



ones have been a success.

Moralizing birders label this "social parasitism," and make a statistical case for the buffalo birds' having caused serious declines in the populations of some adoptive nesters, the sodbusters in this story. But some sodbusters know an interloping egg when they see it and toss it right out. Robins, catbirds, blue jays, and brown thrashers do this. Others recognize a strange egg laid in the nest by an interloper, roof it over, and make a new nest one floor up. This can happen again and again on the same original site, as in this drawing. It is a cutaway view of a five-story yellow warbler nest showing several buffalo bird eggs, from a photograph by W.V. Crich.

That buffalo bird had to keep on trying, but she lays her egg very quickly, in just a few seconds, and leaves. Most small birds like her need three to ten minutes to lay an egg. Though she no longer follows the buffalo, she still has no nest-building urge, instinct, or ability. She spends her day with social groups and then goes at night to communal roosts all year round. These often include red-winged blackbirds, grackles, house sparrows, and starlings. The buffalo birds travel south for the winter, after taking advantage of a continuous supply of host nests over

a two-month period. Of the forty eggs she may lay in a year, only two or three will mature.

With the buffalo gone, our bird has made do with cows and been renamed a cowbird. As the cows walk about a grassy pasture, stirring up insects, the birds follow along or ride on their backs. They can zip down and grab an ant, wasp, fly, leafhopper, beetle, grasshopper. And they can find plenty of flies right on the backs of the cows.

Buffalo birds are about the size of a bluebird, or a little larger. The males have a brown head and upper breast. Forbush (1926) calls the color "a deep, warm brown." The rest of the male is glossy and black, including gleaming green and purple and violet. Females are more subtle, "grayish-brown," with a "faint greenish gloss." There are darker streaks along the shafts of her feathers. The male's bill is black, the female's brownish, with the lower bill a little lighter. The bill is short and stout, the tail square at the tip. From tail tip to bill tip, these birds are seven to eight inches long.

Buffalo birds are here by March or April, but they are common in winter, too, especially in the Connecticut River lowlands. This may not sound like much of a trip, after the romantic journeys with the buffalo, but these birds live all over our continent, from Alaska and Nova Scotia to Florida and southern Mexico. They still look like travellers, not tied down by housework and chick-rearing. They will be ready to go when the buffalo return. — Bonner McAllester