

THE "CLIFF EAGLES" OF ATCHAFALAYA BLUFF.

True sportsmanship, courage, fearlessness and speed are all eagerly sought by young men aspiring to fame in their various lines of endeavor. These qualities are all admired in birds as well as men and the bird which has them all is the Duck Hawk.

During the summer of 1937 word came to me that it was thought that a pair of these birds were nesting in the rocky cliffs along the Mississippi in northeastern Iowa.

Since the last authentic record of the nesting of these noble falcons was in 1898 I was quite incredulous and started correspondence at once with State Conservation Officer George Kaufman ~~at once~~.

I asked him to be on the look out for these birds and report to me at once should they return in the spring of 1938.

This he very kindly did and quite early in the spring he reported them back again.

Having photographed a great number of birds from the tiny Hummingbird up to the Great Horned Owl I have experienced thrills of various kinds and like the true Nature lover I was always looking for new thrills. When the news came to me by wire from Kaufman on April 29th that the nest had been definitely located I immediately began making preparations to visit the home of the boldest and most fearless of all our birds.

Leaving my home about 250 miles distant at daybreak on May 4th and loaded with moving picture camera, color film and all the other various kinds of equipment for such an undertaking, I was determined to get one of the most difficult of all bird pictures.

Allamakee County is the most north easterly County in our State with Minnesota to the north and is bordered on the east by the mighty Father of Waters across which were the bluffs of Wisconsin.

Arriving there before noon after driving in the rain part of the way I found the weather still cloudy and very poor for photography.

During the afternoon Kaufman and I went to the nesting site to survey the surroundings and also the possibilities of getting pictures.

The nest was in a cavity on the face of one of the great rocky cliffs towering 400 feet above the Mississippi.

The cavity was only about 20 feet down from the top of the cliff and was as nearly inaccessible as it was possible to place it.

During the afternoon we climbed the lower face of the cliff as far as possible and seating ourselves on a ledge we watched the pair of old birds as they circled above us screaming at us their loud

Ka - ak, Ka-a-a-k, Ka-a-a-k, calls.

We were still over 100 ft from the nest but they expressed in no uncertain terms that they did not like to have us there.

On the rocks around us we found the head of a Red Headed Woodpecker, feathers of the Blue Jay, feathers of a Northern Flicker, a small feather which seemed to be from a Bluebird and the remains of a Muskrat.

The men in watching these birds a few days before had seen them exchange food in mid air and this I wanted to film if possible. The one which they presumed was the male would go hunting and when he returned with his victim he would give a certain signal call and immediately the female would launch out into the air and circle below him as he was carrying his prey. At another given signal he would drop it and she would catch it without fail and promptly go to feed the family. They were too interested in us however to do any hunting that afternoon so I only secured flight pictures as they darted through the air like bullets.

At one time a huge Turkey Vulture became curious to know the cause of all the commotion and appeared upon the scene.

The Vulture although twice the size of the Duck Hawk could not cope with this death dealing thunderbolt of the air and promptly turned tail in ignominious retreat with the Hawk in mad pursuit. The last we saw of the Vulture he was diving straight down for the tall timber evidently hoping to evade this death dealing demon who had already struck him once.

A Crow sat upon a tree at a real safe distance and gave a few Caw, Caw signals warning all of his tribe to stay away from that cliff and they all understood that warning for no Crow appeared there that afternoon.

After we had planned our method of getting pictures we returned to the State Fisheries building in town where we had the whole hearted co operation of Mr Albert the Supt. of Fisheries.

He furnished the necessary ropes and we prepared a swinging rope seat and other necessary equipment for use in the morning.

We awoke Thursday morning to find it raining again and very cold and windy so nothing could be done.

Friday morning dawned clear and bright but very cold and windy.

Since clear weather was what we wanted we had to try to disregard the cold and wind and make the best of it under the circumstances.

We needed more assistance and had no trouble in getting Mr Joe Teft the Deputy Federal Warden and also Paul Thompson to help and we started for the scene of action as soon as possible.

With a ground crew of four good men any aviator should feel safe.

However three of my crew did their work from the top of the bluff so really should be called the "sky crew".

We resembled a party of Alpine climbers as we started up the steep bluff carrying all our ropes and cameras and other equipment.

About half way up our party divided and Kaufman, Teft and Thompson who composed the "sky crew" circled far to the right and found their way up over the top by going around.

Albert remained with me and was my assistant.

We climbed up to the highest possible ledge which was considerably more than 100 ft below the nest cave and waited for the "sky crew" to lower my rope swing. When it came dangling down I strapped myself in the seat together with my trusty movie camera and was now ready for action.

Owing to the extreme cold for this time of year I wore a leather jacket and a sheep lined coat to protect myself from the strong cold north west wind sweeping down the Mississippi. For headgear I wore an overseas helmet to protect myself from falling rock from above and also from a possible attack from the old birds. Should they strike a man on his head with their full force it would be a knock out blow for sure and would mean a ripped skull and perhaps unconsciousness. I wanted none of that while dangling 400 ft in mid air on the face of that cliff.

Paul was our signal man on the brink above and George and Joe were manning the rope.

As soon as I was ready I gave the signal to Paul to haul away and the rope tightened and slowly I began going up.

Up and up I went swinging in space with the blue sky above, the rocky face of the cliff in front of me and below me was a sheer drop of some 400 ft to the banks of the Mississippi.

As I passed over the edge of the nest cavity I gave the signal to stop and there before me were four young Duck Hawks about half grown.

They were rather surprised to have callers drop in at their pent house and made a loud clattering noise and all scrambled back into the back part of the cave. I was rather surprised to find it so large for it seemed but small from below. It really was eight or nine feet back into the rock and the opening about two and one half feet high in front. It was perhaps four feet wide in front tapering back to not more than half that in the rear. A small piece of one of their egg shells was there and it was the color of tobacco juice.

There was no nest there neither were there any signs indicating that there had been as the floor was littered with broken pieces of rock from the size of hen eggs to as large as your fist.

The young birds were covered with a coat of dirty white down and on their wings the large feathers were just coming in. I estimated that they were between two and three weeks old. They had the typical head of a Duck Hawk also the large yellow feet.

Scattered about in their cave were old dried bones and feathers most of which could not be identified but the most conspicuous of all were the number of Blue Jay feathers. This indicated clearly that the Blue Jay population in that vicinity was held at a minimum and I could not help but think that perhaps the Duck Hawk is a good balance wheel in the great scheme of Nature after all.

My position was not exactly correct for good photography so I was lowered and the rope changed a few feet to the left and again hoisted up and now was exactly in front of the opening.

On this ascent I brought a six foot sapling with a hook on the end and I used this to bring my birds to the front where I had better light and also where I could get at them to band them.

All this required some time but it was the chance in a lifetime so I did not hurry and tried to do a good job of it all.

I doubt if a more inaccessible place could be found for a nest and a perfect place it was too. Nicely arched overhead with solid rock and located so never a predator could ever approach from any side excepting the air and what predator of the air would ever attempt such a foolhardy thing as that.

The view from the entrance of their cave was a magnificent one and as I worked with them there I almost envied them of such an eyrie.

Far below swept the mighty Father of Waters on its way to the sea and across were the blue hills of Wisconsin.

Far up the River in the faint distance could be seen Battle Island the scene of the massacre of Bad Axe where the great Chief Blackhawk made his last stand and his entire band of warriors as well as women and children were killed. Albert Sidney Johnston and Jefferson Davis both taking prominent parts in this battle.

Farther down the river is old Ft Crawford at Prairie du Chien and all along the mighty river particularly on the Iowa side are the cliffs ranging from three to six hundred feet in height and covered with birch and juniper while below in the deep dark canyons is a veritable flower garden of Nature's gems with ferns waist high.

What a paradise to look down upon from your front door. But I also thought what a sight it would be to see these youngsters leave home.

There was no door steps leading down from their front door.

As they would start out in life they simply would have to launch out into space from that dizzy height with no assistance whatever.

The old adage "sink or swim" would have to be changed for them to read "fly or drop" which would mean certain death.

But here again Nature has made the proper provision for there is no bird that flies that has stronger wings, has more speed and can handle himself better. He can overtake and kill any bird in the air, even to our fastest flying ducks hence his name.

I mentioned at the outset, the words "true sportsmanship" and that is also true of him for he never "shoots them on the set". Rather he will give chase in the air as though he was proud of showing off his speed and overtake any bird foolish enough to get in his range and drop on it like a thunderbolt and that is the end of the trail for that victim. Kaufman and Albert observed one of these birds swoop down on a Kingbird (our little tyrant) ~~and~~ as he was flying along the river bank bullying the other little fellows and there was only a burst of flying feathers and one squawk and our tyrant was no more. Our balance wheel of Nature was again in action.

After banding this family of hawks and filming them as much as I pleased I was reluctant to leave them as they had been so interesting. The old birds had been circling around and screaming Ka-ak, Ka-ak, Ka-ak at me continuously but never once did they attack me.

I thought that I was well prepared but I don't know what would have happened should one of them have struck my "tin hat" while I was swinging there 400 feet over the river. I could not help thinking of the fate of that Kingbird.

I finally gave the signal to lower away and I was soon out of my swing and ready for the climb down to level ground.

As we started to clamber down the face of the cliff we noticed a Phoebe perched on a branch and jerking her tail in the usual manner.

We had noticed her both days and I am sure that she must have had her nest near by.

Once again the thought came to me. Why did the Duck Hawk prey on Red Headed Woodpeckers, Kingbirds and Blue Jays and miss the poor innocent Phoebe?

Perhaps she could hide better or perhaps it was because she was not so blustery and noisy. Innocent folks usually escape the fate of tyrants.

It was a slow and tedious climb down but we finally reached the road along the base of the cliff and took one last look at the pent house home of our aristocratic friends.

They are called by the natives, Cliff Eagles or Rock Eagles which name also seems quite appropriate but I still think the name Duck Hawk the best of all for it seems to exactly fit them.

To Mr George Kaufman should go the greatest amount of credit for he rendered invaluable assistance together with Mr Albert of the State Fisheries, in locating the nest as well as managing my "sky crew".

I now had the satisfaction of knowing that I had a report to make of the first nesting Duck Hawks in Iowa in exactly forty years and also of banding the first Duck Hawks to be banded in Iowa and certainly the first ones ever to be filmed in natural color in Iowa.

The Government survey of the River gives the name of this great bluff as Atchafalaya meaning Lost Water.

Since our Duck Hawks selected this great bluff as their home I think that name quite appropriate for any bird frequenting those waters below that cliff are certainly lost.

The satisfaction one derives from accomplishing easy tasks is nothing compared to doing that which seems impossible hence I will always remember my visit to the home of the Duck Hawks on Atchafalaya Bluff with a great amount of satisfaction.

After banding this family of birds and fitting them as much as I
could I was reluctant to leave them as they had been so interesting.
The old birds had been nesting since and were very busy.
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happened should one of them have struck my "tin hat" while I was
working there 600 feet over the river. I could not help thinking
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worked invaluable assistance together with the light of the state
laboratory in locating the nest as well as arranging my "tin hat".
I now had the satisfaction of knowing that I had a report to make on
the first nesting black hawk in Iowa in 1907. Forty years and also
of finding the first black hawk to be banded in Iowa and certainly
the first one ever to be killed in natural color in Iowa.
The Government survey of the river gives the name of this great bird
as "black hawk" meaning "lost water".
Along our walk I have collected the great bird as their name I think
that name quite appropriate for my bird representing those western
below that cliff are certainly lost.
The satisfaction one derives from accomplishing any task is nothing
compared to doing that which seems impossible to me. I will always
remember my visit to the home of the black hawk on "Tin Hat"
with a great amount of satisfaction.

659 miles north of mouth of Ohio River