

Bird-nests

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As a small boy, I had a fondness for taking a furtive look into bird-nests. Those freckled small eggs are not half bad to look at. Should they be termed lovely or noble? In those days I knew no word or words to apply to them. It comes to this that I simply had a crazy fancy for the eggs of little birds. When I spotted a bird-nest in a branch of a tree, I climbed the tree even in face of some danger to myself and peered into the nest. I was sure I could climb five or six feet high, if there were some branches that would serve me for my foothold. I was afraid to climb to a place too high for me but sometimes I was reckless enough to dare it and take a peep, palpitation of the heart coming on suddenly at the same time. At such a time eggs could not always be found in the nest, which instead was lived in by chicks or had already been deserted by fledglings. Even then my heart thumped none the less, without regard to the presence or absence of eggs.

It often happens, however, that our childhood experience, even the one repeated just two or three times, produces in later years an illusion of its having been an everyday occurrence. I am afraid I may have an illusion of this kind, yet it seems to me that wild birds were not so afraid to approach toward our houses in my childhood as they are now. It may have been that [my paternal home was located at the edge of the wood half way up a hill. Such birds as thrushes, pheasants, bulbuls, buntings, jays and turtledoves came flying by turns to the thicket in back of our home and were seen roving over the place. I have an impression made upon me that it was the wont

of bulbuls to bathe in the stone washbasin in our garden. After a quick and riotous bath, taken with snappy movements, they left the basin and shaking themselves dry, flew away. Pheasants came to the oak tree to peck its acorns. The leaves of shunran (*Cybidium virescens*) also seem to have often been bitten off by them. Sometimes, just when I got home from school, I saw by the well-side pheasants taking wing at my footfalls to fly away into the thicket behind our house, flapping their wings heavily. Mixed with the flapping of their wings was heard some harsh and strident sound like that of something creaking.

Thrushes came to a sunny spot at the bottom of the precipice within the grounds and were seen rummaging about among the fallen leaves of nara trees (*Quercus glandulifera*) piled there in drifts. Kiichi, our man-servant of about twenty in those days, used to set a trap under a Japanese plum tree every winter. The trap, which folks called 'kobutsu', was a primitive one contrived to catch little birds. Sufferers by this gadget were mostly thrushes and buntings. A kingfisher was also seen sitting on an overhanging branch of a pine tree and looking down pensively into the pond below. The visit of this bird was rare and far between, and besides, it took to flight, the moment it sighted the figure of a man. A pair of turtledoves built their nest in one of the tall pine trees in the wood behind our house and even after their chicks fledged out, stayed on in the neighborhood, emitting the soft murmuring sound of coo, coo..... When snow fell, turtledoves came flying from the mountain recesses to peck the fruit of the nandins (*Nandina domestica*) planted to form the outer hedge of our vegetable garden, but after having had their bellyful, they perched very still and quiet on the snow-covered branch of the persimmon tree there. They seemed fascinated by the snow scene.

Not only turtledoves but also both thrushes and bulbuls seemed to have a great liking for the fruit of nandins. Once, when we kept a thrush and a bulbul, which Kiichi had caught, in the same cage

previously lived in by our canaries, they scrambled even in our presence for the fruit of nandins given.

Buntings built their nests in the trees in the wood in back of our home. A pair of them built their nest once in the sasanqua in our garden. Parent buntings take their fledglings along here and there to train them for feeding on grain, before they part with them. We scattered chaff and waste rice in our garden and there we soon found parent birds in company with their fledglings. Among all the species of little birds, buntings are regarded as dull-witted and pass by the name of 'Silly Bunting'. Indeed, they dare to perch on the roof of a shrine like sparrows and siskins do, yet they can show utter unconcern in sitting on the roof over a night-soil reservoir in the field. They stand on no ceremony, so Kiichi told me they were the kind of birds that could put us quite at ease. In other words, this may mean that they belong to the common run of the feathered tribe.

A pair of siskins built their nest once in one of the pine trees in our garden. Kiichi discovered it, while he was trimming the tree. In the nest were found chicks already hatched out and covered with down. Their eyes were not open yet, but when breathed upon by me, they stretched themselves and with their heads upturned, opened their bills wide. I used to climb this pine tree before I went to school and after I came home from there. At no other time did I go near the nest, for I took every precaution to be on the safe side. I just observed it from afar. Each parent bird looked beautiful in the light of the sun, when it started flying from the nest. Especially, when seen in counterlight, it looked more beautiful, with its green color becoming pellucid. One day, however, while Kiichi was left alone in charge of our house, a pedlar of fancy goods, who he said was a bird fancier, came around, and he, by managing to win Kiichi over, caught both the parent birds and took them away with him. The way he did this is that he wound a wisp of limed straw around the edge of the nest and made the parent birds get stuck to the

lime, when they came flying home. When I got home from school and found what had happened to the nest, I stamped my feet on the ground in front of the veranda, crying bitterly. Quite unperturbed, Grandfather told me that we could buy any number of siskins at the bird shop in town, and he would have nothing to do with me. On my part, it was far from me to stop crying, so I kept crying in a still louder voice. Startled at the gravity of the situation, Grandfather promised me to go right away to the bird shop in town and buy me lovelier birds than those siskins.

The bereaved chicks, if left alone, could not be expected to grow up. I picked on Kiichi, demanding what he was going to do with them. He said that he would feed them under his own care, and he took the nest down with the chicks in it from the branch of the pine tree. Feeding was carried on in this way. When the chicks opened their bills, which Kiichi touched beforehand with the tip of a chopstick, they got green caterpillars put into their wide-open bills. It was not till I saw him feed them in this way that I came to know they could thus grow up under human care. Grandfather intimated his feeling of uncertainty, saying, "It's no good. They will soon die." But when the prospects became bright enough for them to grow up under Kiichi's pains-taking care, he remarked for some reason or other that we must set them free, as soon as they fledged out. He, however, bought me two Korean pigeons to make up for it, when he chanced to go to town. They were rare and tame pigeons. Like turtledoves, they cooed repeatedly, but they made a bow, each time they cooed—the reason why we called them "Bowing Pigeons".

Out of the four siskin chicks one died after it ceased to cast even a look at the feed given. The other three met their death attacked by a stray cat, just when they grew up enough to fledge out. Those two bowing pigeons we had left free some time before were lost sight of about the same time. They also seem to have been attacked and devoured by a cat, for long afterward one of our neighbors came to tell us that he had seen feathers of pigeons

scattered in a mulberry field.

On the village farmers' spring holiday after the death of the two bowing pigeons, Kiichi went catfish fishing in the irrigation pond called the 'Hosota-ike', and then he chanced to find a bird-nest. He told me about it, keeping it secret from Grandfather. His report was that he found the nest on the ground and that the eggs in it looked just a little smaller than those of a hen, numbering as many as twelve. This was glad news to me. I suspected that it might be a wild duck's nest, because it was found so near the pond. Kiichi insisted that it must be a mandarin duck's, because the eggs were smaller than those of a hen. My curiosity was greatly whetted. I felt anxious to go and see the nest, so I made a promise with him in secret.

It was arranged between ourselves that I should crucian carp fishing in that irrigation pond every Sunday. The pond, which was V-shaped, was dangerous for a boy to go alone, so Kiichi was to go there with me every time. And he could thus have reason for staying away from his work in our vegetable garden to enjoy crucian carp fishing. What was important for us after all was that we should keep all of it strictly to ourselves and then put it into practice for mutual satisfaction.

On the strength of a secondhand information, which Kiichi got from one of our neighbors, he told me that a mandarin duck is a good layer. If you steal the eggs lying in its nest, you can find in a few days three or four more eggs laid in it. When you take away its eggs, the only precaution you have to take is to leave one egg untouched. If you steal all of them, it drives the bird to despair. If not driven to despair, the bird becomes so bewildered that it surely loses heart to lay more eggs. The trick is the same as the one used when we usually leave a ceramic egg as a nest egg in a henhouse. Kiichi told me in this way.

On a Sunday we both got Grandfather's leave and went to the irrigation pond, carrying our fishing tackle with us. Fishing, however,

could wait. We first went to see the mandarin duck's nest. In a nara (Japanese oak) grove there was a spot of lush miscanthus. The spot was where the nest lay hidden in the grass with strong fumes. A hollow scratched out of the ground was full of fallen leaves, small pieces of sticks and grass-roots, forming a rough and ready nest. As Kiichi had told me, the eggs in it looked simply grand, numbering twelve. Slightly smaller than eggs of a hen, they had a sharp difference in size between both ends, looked much more oval in shape and were lighter in color than yellowish-brown. As I had said before, Kiichi chanced to find the nest, while walking in search of the edible leaves of tara (*Borrassus flabeliformis*) after getting tired of fishing in the pond, when he went there on the village farmers' spring holiday.

I gazed at those eggs. The twelve eggs were lying arranged in a way inexpressly calm and quiet. Eggs of any kind, when found in a nest, appears to be lying in disorder, but actually each egg stays put in its own likeliest and most natural position in such a way that no shift by any human hand is possible. And besides, if rearranged, they roll over of their own accord, finding their proper bearings and taking their own sedate positions. I put one of the eggs in the palm of my hand. I felt something of its warmth. Kiichi took it away from the palm of my hand and put it in his fishing basket, saying, "A dozen is a fair number." Then, counting the eggs in the nest one by one—two, three, four—, he took and put them in his fishing basket. When he came to the last one, he said to me, "Don't touch it," and would not allow me to do so. I, on my part, tried in vain to catch sight of the parent birds.

Kiichi went down to the edge of the pond and using the stones he gathered, constructed a cooking fireplace on the spot and made a fire. He had it in his mind to boil the eggs in the kettle we had brought with us and eat them. I had no longer any interest in fishing and helped him in building the fire or counted the eggs over and over again. When the water in the kettle began to boil, we put

six eggs in it, allotting three to each of us. We decided to eat the remaining ones after we went home. If we couldn't boil them at home, we thought we might eat them raw.

The next Sunday we again went to the irrigation pond. We found seven eggs in the mandarin duck's nest. Supposing that the bird could lay an egg a day, we thought it must have been overwork for the mother bird. As on the previous Sunday, we stole six, leaving one in the nest, and ate them. On Sunday following, we still acted in the same way. This adventure repeated several times over, it follows that we stole quite a number of eggs from the mandarin duck's nest. About a month after the village farmers' spring holiday, our misdeed, which we had repeated without becoming fed up with it, came to the knowledge of Grandfather. He gave us a good scolding and put an end to it. In my case, I was placed under confinement on the dirt floor of our warehouse until evening as a penalty for my maltreatment of the parent mandarin ducks. Moreover, I was taken to the village herb doctor for treatment of such vicious promptings from within me, in order to make me normalize as a child. This, Grandfather told me, had to be done to cure me of my cruelty. He said that I was guilty of a gross misdeed in forcing the mandarin duck to be prolific and tyrannizing over the weak in secret. I thought that it made little or no difference, whichever bird we might try to make a good layer, a mandarin duck or a domestic hen. Here again he admonished me of my great mistake.

Long afterward I sometimes happened to try to recollect how many eggs in all I had stolen at that spot by the pond. And each time, my recollection involved a feeling of uncertainty as to how many eggs mandarin ducks were capable of laying in their breeding season. It was only some time ago, when I went landlocked trout fishing that I first got quite a new finding from a local angler. He told me that mandarin ducks build their nests only in the hollows of trees. Moreover, their nest-building and breeding are carried on by the streams in deep mountains and dark valleys. And then, in fall,

they come down the streams with their offspring and find their new habitats in ponds and lakes on the shores of the lower courses. His talk, which sounded very romantic and not half bad, still came as a surprise to me.

The angler who gave me this account of mandarin ducks said that in his boyhood he had seen a mandarin duck's nest in a hollow of a tree at a spot somewhere alongside the upper course of the Shimobe river. He said that he had seen another on the shore far up the Azusa river, too. In his opinion, it was probably birds like pheasants or copper pheasants that built their nests in the clusters of grass and laid pale yellowish-brown eggs, seeing that mandarin duck's nests were invariably found in the hollows of trees. To make myself sure of it, I consulted a book entitled *Fauna Japonica*, after I came home from my fishing trip to the Azusa river. I found the following description in it.

In summer the male mandarin duck, deprived of its distinctive feature, sheds off its "icho-ba" or ginkgo-leaf shaped plumage, as it is called. Then both male and female assume nearly the same appearance. In both seasons of spring and summer, breeding is carried on in the hollows of trees in deep mountains. In fall both parents and offspring come down the mountain-streams and find their wintering habitats in ponds and lakes in the plain fields at the foot of the mountains. The ginkgo-leaf shaped plumage is also known as the "omoi-ba" or love plumage.

I also learned from *Fauna Japonica* that what I had remembered as a mandarin duck's nest in my childhood had been that of either copper pheasants or pheasants. These two kinds of birds are different, in that the former is monogamous, while the latter is polygamous. Their manner of breeding, however, is nearly the same. As for their nest-building, they build almost the same kind of nest as the one I was taught to be a mandarin duck's in my boyhood. Their breeding season begins around April, lasting for a fairly long period. At a time they lay eight to ten eggs; only the damage rate due to enemy attacks

is very high, because they lay eggs on the ground. They, however, are capable of laying more eggs to make up for their damaged or lost ones at such a time. It is because people noticed their supplementary laying of eggs and successive feeding of chicks that they came to talk about the second-borns or third-borns of pheasants and copper pheasants. As a matter of course, there is a limit to the productive capacity in both. The experimental breeding of pheasants show that one pheasant can lay forty to eighty or ninety eggs through March into July..... This was an outline of the whole description I found.

It seems to be on the safe side that what I had seen and learned to be a mandarin duck's nest should be corrected to have been a pheasant's. Copper pheasants are found in deep mountains thick with needle-leaved trees and have a preference for comparatively dark and damp places. Pheasants are found on hills or in woods not far from human habitation and show their liking for clear and spacious places. The book I referred to explained their habits as such. What I had seen must have been a pheasant's nest after all.