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The wild ostrich.

Roosevelt, G.

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THE WILD OSTRICH

BY THEODORE ROOSEVELT

IN Mr. Scully's interesting article on the life of the African ostrich, he states that, as regards 'the habits of the wild birds, nearly every extant account bristles with inaccuracies.'

In the next paragraph, he states that 'to an unprotected man in the open an infuriated ostrich is as dangerous as a lion.' This sentence is itself a 'bristling inaccuracy.' If, when assailed by the ostrich, the man stands erect, he is in great danger. But by the simple expedient of lying down, he escapes all danger. In such case, the bird may step on him, or sit on him; his clothes will be rumped and his feelings injured; but he will suffer no bodily harm. I know various men — including Mr. William Beebe — who have had this experience. Does Mr. Scully imagine that an infuriated lion will merely sit on a man who lies down?

Mr. Scully says that the ostrich is the only animal man has domesticated because of 'sheer loveliness, as distinguished from utility.' Surely Mr. Scully has forgotten that the peacock has been domesticated for a far longer time than the ostrich. His statement that the ostrich plumes are 'probably the most perfect decorative items in Nature's storehouse,' ought, like any such statement, to be put in the form of an expression of personal taste; various storks, cranes, and herons, not to speak of birds of paradise and argus pheasants, carry plumes which to a multitude of persons with equally good taste seem even more beautiful.

Mr. Scully's description of the rav-

ages of the jackal among the ostrich eggs is of moment. In the course of the description he says that 'the white-necked raven coöperates with the jackal. He will carry a small heavy stone up into the air and drop it into the nest. Jackal and raven then share amicably the contents of the smashed egg.'

This is most interesting, and it is so important, that Mr. Scully ought to have described in detail the particular observations which warrant the various features of the statement — the cooperation, the use of the stone as a tool, the amity in sharing the result. Similar statements are frequently made, usually about vultures. But I wish that we could get the testimony of trained eye-witnesses. It is not in the least impossible: in the same regions in Africa the alliance between the big honey-badger and the queer honey-bird, is much more remarkable. Moreover, many birds drop shells on rocks or pebbly beaches, to break them; last week I saw gulls doing this. But the wielding of a stone as a tool marks an effort of intelligence akin to that of the higher primates, and of man himself at about the opening of the Pleistocene; so that it would be interesting to have real evidence of it. The incident of a raven and a jackal sharing the egg is also of special interest — entirely possible, of course, but as unexpected as a similar friendly alliance between a fox and a crow; so that it ought to be a subject for first-hand testimony.

In one paragraph Mr. Scully says

that the wild ostrich is polygamous. Yet in the next paragraph but one he states that both cock and hen sit on the eggs, and that the cock sits on the nest 'from about four o'clock in the afternoon until about eight o'clock next morning, approximately sixteen hours.' This must mean that the cock broods all the eggs of all the hens at the same time; for, of course, if the cock has more than one hen, he cannot spend two thirds of each twenty-four hours on each hen's separate nest. I came across only six or eight cases of nesting ostriches and ostriches with broods while I was in Africa. In each case there was only a pair of birds, a cock and a hen; it was only a pair and always a pair that did the brooding of the eggs, and only a pair and always a pair that led the chicks when hatched. Of course, this does not mean that polygamy may not occur; but inasmuch as both the cock and the hen sit on the eggs, and as the sitting cock can hardly cover all the eggs of both or all the hens, polygamy must radically interfere with the normal habits in this respect — and accurate and extended observations on wild birds ought to be a preliminary to generalizations on the subject.

Mr. Scully says that the nesting habits offer 'an undoubted instance of protective coloration. The cock, being jet-black, cannot be seen at night; the hen, which sits throughout the greater part of the day, is more or less the color of the desert sand. She thus attains a maximum of invisibility while on the nest.' This is certainly a misreading of the facts, — even if the facts are observed correctly, — and is probably a failure to observe them correctly. In Africa I came across wild-ostrich nests five times, always toward noon — that is, between nine in the morning and three in the afternoon. In three cases the hen was on the eggs, in two cases,

the cock. The cock which I shot and which is in the National Museum at Washington was one of these birds which I, by accident, put up from sitting on its eggs toward midday. Of course, five instances are not sufficient to generalize from, but they do warrant further examination of the subject before making dogmatic assertions as to the cock always sitting at night and the hen always in the daytime. My own observations were that the two sexes sat alternately, and indifferently, during both night and day. Nor are my own observations the only ones to bear out this view. In Selous's *Travel and Adventure*, page 463, he speaks of a hen ostrich being shot 'as she was returning to her nest just at sunset.' In Stewart Edward White's *Rediscovered Country*, page 123, he describes a return to camp after a morning's hunt, and says, 'Near camp caught sight of a queer-looking black hump, sticking out of the tall grass. When near, it suddenly unfolded into a cock ostrich and departed. We found twenty-eight eggs.'

Moreover, even if the rule laid down by Mr. Scully on this subject proves to apply generally, his interpretation of the rule is certainly erroneous. Protective coloration is a relative matter. Under the conditions which Mr. Scully describes, the cock ostrich is practically always revealingly colored, as compared to the hen, and his coloration is of a highly advertising type. Mr. Scully says that the hen is colored like the desert sand, and therefore attains the maximum of invisibility (compared to the cock) when on the nest. This is true; and it is almost as true at night as in the daytime. Under most conditions, and normally, the cock is more easily seen at night than the hen. Cloudy nights are very rare in the desert: half the time it is moonlight; and then the cock is almost as reveal-

ingly colored as in daylight. The rest of the time it is brilliant starlight, and against the desert sand the cock is even then more visible than the hen.

Nor is this all. Mr. Scully says the cock sits on the nest during four hours of daylight, the two hours after sunrise and the two hours before sunset. These are precisely the four hours during which carnivores are most active if they are abroad during daylight at all. African carnivorous beasts are for the most part nocturnal; but they are often active for a couple of hours before sunset or after sunrise; whereas during the heat of the day, say from nine o'clock until four, it is exceptional for them to move round. Therefore, if Mr. Scully is correct, the cock ostrich sits on the nest during the very hours of daylight when its revealing coloration is most dangerous and disadvantageous, while the hen sits on the nest during the hours when her concealing coloration is of little or no consequence.

Mr. Scully's theory — the accepted theory of many closet naturalists — has no warrant in fact. All the evidence goes to show that neither the revealing coloration of the cock ostrich, nor the concealing coloration of the hen, is a survival factor. The birds' habits and surroundings, their keen sight, wariness, speed, and fecundity, and the desert conditions, not their coloration patterns, are the survival factors.

Mr. Scully speaks of the curious waltzing or gyrating of the ostriches as not occurring among wild birds. I saw it twice among parties of wild birds in the Sotik country, beyond the Guaro Nyero of the south. Mr. Scully says that, as ostriches live under 'constant menace' from carnivorous foes, 'the general practice of gyration or of

any exercise calculated to attract the attention of enemies is unthinkable.' The facts directly contradict this assertion. In the first place, by the time the young birds are old enough to gyrate or waltz, they are so conspicuous that any foe is sure to see them, whether they are walking about or gyrating; and after their early youth ostriches do not seek to escape observation — they live under such conditions that they trust exclusively to seeing their foes themselves, and not to eluding the sight of their foes. In the second place, 'exercises calculated to attract attention' not merely are not 'unthinkable,' but are actual in the cases of many birds with far more numerous foes than the ostrich has. In East Africa, in parts of the ostrich country, I found the whydah finches numerous. The very conspicuous males performed continuously in their dancing rings, and their exercise *was* 'calculated to attract the attention of' every beast or bird that possessed eyesight. Relatively to the size of the bird, it was far more conspicuous, far more advertising to all possible enemies, than the waltzing of the ostrich. Certain antelopes, especially when young, indulge in play almost as conspicuous.

Mr. Scully's explanation (of a condition which does not exist) is to the effect that 'probably' the ostrich had its origin in some 'vast Australian tract where carnivora were scarce.' This is mere wild guesswork; all the information that we have indicates that it is the reverse of the truth.

Mr. Scully writes with genuine charm about much of his subject. This would be in no way interfered with if he were more careful, both in his observations and in his generalizations.

OFFICERS AND GENTLEMEN

BY MAURICE BARRÈS

I. THE LAST DAYS OF COLONEL DRIANT DEPUTY FOR NANCY

COLONEL DRIANT was killed before Verdun, at the head of his superb battalion of *chasseurs-à-pied*, in February, 1916, on the first day of the terrible German offensive.

Driant was my friend and my colleague in the Chamber of Deputies. He represented Nancy — the same district for which I sat before I was chosen Deputy for Paris.

He wrote some excellent books. His work as an author was an extension of his military and national activity. During twenty-five years, in some thirty volumes, he strove to prepare our young men to face the new German invasion which some of us could see approaching.

When he fell, I went to Verdun. I talked much about him with his comrades in arms. Their words, like the numerous letters from his men, are stones in the monument of his glory. I began at once to collect this useful material; it was the fitting way to be of service to a hero. Thus in my narrative I shall include so far as possible the very words that have remained graven in my memory. In the glowing tales of his comrades, they were magnificent; and if, scattered through my text, they may sound awkward, what does it matter? they preserve something of the last impressions which he made upon his soldiers and his friends.

We know that the two battalions

of *chasseurs-à-pied* which Driant commanded formed one of the links in the chain which covered Verdun to the north; one of the links in the — Corps under General — .

For a long time Driant was free from anxiety. I have been rereading his letters. On November 2, 1914, he wrote me from Samogneux: 'We are holding them here, twenty kilometres from Verdun, so that they can't possibly place their heavy batteries within range, and they will never take Verdun.' But for more than a year he witnessed the constant augmentation of the enemy's stock of munitions, and called constantly for works of consolidation on our side.

During the last weeks he was firmly convinced of the imminence of an assault. 'We have numerous and unquestionable indications,' he said; 'the statements of prisoners agree with our information, but there are those who still doubt.' On February 16, he wrote to Paul Sordoillet at Nancy, 'The Boches are working like ants all about us. The hour of the assault cannot be far away. Never did the phrase, "By God's grace," seem to me less commonplace.'

One evening about this time, when Driant was returning from Verdun to Mormont farm, he said to one of his men, who was with him, —

'Thus far the fates have been kind

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Pamphlet
Binder
Gaylord Bros.
Makers
Syracuse, N. Y.
PAT. JAN 21, 1908

