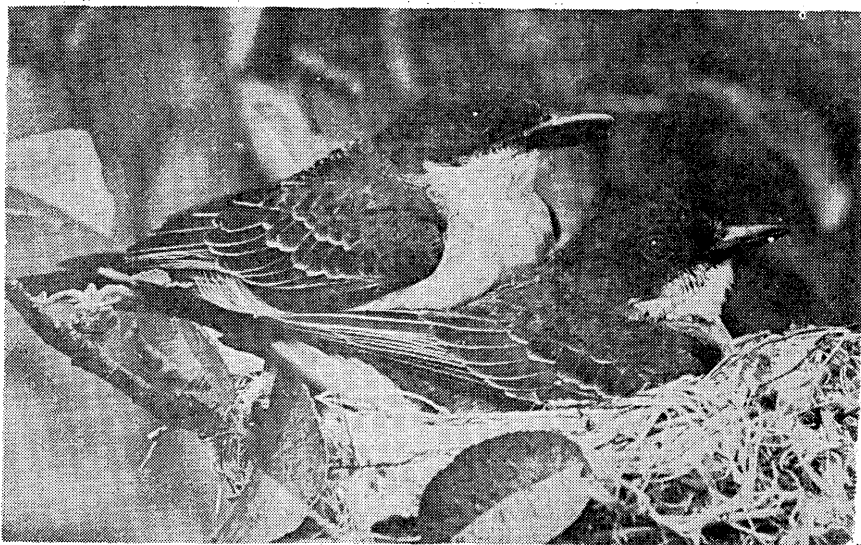


PIGGY-BACK KINGBIRDS

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Fred Ransom, a retired surgeon from Jamaica was spending the summer of 1963 in Ithaca learning all he could about birds in and around Sapsucker Woods and this morning he was in for a real surprise. So were we all. "Is it customary" he inquired after a visit to our Kingbird blind, "for both Kingbirds to sit on the eggs together?" "They may take turns sitting on the eggs" I replied "but I never heard of Kingbirds or any other birds sitting side by side on their eggs" "Ah" — he said, "these birds were not side by side — they were definitely piggy-back". "That", I said "is impossible — I have to see that for myself". It was not long before I did. The blind was ready on its six foot tower, the birds had accepted it, and all I had to do was to climb in with my camera and wait for the impossible. I took no chances on setting speedlights lest it might upset the routine.



Within ten minutes the two birds were back at the nest — and moving in to incubate those beautiful chocolate spotted eggs. One made it ahead of the other and there was apparently a little dispute as to whose turn it was. Each one snapped its bill but the second bird was not intimidated and crowded into the nest alongside of the other which by this time had the eggs safely against its brood spot. Obviously dissatisfied with the position, the second bird crawled over the other, at first crosswise and finally full piggy-back and apparently satisfied. It even let its wings droop slightly over the under bird. In this position they stayed for some ten minutes, when both birds got uneasy at about the same time and left the nest together. In a minute one returned alone and took her place on the nest in a normal manner. She incubated for about 15 minutes, left, and in

a minute the other bird was on the nest doing its stint. This was repeated four or five times during the afternoon until they both returned together and then the whole procedure first described was repeated ending in the mild quarrel and the final piggy-back position.

Never in my experience had I encountered a wild bird that could be satisfied with incubating another of its kind or being incubated by one. I had known of birds laying eggs in another bird's nest when for some reason its own nest was not available — such as a Sora rail that laid its eggs in a nearby Redwing's nest when a flash flood covered its own eggs with water during the laying period. I had known of Pheasants laying in Mallards' nests; of Grouse and Pheasants laying in the same nest and fighting for the ownership — but never before had I heard of a bird submitting to be incubated or of trying to incubate an adult bird of its own kind.

I had been in the blind less than an hour, however, before part of the mystery was cleared by the appearance of a third Kingbird that was slightly larger and apparently a male, the sultan of this small harem. He was interested in everything that went on about the nest but never offered to incubate though he did occasionally dart out at a passing crow.

Of course it is quite irregular for a Kingbird to have two mates — even in separate nests — and females, during the nesting season, are normally just as intolerant of one another as are the males. My only explanation is that the second female showed up after the nest was built and the eggs laid, that she had just lost her own nest and was at the height of her incubation instinct and came to this nest when the rightful mother was off feeding. Her urge to incubate was so strong that she persisted even when attacked by the owner of the eggs and finally was accepted just as a nuisance. Of course there is the possibility that the late comer was a former mate of the male and he accepted her as he normally would not a strange female and when the owner of the eggs got no assistance from him in driving her away she just made the best of the situation.

However that may be, Dr. Ranson was correct in his observation of two Kingbirds sitting piggy-back on a nest, and we have pictures to prove it. The arrangement was not very successful, however, for in the irregular exchange that took place when both birds wanted to incubate at the same time, one egg got kicked out of the nest, one got crushed so it didn't hatch, and one small youngster got lost somewhere along the line so that only one reached maturity and left the nest successfully on July 28 when 15 days old. Laboratory of Ornithology, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York