

Brown Creeper. True, it is itself antedated by *C. rufa*, Bartram, 1791; but the present temper of the A. O. U. Committee throws Bartram out of the case. — ELLIOTT COUES, *Washington, D. C.*

The Roadrunner as a Destroyer of Caterpillars. — In southern California the passion vine is everywhere infested by a red butterfly (*Agraulis vanillæ*), the larva of which feeds extensively if not entirely upon this plant. So great is the damage that plants are often completely defoliated and become so unsightly that in some regions many have destroyed their vines and replaced them with other species, less desirable perhaps but less apt to breed a horde of pests.

Not long since I called on a friend living in the suburbs of San Diego who had a large number of unusually thrifty passion vines climbing over his fence. Upon inquiring the reason of their freedom from what I had considered an inevitable pest, he informed me that a pair of Roadrunners (*Geococcyx californicus*) had for several months paid daily visits to his vines, climbing through them in all directions until the last caterpillar had been captured.

He said that he was satisfied that several newly hatched chickens had gone to satisfy hungry Roadrunners on one or two occasions when the vines yielded less than usual, but they were welcome to a chick once in a while for their very valuable service in keeping in check a pest that none of our other native birds seem to feed upon. — A. W. ANTHONY, *San Diego, Cal.*

How the Chimney Swift secures Twigs for its Nest. — Among some of the beautiful drawings of birds done by Mr. L. A. Fuertes, and submitted to my approval by the Messrs. Macmillan of New York, with reference to their publication in a work for which I am partly responsible, there was one which I 'held up' for further consideration. This represented a Chimney Swift in the act of snapping off a bit of twig with its feet, like a hawk seizing its prey. We have always supposed the bird secured the object with its beak, as it dashed past on wing at full speed; or at any rate that has been my own belief for more years than I can remember. But Mr. Fuertes vouched for the correctness of his representation from actual observation. The question being thus raised, I set it forth recently in a query inserted in one of our popular periodicals,¹ asking for information. I have received a number of replies, mostly corroborating the traditional belief, on what purports to be sufficient observation of the bird in the act. But Mr. Fuertes is supported in his view by Mr. Frank J. Birtwell, of Dorchester, Mass., from whose letter I quote: "In 1894 I spent the summer at Yarmouth, Nova Scotia, where the Swift is common, nesting in unused chimneys of the village. The bird flies to a tree, usually a spruce, and

¹ 'The Nidologist' for March, just to hand, contains (pp. 80, 81) several replies to my interrogation — and these leave the case still open!

alights on a dead twig, her weight or the action of her wings snapping it off. She then carries it off in her feet. Last May 23d a Swift flew to a willow near where I was standing, and snapped off a dead twig in the same manner." This is precisely the performance which Mr. Fuertes's drawing represents. — ELLIOTT COUES, *Washington, D. C.*

Probable First Description of *Empidonax flaviventris*. — It would seem unlikely that two such common birds as the Least and the Yellow-bellied Flycatcher could have slipped through the fingers of Wilson, Nuttall, and Audubon, and remained to be discovered by the Messrs. Baird in 1843. Of the two, the Yellow-bellied is the brightest colored and best marked in comparison with the Small Green-crested — the only one of the three which was characterized in Wilson's time; both Traill's and the Least being less likely than the Yellow-bellied to be discriminated from the Green-crested in those times. I find in Nuttall a notice which, it seems to me, can hardly be anything else than an indication of *E. flaviventris*. This is as follows, with italics for the most significant phrases:

"NOTE. We are acquainted with a third small species [of flycatcher] allied to the present [*Tyrannula pusilla* Sw.] and *acadica*, but distinguishable by the *superior brightness* of its plumage; being olive-green above and on the flanks. Rump, and beneath the wings almost *sulphur-yellow*, with a brightish bar also on the wings. This species does not appear to migrate much to the north of New York State." Nutt., Man., orig. ed., Vol. II, 1834, App., p. 568.

Nuttall is here speaking of no imaginary bird, and not compiling a notice from somebody else. He knows such a bird, and he describes it at first hand — perhaps from memory, perhaps from observation in life without a specimen; but at any rate, his bird is a fact, and as such must be accounted for. He is also dealing with a true Flycatcher — not with any Warbler, or Vireo, or even Fly-catching Warbler of his genus *Sylvania* — all of which he is perfectly able to discriminate from any species of "*Muscicapa*" or "*Tyrannula*." In the orig. ed., I, 1832, he has the Phœbe, the Wood Pewee, the Olive-sided, and the Small Green-crested, all put and by themselves, showing that he understands this group as something apart from Warblers, etc. In the Appendix to his Vol. II, 1834, when he had got hold of the Fauna Boreali-Americana, he adds to his list of true Flycatchers *Tyrannula pusilla* Sw., and *Tyrannula richardsonii* Sw., between which two species he interpolates the 'note' I have just cited. This fixes the position of his new bird as a 'Tyrannuline,' and I do not see what else it can be than *Empidonax flaviventris*; the description is a fairly good one, and certainly fits *flaviventris* better than it does any other species. Nuttall gives no name to his new bird, and in fact cancels his 'note' in his 2d ed., 1840, where the case drops out of sight altogether; so that no nomenclatural question is raised. But this fugitive 'note,' tucked away in the appendix to his Water Bird volume of 1834, and then disappearing seems to embody a curious bit of early history, worth pausing a moment to consider. — ELLIOTT COUES, *Washington, D. C.*



Coues, Elliott. 1897. "How the Chimney Swift Secures Twigs for Its Nest." *The Auk* 14, 217-218. <https://doi.org/10.2307/4068902>.

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