

ORIOLE INSTINCT.

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Mr. Taverner's note in the May issue, describing the nest built by a pair of young orioles, recalls an experience with a nesting pair of the Bullock's Oriole, in the summer of 1911. As in the case of the pair Mr. Taverner had under observation, the male was a bird of the previous year and it was taken for granted that the female was also.

The writer was camped under a group of quaking aspens on the shore of Okanagan lake and in one of these trees the orioles had started building. The branch to which the nest was fastened was an upright one, half an inch in diameter, close to the top of the tree and some twenty feet from the ground. Attention was drawn to the partly constructed nest, by the efforts of one of the birds to draw out a linen thread from a bath-towel, hung over a wooden railing near the nesting tree. With the end of the thread held in the bill and with feet braced against the railing, the bird tugged and worried at the thread until it became loose; then with one decisive jerk, flew with it to the nest. This was repeated several times; an inexhaustible mine of building material had been found.

Having often read of the oriole's instinctive rejection of colored string for nesting material, it was thought to be a good opportunity for experiment along this line. Accordingly an assortment of various colored yarns, white, pale blue, red, black and pink were cut into convenient lengths and placed in a row on the bath towel. In a few minutes the female returned to the towel-rack and finding this loose material, a new treasure-trove on top of her linen mine, made no attempt to pick out more threads as long as the white yarn was available. The colored yarns were not touched and when the supply of white was exhausted, the towel again came in for attention. The reputation of the species for sagacity seemed to be established.

She worked most industriously, taking, on an average, five minutes to weave into the nest a piece of yarn twelve inches in length and a minute or a little longer to return and select another piece. Before alighting on the towel-rack she always gave the characteristic harsh call-note.

The female did most of the building; indeed it was not certain that the male performed any of the work; their similarity, and the fact that they did not appear together, made it difficult to recognize the sexes.

Anxious to discover if this instinctive selection of neutral-colored material would operate under more complicated conditions, the colored yarns were collected and to each of them was knotted a piece of white yarn of the same length and they were placed again on the towel rack, with the white portion uppermost. Without hesitation she began carrying off the pieces, with the white portion held in her bill; the white half was woven into the nest and the colored half allowed to hang from the outside.

Oriole instinct was at a discount now, and I became bolder in my experiments. Selecting some soft thick yarns, in red, green and black and, when fluffed out, of the diameter of a pencil, I tied these in twelve inch lengths to short pieces of fine white yarn. These were taken as quickly as the last; the short ends of white woven into the fabric of the nest and the larger colored portion allowed to hang from the outside. It was amusing to see the bird fly into the tree with a long brilliant streamer trailing behind.

The nest was now ablaze with color, long gaudy strands hung from all points, six to ten inches below the bottom. To add to the color-scheme I tore into strips, a necktie of a particularly violent pattern in red and green, and tied on the usual piece of white yarn. The bird was now utterly demoralised and did not balk at this singular adornment. Several pieces were added to the upper part of the nest.

The polychromatic structure was now completed; the eggs were laid and the nestlings raised without mishap, while the decorations waved in the breeze to the wonder of the passerby and perhaps the confusion of marauding, egg-hunting crows.

A closer examination of the nest after the young had flown, revealed the fact that it was of unusually poor workmanship, loosely made from various kinds of string, through which was woven, the white yarn; the slight lining was of black horsehair; no roots or other fibrous material had been used.