

WHY BIRDS NEST IN COLONIES

by

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Photographs by Herman T. Bohlman.

It would be interesting to know the real reasons why some birds nest in colonies and others do not. Few of our smaller birds have nesting places in common, but the swallows are exceptions, both the eave and the bank swallows. Throughout the West a colony of cliff swallows will select a large building, a bridge or a cliff and plaster a small area with hundreds of thin mud nests. On the other hand, I always find that each pair of barn swallows like a whole building to themselves. Blackbirds like to nest near together in a certain locality. The instinct that prompts a company of these birds to take up their homes year after year about the same pond cannot be very different from the feeling that prompts men to do the same thing. Almost all of our birds like to flock at certain seasons of the year, especially when migrating. At this time there is a common feeling, a traveling kinship. Then, there are advantages of protection.

One might think that the sea birds nest in such great colonies because their numbers are so vast and the rocks where they live are comparatively few. But the same species of gulls and cormorants that crowd together on a small sea rock will also crowd together in a small nesting area about the inland lakes where nesting places are almost unlimited in number. The pelicans, terns and herons all spread out over a large area when they feed, but they like to gather in a big colony and select a common breeding ground.

Among these inland water birds, I have found that the instinct is not only for birds of the same species to form colonies but birds of different species like to have their colonies in

close proximity. The best example of this I have seen is in the Klamath Lake region of Southern Oregon, where the tules extend for miles in every direction, furnishing extensive nesting places. Yet the greater part of the water birds of the Lower Klamath Lake, not including game birds, have selected a certain small region for a breeding ground, and about this place the gulls, cormorants, pelicans, grebes, terns and herons all assemble in one vast colony.

The great blue heron is one of the most interesting birds. It is said that a pair will build an isolated nest, but I have never found one. The heron likes a remote fishing preserve of his own, for he is a solitary fisher; but he loves to live in a small village community where he can return each evening and enjoy the social life among his neighbors and dwell in mutual protection.

He is a remarkable fellow to adopt himself to circumstances. In a bird of such long legs and of such proportions, one would naturally think his nesting place would be on the ground. In the lake region of Southern Oregon, we did find the great blue heron nesting on the ground, surrounded on all sides by gulls, pelicans and terns. But in other portions of Oregon and California a colony of these same birds will select the tallest firs deep back in the forest or the sycamores and willows in the midst of a swamp.

The swamp lands at the lower end of San Francisco Bay region are inhabited by two different kinds of herons, the great blue and the black-crowned night heron. The night heron is a bird much smaller in proportions than the great blue. The legs are short, and the neck is short and thick in comparison to that of the blue heron. At the lower end of the bay is a wooded belt reaching out about a mile. In the centre are large sycamore trees, the trunks of which are twined with a thick growth of poison oak. This area is an almost impenetrable jungle.