

NATURE NOW

Goldfinch's Lifelong Instincts Studied

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Special Writer For The Birmingham Eccentric

The Naturalist who spends hours observing the commonplace sometimes sees the unusual.

On September 20, while on a field trip along the flats of the Clinton river near Utica, Michigan, we came upon a mother goldfinch dead on her nest, her wings still spread in a protective gesture.

SECURELY anchored in a small Hawthorne some fifty inches above ground, the nest was carefully constructed of plant fibers interspersed with plant down and gave evidence of belonging to the first nesting period.

At the time of her death the mother bird was brooding a single egg which remained intact. Of all our sightings of goldfinch nests late in July or early August when a fresh supply of nesting composite materials are available for nesting materials and their seeds ripen to feed the young.

GOLDFINCHES ordinarily build twice in this season. We recently found another nest in a similar location with three young four or five days old. These represented a second brood.

The nest was carefully built. Records show that the goldfinch takes an average of thirteen days to complete the first nest. Sometimes both the plant fiber and the down used at this time are from the early willow and poplar. The second nest was made of the fiber of the swamp milkweed interlaced and lined with thistle down.

PROBABLY because of a more abundant supply of materials, the second nests in late August are completed in five or six days.

The dead bird's first laying cycle was interrupted and would have produced from four to six eggs. The second nest usually contains two or three eggs, as was attested by our observation.

WALTER NICKELL of Cranbrook Institute of Science suggested several theories which might account for the death of the mother bird. Frequently an egg is broken in the incubator which results in injury and infection. Sometimes nesting birds are attacked by predators of their kind. As in all living things, disease and old age take their toll.

It is also possible that our mother bird may have died of fright of some threatened enemy. The heart rate of song birds is extremely rapid as required for the speedy distribution of nourishment to quickly exhausted cells responding to a high metabolism rate.

IN A COMPLETELY relaxed black-capped chickadee it varies from 400 to 600 beats per minute.



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birds continue friendly and gregarious even during the nesting season when small groups may be seen dipping over the fields and singing in the tree tops.

Studies show at least three songs: an "off territory" courtship song, a territorial flight song and the usual canary-like warbling song used in flock formation. The last of these is heard well into September when most birds are long since silent.

THE MOTHER BIRD feeds her young at one-half hour intervals by regurgitating partly digested seeds of thistle and other composites. In the nest holding the young we found their crops so distended that they reached well up around the neck on either side.

One question asked which may be in your mind is "How will these young, hatched so late, make their migration flight?" The answer is that since the goldfinch is a seed eater he need not leave until the early snows cover the land. The goldfinch is well feathered and scientists agree that hunger is a more potent factor than cold in migration patterns.

Only the mother bird so long dead knew the manner of her secret end. But the metronome of life continues to beat in fast tempo for our songbird friends who live out their small and defenseless lives in the midst of numbing threats.

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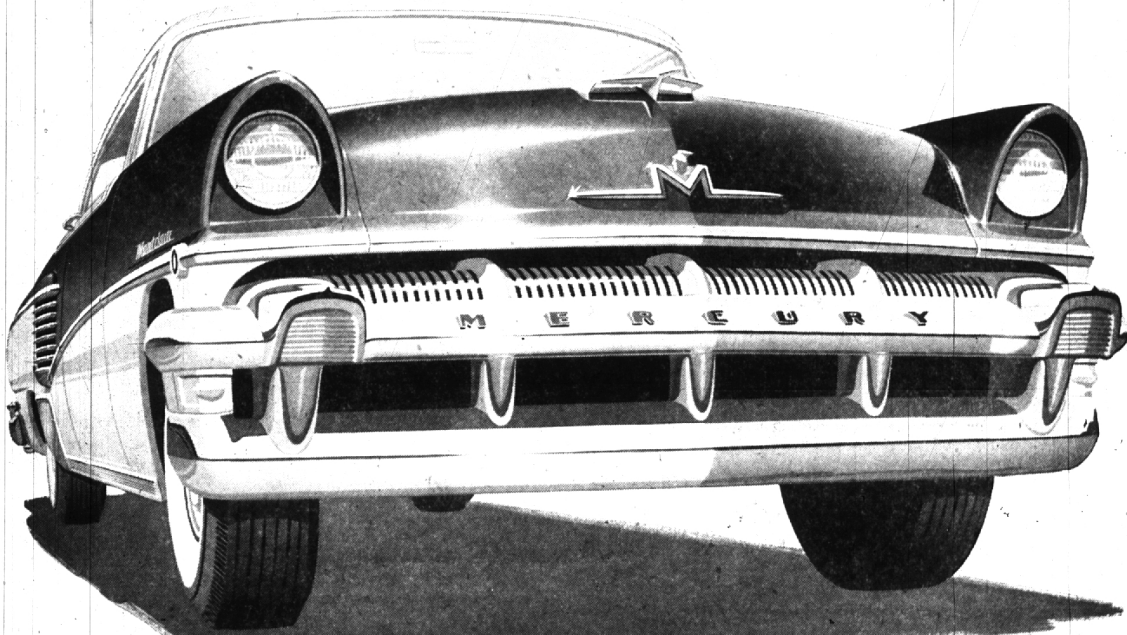
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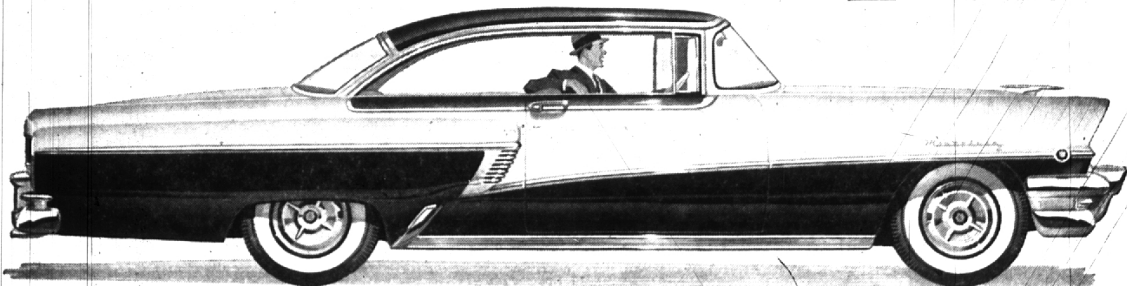
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