

The Basilisk Lizard

By ALEXANDER F. SKUTCH

AMONG the many kinds of lizards that inhabit southern Central America, one of the most interesting is the basilisk. The biggest individuals, probably old males, are about two feet in length, grayish-green or grayish-brown in color, with a pale yellow stripe along each side. They wear a high, thin crest on the hindhead, another with a frilled margin down the middle of the back, and a third along the upperside of the basal half of the long tail. On somewhat smaller individuals, which seem to be females or younger males, the crest is confined to the back of the head, where it projects behind like the rudder of a boat, with perhaps a rudimentary crest along the back. Youngsters of all sizes, which form the bulk of the population, lack the crest.

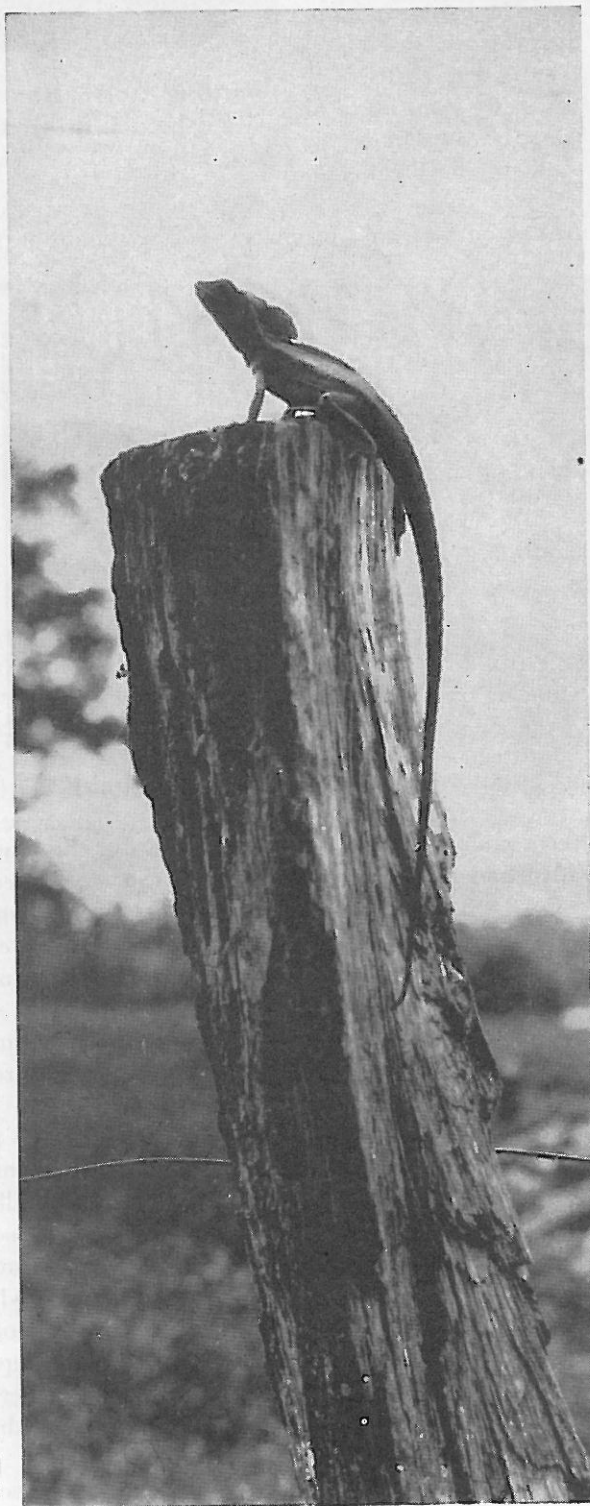
Basilisk lizards dwell along the shores of rivers, lakes and lagoons in the warm lowlands, up to about 3000 feet above sea level. They like to sun themselves on rocks projecting above the water of rushing mountain streams, on logs stranded on the banks, or on the bare shores of lakes. From the waterways that are their headquarters they make excursions over neighboring pastures and lawns in search of food. Yet they rarely travel far from water, and if alarmed on one of these inland trips they scuttle at full speed back to the nearest shore, where alone they seem to feel safe. Keen-sighted, alert and usually distrustful of man, his approach generally sends them hurrying back to the friendly streamside. When running they use only their long hind legs, elevating the forepart of the body and holding the much shorter front legs above the surface of the ground. The long tail serves as balance.

The first sight of a big basilisk lizard scurrying over the

water is an event long to be remembered. They run over the surface of river or lake much as they do over the ground, holding the forelegs up and using for propulsion only their strong hindlegs, with the long toes spread out over so wide an area that, moving at great speed, they do not break through the surface film. The tail drags along the surface of the water. The basilisks

use their long toes to keep them above water much in the manner of those graceful tropical birds, the jacanas. But the jacanas, which walk deliberately over lagoons and sluggish streams hunting food, depend upon floating water weeds to sustain them; whereas the basilisks run so fast that the surface film of the water alone suffices to hold them up. When surprised on the bank of a stream, the wary lizards scurry across to the opposite shore, or to some islet or projecting boulder in mid-channel. But if the expanse of water is wide and no floating log or emergent stump offers a haven of refuge, the canny basilisks flee back into the dense vegetation along the shore rather than take to the open water. If a fall into the water carries it beneath the surface, the basilisk can swim by kicking its hindlegs, much in the manner of a frog.

Basilisks are, at least in part, vegetarians. I have seen them eat the soft, sweet, white coat that surrounds the slippery green seeds of the *Inga* trees — the *guavos* so dear to the hearts of Central American children. Lacking a mill to process our coffee, we spread the freshly picked bright red berries to dry in the sun on top of a huge rock, inscribed with curious designs carved by Indians long ago, that rises beside a stream not far from the house. Here the basilisk lizards come to eat the sweetish pulp in which the twin coffee "beans" are found.



But the most enterprising basilisk I ever knew was one that formed the habit of visiting a table set for the birds. The board was fastened in a crotch of a *Heliocarpus* tree in front of my house in southern Costa Rica. Here bananas or ripe plantains were displayed daily, and over a period of years attracted a growing number of birds of more than twenty kinds, including tanagers of nine species, five kinds of honeycreepers, three finches, two kinds of woodpeckers, visiting Baltimore orioles, and swarms of little wintering Tennessee warblers.

It was into this brilliant company that the basilisk lizard intruded, about four years after the feeding-table had been established. He was a fine crested fellow, although not of the largest size, and he lived along the stream that flowed fifty yards away. Several inches lacking from the end of his high-crested tail served as a mark of recognition. Easily he climbed up the twelve feet of smooth trunk to reach the board, where he lost no time in digging into the bananas, scooping out big mouthfuls with his broad jaws and consuming far more on each visit than any bird. His arrival would put the birds to flight, and so long as he remained on the board they held aloof, the boldest perching a few feet away and complaining. His hunger satisfied, he would disappear into the shrubbery on the bank below the tree.

The lizard's visits to the table began in October and continued into November. Then for about four months

he stayed away. The following April his visits were resumed; the missing tip of the tail was evidence that the same individual had returned. He was not entirely welcome, for not only did he frighten away the birds, but he ate more than his share, and what was more annoying, with his blunt jaws he pushed the bananas from the table, which the sharp-beaked birds rarely did. Bananas were becoming scarce because the plantation was ravaged by the sigatoka disease, which killed the leaves and allowed the plants to produce only meager bunches, if they did not die before yielding anything. Hence I deemed it expedient to discourage the big lizard's visits. As shy as most of the birds, he would leave the table if he saw me approach over the lawn, and climb up a long, ascending branch where he was safely out of reach amidst the foliage. Then when I entered the house and everything became quiet he would descend and resume his feast.

A persistent pilferer, the lizard, although chased many times, returned again and again. Finally, one day when he had scrambled up the long branch and looked down at me as though in defiance, I shook the bough until he jumped from his high perch. The dense *Thunbergia* bush on the bank below broke the force of his long fall and he scuttled off, apparently none the worse for the experience — but wiser. After that he stayed away from the table, leaving the bananas to the multicolored birds, and to the bats and marsupials.