

ALEXANDER SKUTCH

*Montezuma Oropéndola*



The traveler in the Central American tropics cannot fail to notice the colonies of oropéndolas, their skillfully woven bags swinging like exaggerated oriole nests from the branch tips of the ceiba trees. The striking males, as large as crows, are deep chestnut shading into black on the chest and head; their outer tail feathers flash canary yellow. The summer of 1955 was a good season for these large icterids (blackbirds) on the Caribbean slope of southern Mexico where they do not seem to nest every year. I saw my first colony in a royal palm not far from the roadside. Later in a tall ceiba we watched a classic colony, forty nests suspended in an almost perfect circle around the perimeter of the tree. I spent an hour photographing the displaying males that swung upside down to the accompaniment of much wing flapping and loud gurgling noises.

They made a beautiful picture in the late afternoon light (it was five o'clock). The next morning, before nine, when we returned along the same road I sensed that something was missing; a mile or two later I had my delayed take—where was the ceiba tree? We went back and discovered that it had been chopped down. The big baglike nests lay sprawled on the ground and there were no signs of life. The big, wonderful birds, their colony ravaged, had fled.

In recent years a flood of American ornithologists has invaded Mexico; a few have investigated the other Central American countries. Most of them have been either collectors of specimens or collectors of lists. A few dedicated men like Irby Davis and George Sutton have inquired into the ways of the living birds. Alexander Skutch has gone one step further. Putting down his roots in Central America he has attempted to do for this virgin ground what Audubon did (in words, not pictures) for North America.