The Great Tinamou
of the Tropical Forest

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I stood on a wooded ridge, amid palm trees whose slender, soaring trunks thrust feather crowns into the high canopy of the rainforest. Around me grew clusters of low, spiny palms, with ribbed fronds that tapered to tips beneath which brown hermit hummingbirds fastened their downy nests. My eyes followed the graceful curve of a woody vine upward to the lofty bough from which it hung, like a tree trunk that had lost its power to stand erect. The forest dripped after the heavy afternoon shower of early May, but the sun, sinking low above the wooded

summit of the opposite ridge, sent nearly horizontal rays through a gap in the massed clouds. Far above me in the loosen tree tops, a party of toucans were singing their warps, throwing their great yellow and chestnut bills skyward as they began each high-pitched verse. A Black-faced Ant-thrush, walking daintily over the leaf-strewed ground, whistled three in a full, mellow voice. From the fern undergrowth came a Brown Manakin's exquisite whistle, ascending in three stages. A sweet, slight call revealed the presence of a Black-striped Woodcreeper, clinging unseen to some high trunk. The cicadas, which through the dry early months of the year had filled the woodland with their strident sounds, mingled their sharp sizzles with the liquid notes of the birds. Doomed to perish beneath the hard rains now beginning, these insects introduced a note of
mutability and death into the joyous woodland chorus.

Suddenly a strong, solemn voice sounded through the forest, overpowering all its lighter sounds as the sunshine dimmed a lamp. Now on one side, now on another, the organ pipes were repeated, saturating all the woodland with pure sound. In a song consisting of two full, long-drawn notes several times repeated, the Great Tinamous (Tinamus major) were heralding the approach of night.

For a few minutes the tinamous' whistles pealed intermittently through the forest, then they fell silent for the night. As I walked home-ward along a narrow, fern-bordered path, the last of the pyrophorus fireflies, creatures of the dry season, traced brilliant, erratic courses through the trunks of the great trees—my trees. Recently I had bought this forest, along with the adjoining clearings and small plantings of a farm newly carved from the wilderness in southern Costa Rica, and close beside it I had built a house which I hoped would be my home for many years.

Sometimes as I followed a forest path I met a Great Tinamou, a bird the size of a Guinean Fowl, with a stout, finely barred, olive-brown body, a slender grayish neck, a small chestnut head with large, dark eyes, a straight bill of moderate length, and a negligible tail. After walking ahead of me for a short distance, the tinamou would quietly vanish into the surrounding undergrowth. These birds were almost always alone; although once I met a parent who led three half-grown chicks for a good way down a forest road before they veered aside into the undergrowth.

More often, especially while walking through pathless woodland, I would become aware of a tinamou, not by sight, but by a startlingly loud burst of wingbeats as the heavy bird rose from amidst screening herbage and flew rapidly away between the tree trunks, to alight at some point beyond my vision.

Although the abrupt moving of the heavy tinamous seems to demand an effort too violent to be under perfect control, I have never known the bird to strike against an obstacle, as, according to W. H. Hudson, the Spotted Tinamou of the open pampas of South America frequently does, with fatal results. Any tendency by a forest-dwelling bird to collide with the trees that closely surround it would be sternly suppressed by natural selection. In Panama, Frank M. Chapman saw a Great Tinamou fly up in this way when stalked by a Tayara.

One does not often see a bird as large and shy as the tinamou at ease in its natural setting, but years ago in the forests of Panama I enjoyed this unique experience. I was spending the morning in my little swamp of brown cloth, watching a Yellow-thighed Manakin attend her eggs, when I noticed the tinamou about thirty feet off. For a long while it walked around in small circles, from time to time picking up something edible, but never quitting one small area. I wondered what the attraction of this particular spot of the forest floor could be, but I did not wish to emerge from hiding to investigate.

Presently a Brown Dendrocinch, next a pair of Spotted Antbirds, arrived to accompany the tinamou, and from tree trunks or uplings dropped to snatch something from the ground, then rose at once to their low observation posts. This behavior, typical of followers of army ants, assured me of their presence, long before they came close enough to be distinguished. The tinamou was picking up the insects and other little creatures driven forth from the ground litter by the hunting ants.

I had known the tinamou for years before I ever saw it elsewhere than on the ground or on the short, low flights it makes when disturbed. As I passed through my forest one afternoon in September, a tinamou rose from the undergrowth to a stout horizontal limb of a tall tree, forty or fifty feet up. Here it stood for so long that I thought it had gone to roost, although another hour of daylight remained; but when I returned ten minutes later, it had vanished.

The following April I stood quietly in the forest as the day waned, watching a low, glaukular nest in which I hoped to see an elusive Nightingale-Wren retire for the night. As the light faded, a tinamou flew into a neighboring small tree, to alight on a nearly horizontal branch a few inches thick and about twenty feet up. This was at the enchanted period of the twilight when the tinamous were raising their voices here and there in the distance; but the bird in the tree stood silent and motionless.
In such forest as this—which happens to be in the rain-forest of Honduras, in the Great Tinamou’s range—the bird is perfectly at home. This shows the base of a huge silk-cotton.
When the Chestnut-mandibled Toucan had finished their vesper chorus and it was nearly dark in the underwood, I advanced cautiously toward the tinamou's tree. Since the bird gave no evidence of alarm, I grew bolder and went closer. Throwing the beam of my electric torch on it, I moved all around and beneath it, keeping it always in the circle of light, but its only movement was to turn its head. The reflection from its eyes was white, not red like that of the Patuque of the neighboring clearings. To judge by the brilliance of its eye-shine, the tinamou was fairly well at night. I wished to learn how it grasped its perch, but my light was not strong enough to reveal this detail. Finally I departed, leaving the tinamou resting peacefully in the very spot where it first alighted.

Formerly, when I was wakeful at night and heard a tinamou calling in the neighboring forest, I was troubled by the thought that it wandered over the ground, exposed to all the perils of the tropical forest. But now I pictured it resting on a high bough in relative security. The Great Tinamou does not join the dawn chorus, and it sings only sporadically through the day, as it does in the night. Its principal period of song is in the evening twilight.

One day in June, as I walked through the open woodland near the rivulet at the western boundary of my farm, three big, intensely blue eggs caught my eye from a distance. Save the morpho butterfly's satiny wings, these were the most vivid objects in the forest. They lay near the top of the low bank on the farther side of the stream, at the base of a clump of tree ferns. Although somewhat screened by the heart-shaped leaves of a terrestrial arid, they were so inadequately concealed that I could see them from a point a hundred feet away.

Retraining from approaching for a closer inspection of these lovely eggs, I marked with a stick the most distant spot from which they were visible. Next day I cautiously returned to my marker, hoping for a glimpse of the parent bird, whatever its kind, as it covered the eggs. But alas! they had vanished, leaving only a few fragments of glossy blue shell scattered around the spot where they had rested on the ground, with no sign of a nest. From descriptions that I had read, I believed them to be eggs of the Great Tinamou, but these were the first that I had myself found.

A decade passed before I found my second tinamou's nest, a shallow depression in the ground litter at the base of a small tree near the forest's edge. The two eggs were unattended and cold, but not for long I saw a Great Tinamou. Two days later there were still only two eggs, cold and wet; but on the third day I found three eggs, still cold. On the fourth day I at last found a tinamou covering the eggs—my first unexceptionable proof of the identity of these lovely objects. While I stood watching the bird from a distance of about twenty feet, it suddenly flew up directly from the nest, it seemed—and with a great burst of wingbeats shot out of the forest and over the adjoining second-growth thickets. There were still only three eggs, slightly warm. On my next visit, two days later, two of the porcelain-like shells lay near the nest site with big gaps in their sides; the third had wholly vanished. I consoled myself with the reflection that the parent bird had probably escaped, unharmed by the plunderer of its nest, for there were no feathers in the vicinity.

In the forests of El General, the Great Tinamou breeds chiefly early in the wet season, in April, May and June, to judge by the few nests that I have found and the chicks that I have met; but an empty nest which a neighbor once took me to see had eggs in late February, the height of the dry season. Although sets of six or even eight eggs—possibly laid by two females—have been reported from other regions, here I have not found more than four. In early April five years ago I discovered my third and last nest. My attention was drawn to it when a tinamou suddenly flew up, about ten feet away, while I stood watching a Chestnut-backed Antbird. Four eggs lay among loose leaves between two projecting buttresses at the base of a high tree. I did not touch the eggs, and after a few days the tinamou would continue to cover them while I looked at him from a neighboring little-used mudway. He always sat facing the trunk, and fitted neatly into the space between the buttresses.

Much as I desired to place a paint-daub recognition mark on my big tinamou between the buttresses, I doubted whether he would permit such a familiarity, and I did not wish to cause his desertion. But ten days after I found the nest,
nature herself marked the bird in a manner that I thought would be helpful. Rain began in the middle of the morning and lasted into the night. The following noon, I noticed that the dark feathers on the tinamou's rump were matted together and bore a whitish encrustation that was very conspicuous where flecks of sunshine fell upon it. This was evidently due to salts leached from the plumage by the long rain and left after the evaporation of part of the water by the heat of the bird's body. The tinamou's appearance suggested that he had sat motionless, breast against the trunk, since the sun begins more than twenty-four hours earlier, without even preening his matted plumage.

At last I had a marked Great Tinamou, and the opportunity for fruitful study was too precious to be wasted. Rather than disturb the surroundings by setting up a blind, I decided to make frequent visits of inspection from the neighboring roadway, along which I could pass without alarming the bird. I began at once, and on seven visits that afternoon, some of them in the rain, I found the same bird sitting.

As the next day dawned, I returned to the forest to continue my observations. As I came in sight of the nest in the dim light, the bird shot up from it with loud wingbeats. Yet I was at the same point where I had always stood; why had he suddenly become so distrustful of me? Advancing for a closer view of the eggs, I found one with a gaping hole in the side and the contents quite eaten away, leaving a conspicuous network of red blood vessels on the white inner surface of the blue shell. Another egg was intact but badly dented in two places; the remaining two were uninjured, and all three were wet and cool. Close beside the nest was a small tuft of pale feathers, evidently torn from the bird's flank. As I reconstructed the course of events, some animal had attacked the tinamou in the night; he had fled, leaving some feathers in the assailant's mouth and possibly destaining the egg as he took off; then he had returned in the dim light of dawn, such a short while before my arrival that the remaining eggs had not yet warmed up.

I removed the empty and the dejected shells and the blood-stained leaves on which they rested, then placed fresh brown leaves beneath the two uninjured eggs. By midday only one remained in the nest and the empty shell of the other lay two yards away. Could the Coati mundi whom I had met in the vicinity a few days earlier have been the villain in this tragedy? Or was it the weasel that I had also seen nearby?

Despite the vulnerability of its lovely eggs, despite all the poachers who year after year prowled through my forest and the marauding dogs that make it hideous with their howls, the Great Tinamous have managed to survive, although in diminished numbers. Since the Crested Guans (Penelope purpurascens) disappeared years ago, they are the largest birds continuously present. It is easy to understand why the terrestrial tinamous have survived better than the arboreal guans. When guans are alarmed, they perch conspicuously well above the ground and yelp absurdly in high-pitched voices, a mode of behavior which is probably discreet enough when hunting Ocelots, Pumas, Tayras or other mammals disturb them, but which in the presence of a ganner is suicidal. But the tinamous rise so unexpectedly from the undergrowth, and dart so rapidly away, that the hunter who would shoot them must be exceptionally quick. The stupid pass the vine and the wary remain.

With the guans have gone practically all of the big, yellow-breasted toucans, once so abundant in these forests, as likewise the little Red Deer, the Coati mundis, most of the Agoutis and the Tayras. Gone, too, are countless stately feathered palms, felled by treemongers who carry off the pound or two of edible tissue at the growing point of each, leaving all the rest of the magnificent growth to rot on the ground. But the Marvelled Wood Quail, which hogs the ground even more closely than the tinamous, has, after an interval when it had all vanished, increased of late, now as shy of man as it formerly was trustful.

Although my forest has suffered much, it has not yet been despoiled of all its treasures. A troop of White-faced Monkeys still roams through its tree tops, and most of the smaller birds survive in apparently undiminished numbers. Perhaps most important of all, as night falls the stirring chorus of the Great Tinamous still peals through it, proof of its enduring wildness. I think of the tinamou as the soul of the forest.