

- The bird known as *tabon* in the Philippines lays its eggs under earth mounds.

## A RARE PHILIPPINE BIRD

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The *tabon* is an inscrutable creature. This bird would rather walk than fly. It considers building aerial nests impractical. Yet, this non-conformist denizen of the avian kingdom has been heaped with honors. A cave in Quezon, Palawan, where a skull cap of a proto-Malay was found has been named after this megapode (big feet).

The *tabon's* unconventional ways were obviously remembered in the scientific investigation of the cave, hence the name *Tabon* cave. The *tabon* belongs to the family *megapodiidae*. It is otherwise known as mound builder because instead of building nests of twigs, leaves and other common nest-building materials it buries its eggs deep in the ground and covers it with a mound of sand. Taking its heat

from the ground, *tabon* eggs hatch by themselves. Somehow, the young emerges from the mound of earth all the way from its deep hole, a ponderous and uncanny accomplishment for a creature that had just broken out of its shell.

Under a special permit, anyone can be allowed to gather *tabon* eggs from May 16 to June 30 every year. The bag limit is 300 eggs per licensed hunter per season.

The whole *tabon* mound is literally a heap of fun. Covered by the heap of soil, dead leaves and twigs in a small area are the eggs. They are so cleverly concealed, each egg in a hole of its own, that the location is anybody's guess. Whereas in an Easter egg hunt a wide area of ground and a variety of hiding places are used, look-

ing for a tabon egg is confined to one tiny spot. The search, however, could be more laborious and difficult.

There are no leads to follow in finding the eggs once the tabon mound is found. One has just to start digging, taking care that the eggs do not get broken by the digging instrument. Sometimes an egg hunter would work for an hour without finding an egg. If he is lucky, he may find up to 10 in that time, each find punctuated by loud exclamations for a tabon egg is indeed a trophy worth its weight in fun and delicacy. One mound may yield up to 20 eggs.

A tabon egg is about three inches long, bigger than a goose egg. The size of the egg is a parody, for the tabon egg layer is no bigger than a native hen, sometimes smaller.

The tabon is both a clever and a stupid bird. It is clever in that it can hide its egg skillfully in the sand. But even if its mound has been thoroughly searched by egg hunters it still has no sense enough to look for another hiding spot; it insists,

maybe for convenience, in laying its eggs in the same mound.

Asked the best time for tabon-egg hunting, a native of Samar observed that the tabon usually lays its egg during the taguil-aw or low morning tides. Why this is so is a reason best known only to nature which hides most of its top secrets. At any rate, natives of places where the tabon bird is found experience more fruitful hunts during the low morning tides.

Apparently, there are numerous islands in the whole Philippine archipelago where the tabon is found. Considering the fact that this now venerated bird is not much of a flyer (it is heavy for its wings) it is surprising why it inhabits even tiny isolated islands. On islets of Palawan that are so tiny they are not even indicated on most maps, I found tabon mounds — and diggings by egg hunters. On an islet of the Polillo group of eastern Quezon province, the geographical opposite of Palawan, I also found tabon mounds and diggings by egg hunters.

The parent birds are not easily seen. An egg hunter may spend years at the sport without seeing the tabon that lays the great pinkish eggs, for, unlike the high flyers, the tabon with its brown color that easily blends with the ground and the dead leaves and the fallen twigs and branches are shy and, obviously, do not consider personal appearances to humans a healthy activity.

Catching an adult tabon is not as easy as it is thought to be. Some may be caught by traps, but according to trappers tabon catches are exceptions rather than the rule.

The laws of this country frown at those who try to catch the tabon that lay the

eggs. Catching adult tabon is prohibited.

Besides the distinct honor given to the tabon by the anthropologists who worked in the now famous Tabon cave of Palawan, some honors have been bestowed on this unique bird in the past. Some barrios and sitios of the Philippines have, according to travelers, been named Tabon. In the Cebu, Bohol and other Cebuan speaking regions, one who sports the color of a typical brown Filipino is called *tabonon* (equivalent to *kayumanggi* in Tagalog). A woman referred to as *tabonon* is complimented, for she is not only the color of the typical Filipina but carries the grace and the Maria Clara shyness of the venerable tabon bird. — *Manila Bulletin*.

The broadest and most prevalent error requires the most disinterested virtue, to sustain it. The slight reproach to which the virtue of patriotism is commonly liable, the noble are more likely to incur. Those who, while they disapprove of the character and measures of a government, yield to it their allegiance and support, are undoubtedly its most conscientious supporters, and so frequently the most serious obstacles to reform. — *Thoreau*.