

REARING YOUNG RED-BREASTED NUTHATCHES

BY FLORENCE K. DALEY

(Plate XXIV)

ONE early morning in June the Forrester of the Winnisook Club, Slide Mountain, in the Catskills, found on the ground five tiny Red-breasted Nuthatches (*Sitta canadensis*) not more than a few days old. He at once made a search for the nest, but looked in vain, no mother bird, no nest anywhere to be found, so he gently gathered up the five and carried them to a club member, who tried to care for them, her first thought was food—but the problem of predigested food faced her. Happily the softness of bread and milk suggested itself, but before she could prepare the food two of the little birds had passed away.

To the remaining¹ three, she offered a bit of the milk-soaked bread using a small pair of tweezers and imagine her joy when three mouths opened wide and devoured all they could hold.

Knowing of my interest in birds and bird banding she sent word to me of the three orphans and I lost no time driving the four miles from Frost Valley where our cabin is located to Slide Mountain. When I arrived I found the Nuthatches swathed in cotton resting in a small berry basket, apparently well and happy as if tucked away in their nest far up in the wilderness. Having been actively interested in the study of birds of this region, I was at once presented with these Nuthatches. I drove them down from the mountain to our valley home and they traveled well and were ready for their meal of bread and milk.

The next thing in order was to prepare a comfortable and natural home for them. Knowing the habits of Nuthatches and their love of hunting and pecking in the crevices of the bark of trees, I decided to transfer them to a Warbler trap cage, one that I had placed in our orchard hoping to entice Warblers into the top door opening, so that I might band them. This cage was a happy thought for it was roomy enough to line it with hemlock bark and still give them space for exercise. I hesitated about perches, for these birds are creepers, but I added two perches and a swing to the furnishings.



YOUNG RED-BREASTED NUTHATCHES ON BARK IN CAGE.

Later I was to have much enjoyment watching their acrobatic stunts, flying to the swing, hanging head down and sometimes turning over and over while the swing was going full speed.

The next problem was to make a nest for them such as their parents had labored so hard to build deep in a tiny hole in some tree. Fortunately every autumn I collect nests, so after looking over my collection I selected from several of the nests the materials to build a nest best suited to Nuthatches, and lined it with the fresh feathers that the Wrens so kindly left for us. I now placed all three in the nest in the cage and in half a minute they snuggled down and were fast asleep. In half-an-hour however there was much twittering and "yonking," so I fed them and from that time on they were fed every half hour from 8 A.M., to 8 P.M., when they were covered with a light cloth and slept quietly every night, all snuggling down close together in the nest.

I noticed next day that they seemed to be in great discomfort, scratching and picking at their poor little feathers, so I decided to give them a dust bath of insect powder. I used "Black Flag"—after three dust baths and scattering the powder in the nest they were entirely free from lice and seemed to grow stronger from that time on. I had now had my adopted family about five days and they were developing fast, so I decided to vary the menu. In buying seeds for my traps I had bought many packages of canary seed and each package contains a small block of mixed food called "Sing Restorer" a tonic for young and adult birds—so I decided it might be good for my little family. I removed it from the tin and moistened it with warm water and added a few finely chopped walnuts. All three ate it greedily so I varied their meals from the fifth day, one half hour bread and milk, the next "Sing Restorer," and in between water from a medicine dropper which they particularly enjoyed. It was very amusing to watch their antics and the difference in their individualities.

It was now ten days since their arrival and they were almost full-sized, fully feathered Red-breasted Nuthatches. They would hammer away at the bark and hunt in the crevices for grubs in regular grown-up fashion, so I placed tiny pieces of suet there and they were not long finding the treasure.

On the eleventh day I heard a soft "yank yonk" outside the

porch in a near-by tree and there I saw an adult Red-breasted Nuthatch. I looked quickly at the cage thinking my eyes deceived me—but there were my three and outside was a fourth Nuthatch. I took the cage out under the tree and such a twittering, “yuck yuck” from above, and a chorus from the cage. It was feeding time so I proceeded to feed my family where the visitor could watch the proceedings. I had just started when I heard a flutter of wings, and down on my head the visitor flew—that was one of the most thrilling moments of my life.

I continued to feed the hungry babies and the visiting Nuthatch continued to watch me and even perched on my head. It then occurred to me that she might like to visit in the cage—I opened the door, and in she flew without a moment’s hesitation. The three seemed to expect her and snuggled so closely she was almost smothered by their cordial greeting, but she allowed them every liberty. I offered her the menu of the day, but she refused to eat. I then offered her water which she accepted and enjoyed from the medicine dropper; but as meal after meal passed and she refused to eat I decided to hunt some grubs and worms, but eat she would not. It was now bedtime and as soon as I put the cover on the cage all four snuggled down in the nest and were soon fast asleep. In the morning the visiting Nuthatch looked droopy, so I decided to release her. I placed her in a tree and after a minute or two she flew to another tree, hunted for her breakfast, then off toward the woods and that was the last time I saw her, but I banded her, and in the autumn I hope to see 6898 once again.

Three days later one of the three, strong and healthy in the evening was barely breathing in the morning and soon passed away—the others did not show any depression.

We were now nearing the time when I felt the remaining two must try their wings, so I allowed them the freedom of our screened porch. They flew about strongly from the first minute and took great delight in creeping all over the screen head down. This told me that our time of parting had come, so the next day I placed them in a tree in the orchard. They lost no time hunting food, flying from tree to tree “yank yonking” their gratitude, but they did not forget their foster-mother even after being admitted to the select company of the Chickadees. Whenever I opened a door to

go out into the orchard they would hear me and come flying to my head, shoulders or arms—"yank yonking," sometimes refusing to stir while I walked all about the cabin. I always carried a cup full of bread and milk and they never refused refreshments. This continued for several days, but each day I could see they were busier taking trips to the woods with the Chickadees until one morning I opened the door in vain for there was no cheery "yank yonk." I have not seen them since—but hope some day when I open the door to find my full-grown Nuthatches 6896 and 6897 waiting to greet me.

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