

### In the Summer Home of the Buff-breasted Flycatcher.

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Having promised to write something of the nesting habits of the Buff-breasted Flycatcher (*Empidonax fulvifrons pygmaeus*) it occurs to me that so little has been said of their life history that I will not confine myself to their nesting habits. Tho' the least among the genus *Empidonax* in size, they are by no means least in interest, and this is not merely owing to their rarity either.

Judging by the very few to be encountered in their known breeding localities, they are indeed rare, the largest number of them that I have seen in any one season being not more than three or four pairs. They appear in their summer haunts in the mountains, which are so far as I have found them, at altitudes of from 6,500 feet up to the summits, at about the time of the coming of the warblers, late in April or in early May.

On April 20, '99, I saw a single individual low down in the foothills of the Santa Rita Mountains and have little doubt he was bound for that range for the summer. They begin nesting, according to the earliest record in my own note book, June 3. From that date until about June 20 seems to be their normal time for beginning work. Disturbed pairs will begin nesting up to Aug. 1.

Their eggs present somewhat more variation in shape than those of others of this genus. Two of the few specimens that I have examined, taken from different sets, were sub-equal-ended, and the transverse diameter of nearly all is relatively great. The delicate, clear, creamy white color, unmarked, is uniform. I have been unable to keep track of any of the young after leaving the nest, as they are thereafter, so far as separate identification is concerned, hopelessly lost in the big trees.

They linger about their nesting locality until the warblers, vireos, Mexican Chickadees and others are feeding in flights of various mixtures wherever

food is most plentiful. Just when they leave their summer homes I have been unable to stay with them long enough to ascertain; whither they go I have seen no data from which to determine.

I first made their intimate acquaintance in the Chiricahua Mts. in southeastern Arizona in 1896. Early in June I saw a pair of them just below my camp at Riggs Bros.' saw-mill, on the western slope of the range, at about 6,500 feet altitude. As there was no record of their nest and eggs being found it will readily be believed that I took an intense interest in that pair. I watched them in the early morning when birds are building, if building at all; watched them for hours after breakfast; watched them toward the evening when so many birds, like the proverbial lazy man, who "works the best when the sun is in the west", do a little hurried building. But those were all holidays to that precious pair. And beautiful days they were. The skies were Arizona's; the temperature ideal. The canyon stream rippled softly beneath the large sycamores upon which they stationed themselves much of the time; their little breasts shone buff in the bright sunlight; flies were plentiful and there was plenty of time for enjoying themselves, and they improved it.

Every now and then the soft *pit, pit* of the two, as they kept good account of each other's whereabouts, was varied by the *Chicky-whew* of the male. (I borrow this from my assistant Hiram, who always designated him the "Chicky-whew bird"). Not far up the mountain side, among the top branches of some large pines, a male *Dendroica graciae* frequently halted in his tour of inspection of the bunches of needles, long enough to utter his rapid, vivacious song, much like that of the house wren tho' superior. Behind me, far up a pretty canyoncito, now and then the *chirp* of a Stephen's vireo (*Vireo h. ste-*

*phensi*), a veritable chicken's voice—a lost chicken—reached my ears; far up in the very dome of heaven a score or more of White-throated Swifts (*Aeronautes melanoleucus*) skimmed their rapid flight, and a pair of Painted Redstarts (*Setophaga picta*) who had a nest full of hungry mouths in the stream bank 60 yards below, passed in sight now and then, in their foraging, their black and white plumage distinguishing them nearly as far as they could be seen. Earth and trees and air fairly pulsed with fascinating interest, and the days, tho' of the longest, were all too short and too few.

But very early one morning, June 16 I saw the female fly repeatedly from the ground on the hill-side to the same limb of a large sycamore about which they had spent much time. That settled it. I was never quite certain whether I ate any breakfast that morning or not; if I did I am sure I did not know what I ate.

The female did all the work. The nest was placed in an inclined fork among the thick branches, pretty well up, about 35 feet. It was well-constructed, compact, deep, of dried grasses, a few vegetable fibers, plenty of spider's silk and into the lining were woven a few bright feathers. Two nests found this last season also contained several bright feathers, one of them, bright yellow ones of the Audubon's Warbler (*D. auduboni*) a blue one of the Chestnut-backed Bluebird (*Sialia m. bairdi*) and a barred feather of the Whip-poor-will (*Antrostomus v. macromystax*) fluttered on the edge of the nest.

In the first nest referred to, beginning on the ninth day after work began, were laid three plain, creamy white eggs of dimensions as follows: .24x.29,.24 x.29,.24x.30. This set with the nest, I took, purposely, after dark one night, and the next morning they went merrily to work building another nest in the same tree, about six feet from the location of the first. In this nest two eggs were laid July 15 and 16. A set of two also

followed the taking of a set of three in '99,' and a set of three the taking of a set of four this year. In fact I have met no exception yet to the lessening of the number of the second set by one.

Three years later, in '99, I revisited this canyon and, as I passed the locality of my interesting experiences, I rode slowly, and listened and watched. Could it be that I heard again that gentle *pit*? But who that loves the birds could ever forget a bird voice that had once fascinated him? There was no doubt about it; from a point 40 yards below the old nesting site, it came and I succeeded in catching just one glimpse of the bird ere he disappeared in some black willows down stream. His nest I never found. Again, last season, 1900, passing this spot on the last day but one of May, I watched and listened, and again I heard and saw these my old companions of the days of '96,—at least such I liked to fancy them. What constancy to locality! Just one pair of birds at this point year after year, and none other anywhere about.

Subsequently, I found the nest of this pair in a large pine, but I found it only after days of searching. The male had a plan for frustrating the hunter which he worked diligently and as I have noticed it in several, I take it to be characteristic. Each time as I approached the location of the nest, he came out some distance to meet me and began calling and occasionally scolding in a certain locality, thus leading me to believe the nest was somewhere in that vicinity. Once, however, I waited until long after sunset in the vicinity of two large pines, near which the soft *pit, pit* of the female, as I felt sure it was, answering the male had suddenly ceased the day before. Meanwhile the male was persistently, for two long hours, insisting that all his interests were in the vicinity of a tall, leaning pine a hundred yards distant, to which point he had come to meet me day after day.

Finally, when nearly dark, his voice ceased for some time, and upon my imi-

tating his call, as I had done often, he answered me from one of the very pines I was watching. Two or three times I made him repeat it, but his voice seemed low and sleepy now. He had come home to roost, or the next tree to it. It was too late to search but I went back to camp feeling quite sure I had outwitted him. The next day I found the nest and a hard climb I had before I got above the cone upon which the nest was built and looked in upon the four dainty creamy white eggs. The nest and its situation are shown in the illustration.

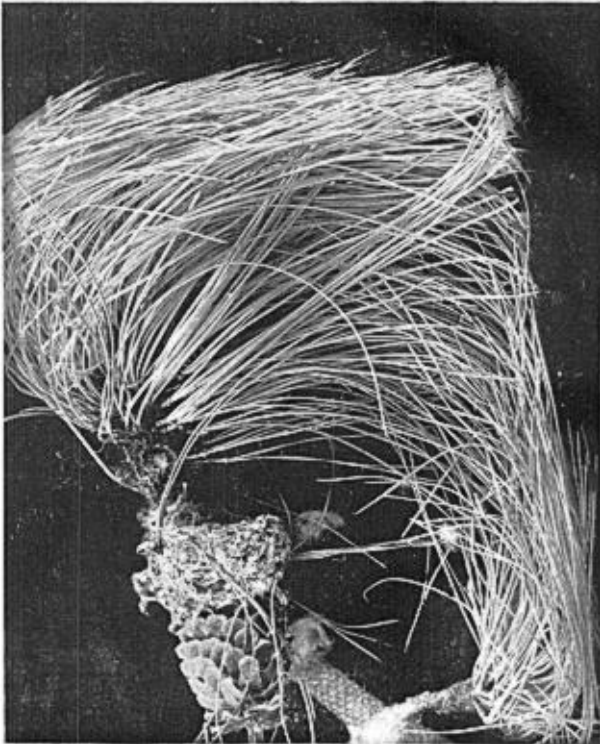


Photo by R. D. Lusk.

#### BUFF-BREADED FLYCATCHER'S NEST ON CONE.

They afterward built on the top of a horizontal limb of a large pine, sixteen feet out from the stem of the tree, in plain sight of the hawks and jays (*Cyanocitta s. macrolopha*) and for jays these mountains are the worst I have seen. Right out in plain sight that dainty little female sat all day long, a perpet-

ual challenge, and many a brilliant fight she must have had in defense of her little home, for I saw some of them and for dash and spirit and effectiveness they could hardly be outdone. Eternal vigilance was certainly the price of success in her case. Nor did it take her mate long to come to the rescue at the least disturbance.

Their soft *pit* referred to has surprising carrying powers. It is sometimes audible at a distance of 150 yards. And I know of none other of the flycatchers having a greater variety of notes than this obscure little bird. Every now and

then the male, particularly, exhibited some trait or trick to challenge my interest and admiration. He is a ventriloquist. Almost invariably his voice seems to proceed from the lower branches of the tree, or from the vicinity of the ground beneath, when in fact the author sits on one of the topmost branches of a tall pine or fir, and being so small and less inclined than other flycatchers to select an exposed dead branch, he is often hard to locate.

In both 1899 and 1900, I found this same flycatcher breeding in a virgin forest of pines and firs, among the trees surrounding a little "park", or treeless, open space, of which there are many in these mountains. It was about three miles above the location of the nest described above, and within a very short

distance of the summit of the range, from which one can get a good glimpse of New Mexico, only a few miles distant. But not one of the nests found in this upper location was built upon a limb, but all against the trunks of the trees, 20 to 35 feet from the ground, in two cases in the angle of a short dead

stub and in two cases with only a tiny jutting piece of bark for support or a slight depression caused by a wound in the tree.

To this there was one exception. One pair, whose nest against the side of a large pine I had watched from the date of its beginning to the day the female laid her last egg in it, climbing almost daily up to inspect it, sometimes touching her with my finger ere she would leave it, decided that such a location was too convenient for me, and built their next nest where I had to bring into requisition a 100-foot rope in order to look into it, where it was located far out on the limb of a large fir.

The reason for the uniformly different nesting sites in the two localities is doubtless one of expediency, and may be owing to the fact that in the lower locality where they are all built out on the branches, lizards are plentiful, while in the upper mountain, where they all select the tree trunks, there are no lizards to be seen, and the jays are much more plentiful than below; and the little nests of the hue of the tree bark, and in fifty per cent of the cases close in below a protecting stub, were not noticeable from above, nor easily from anywhere. One nest that I saw building was made almost exactly the shade of the bark of the dead pine against which it was built, by using plentifully of the weather-beaten remains of an old robin's nest in a tree close by. Of all the sets of eggs of this species recorded to date, as nearly as I can remember those of Messrs. Howard and Willard, taken in the Huachuca Mts., about 50 per cent have consisted of three eggs each, 30 per cent of four eggs, and 20 per cent of two eggs.



We note with pleasure that our interesting contemporary, *The Journal of the Maine Ornithological Society*, will be published as a bi-monthly commencing with its third volume, instead of a quarterly as heretofore. J. Merton Swain is announced as editor for 1901.

### Note on the Name of the Black-headed Grosbeak.

The Pacific Coast grosbeak described in the November number of this magazine was previously named *Hedymeles capitalis* with the following description, probably overlooked by Grinnell.

If the characterization given by Baird be considered sufficient by those versed in questions of synonymy, then the western subspecies should be known as *Zamelodia melanocephala capitalis* (Baird) as *Z. microrhyncha* and *H. capitalis* evidently refer to the same bird.

"Taking the series from eastern Mexico (Orizaba and Mirador) and northward along the Rocky Mountains of the United States, we find the black of the head continuous, sharply defined by a gently curved outline behind, and without a trace of either the vertex or post-ocular stripes. This is the true *melanocephalus* as restricted and may be regarded as the Rocky Mountain form. The most western specimen is 11,241, from Fort Bridger; the most northern 19,355, from Stinking River, Northern Wyoming. All specimens from the Pacific Coast eastward to the Western base of the Rocky Mountains, including Cape St. Lucas and Western Mexico south to Colima differ from the Rocky Mountain series in having the posterior outline of the black hood ragged, and irregularly indented by the rufous of the nape, which always extends in a quite broad stripe toward the eye, along the side of the occiput, and quite frequently forms a conspicuous median vertex stripe, though the latter feature is sometimes not distinct. These differences are observable only in the males, and although slight, are yet sufficiently constant to justify distinguishing them as races. The Rocky Mountain form being the true *melanocephalus*, the name *capitalis* is proposed for the western one." (*Hist. N. A. Bds., Ld. Bds., II, 74.*)

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