

THE CONDOR A MAGAZINE OF WESTERN ORNITHOLOGY.



Volume VIII

May-June 1906

Number 3

The Chickadee at Home¹

BY WILLIAM L. FINLEY

PHOTOGRAPHS BY HERMAN T. BOHLMAN

THE air was crisp. The snow crunched under foot. The water of Fulton Creek slid noiselessly thru the lush grasses that hung along the bank. The clump of tall firs up the hillside was roughly inked against the gray clouds. The dead hush of winter had crept up the canyon. Suddenly a sound like the tinkling of tiny bell-voices broke the stillness. Across the long white vista between the pointed firs scurried a whole troupe of black-and-white fairies.

I stood in the same place a little over three months later. Where I had seen a dozen fairies I now saw only two. Where the rest of the troupe had gone, I do not know. These two seemed happy by themselves. I stood there and watched one of the midgets whirl over to a nearer bush. I looked around but saw nothing but the wreck of an old alder—dead, rotten, useless—broken off five feet from the ground, not even good for fire-wood, almost ready to return as earth to the ground from which it sprang—rotten, but not entirely useless. It gave me a suggestion.

I have never found the chickadee moody. I've seen him when it was so cold I could not understand just how he kept his tiny body warm, when it looked like all hunting for him and no game. If he was hungry, he didn't show it. The wren goes south and lives in sunshine and plenty all winter. He goes wild with delight when he returns home in the spring. The chickadee winters in the north. He endures the cold and hunger of the dreary months. In the spring, his cheer seems just the same. He doesn't bubble over. He takes his abundance in quiet contentment.

The glade up Fulton Creek just suited the chickadees. It was rarely invaded by small boys. Chickadee likes human society when the snow comes and food grows scarce in the woods, but just as soon as he falls in love and his mind turns to housekeeping, he looks for a quiet nook.

The next time I strolled up the creek, one of the newly wedded pair suddenly met me just where the path branched a few yards below the alder stump. I didn't see him come, but he appeared right on the limbs of the maple over

¹ The subject of this sketch is the Oregon chickadee (*Parus atricapillus occidentalis*).

the trail that led away from the nest. As soon as I stopped, he began turning and twisting, stretching his neck to look under a leaf. He hung by his toes head down and swung back up like a trapeze performer. Then he swung head down again, dropped and lit right side up on the branch below. He made a high jump of over a foot, but grabbed nothing. And such unconcern! He never looked at me. "You're entertaining, but not so public-spirited as you seem," I said, as I followed him off down the wrong path away from the nest.

I'll never forget the day we trudged up with the camera to get a picture of the eggs. When we reached the chickadee villa, the mother was at home. I



NEST AND EGGS OF CHICKADEE; STUMP OPENED FROM REAR;
ALL SEVEN EGGS HATCHED

knocked at the base so she would leave. Then I shook the stub, but she didn't take the hint. I took a little twig and poked in, trying to lift her up. She met my advance with a peculiar little explosion that sounded like a mad cat in a box. Finally, I cut a piece right out of the back part of her house where the wall was thin. There she sat, immovable, while I focused my camera. The little black eyes showed a brave determination that I've seldom seen in a bird. I carefully slid the piece back again and locked it with a string.

I knew she had performed a heroic act. I sat down under the tree to watch. The instant all was quiet she shot from the door like a winged bullet and struck right on the limb beside her mate, who had been "dee-dee-ing" to her all the while.

Of course birds do not feel as we feel, but I don't believe a sweetheart ever met her lover returning from a field of battle with a greater show

of joy. They simply threw themselves into each other's arms. It wasn't a silent meeting either; there were real cracks of kisses and twitters of praise. Chickadees are not human by any means, but had she not defended her home all alone against the mighty invasion of a giant?

A day or so later I really did catch both the owners away from the nest, and I counted seven dotted eggs on a cottony couch. When the mother returned, she was so flustered and worried that I closed the door and started to leave in a hurry. But I hadn't stepped away more than ten feet before she was clinging at the

doorway, and a moment later she popped into the hole and continued her brooding.

I watched the chickadees for a few days after the eggs were hatched. Both birds fed in turn, and the turns were anywhere from three to ten minutes apart. From the time the callow chicks were hatched, the parents were busy from daylight to dark. They searched every leaf and twig along the limbs and trunk to the roots of every tree, under bark and moss, in ferns, bushes and vines, and they hunted thoroly. Such numbers of spiders they ate, and green caterpillars and brown worms, grasshoppers, daddy-long-legs, moths, millers and flies, besides untold numbers of eggs and larvæ. Everything was grist that went to the chickadee mill. The way they could turn insects into feathers, distributing black and white pigments just where they belonged, was simply marvelous. A baby chickadee changes about as much in a day as a human baby does in a year.

One can readily estimate the amount of insect life that is destroyed in a day, when the parents return every few minutes with food. Think of how closely every bush and tree is gone over everywhere about the nest. One chickadee nest in an orchard means the destruction of hundreds and maybe thousands of harmful insects and worms every day. It more than pays for all the fruit the birds can destroy in a dozen seasons.

I spent two whole days at the nest before the young chicks were ready to leave home. The owners of the stump seemed to think we had placed the camera there for their convenience, for they generally used the tripod for a perch. Then they always paused a second at the thresh-

hold before entering. The seven eggs had pretty well filled the nest. Now it looked like an overflow. It seemed to me that if the little chicks continued to grow they would either have to be stacked up in tiers or lodged in an upper story.

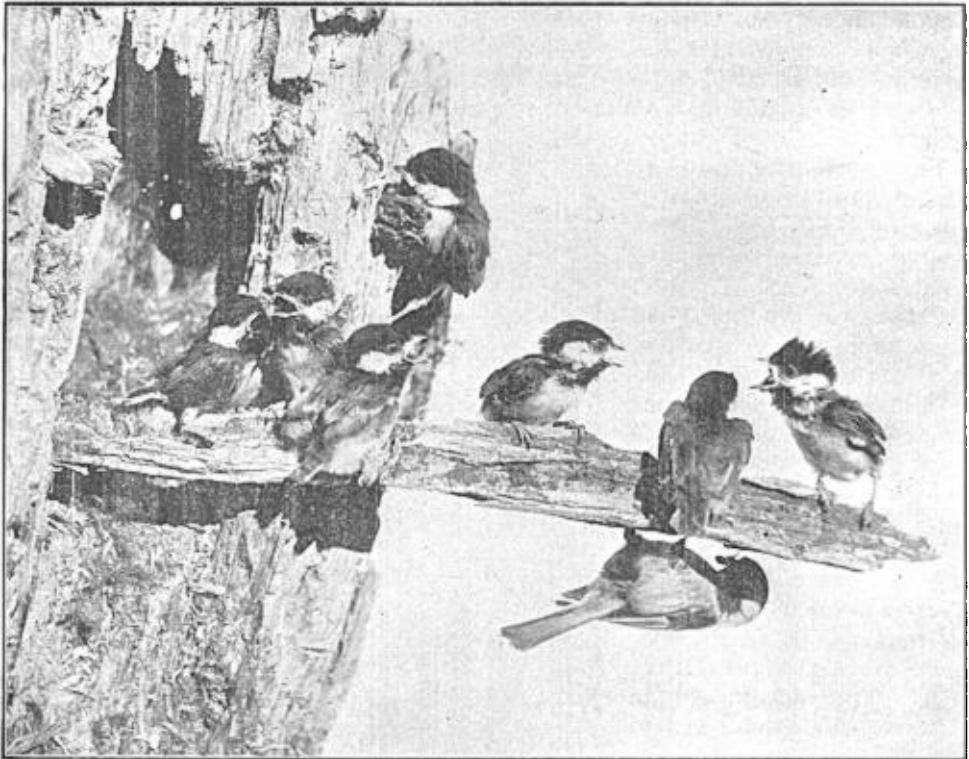
Once the mother came with a white miller. She had pulled the wings off, but even then it looked entirely too big for a baby's mouth. Not a single nestling but wanted to try it. When the mother left, I looked in and one little fellow sat with the miller bulging out of his mouth. It wouldn't go down any further, but he lay back in apparent satisfaction; digestion was working at a high speed below. I saw the miller gradually slipping down, until finally the last leg disappeared as he gave a strenuous gulp.



CHICKADEE AT NEST HOLE

The day was warm. We built a little promenade from the front door and set one of the youngsters blinking in the sunshine. He soon got his bearings. He liked it and looked so perked-up and proud. Then we set out another and another, seven in all.

I believe there's more family love in a chickadee's household than in any other bird home I've visited. I've seen a young flicker jab at his brother in real devilish madness, but I never saw two chickadees come to blows. Of course, when young chickadees are hungry, they will cry for food just as any child. Not one of the seven was the least backward in asserting his rights when a morsel of food was in sight. Each honestly believed his turn was next. Once or twice I saw what



"THE FAMILY JAR"; MOTHER CHICKADEE HANGING BELOW PERCH FOR AN INSTANT BEFORE FEEDING THE YOUNG ONES

Copyright Photo, 1902, by H. T. Bohlman and W. L. Finley

looked like a real family jar. Each one of the seven was clamoring for food as the mother hovered over. She herself must have forgotten whose turn it was, for she hung beneath the perch a moment to think. How she ever told one from the other, so as to divide the meals evenly, I don't know. There was only one chick I could recognize--that was pigeon-toed, tousled-headed Johnnie.

We trudged up the canyon early the next morning. Four of the flock had left the nest and taken to the bushes. Three staid in the clump while we focused the camera. It is rare indeed when one catches a real clear photograph of bird home-life, such as a mother just placing a green cut-worm in the mouth of a hungry chick; an unusual look of satisfaction on the face of the second bantling,

who had just gotten a morsel; and a hopeful expression on the countenance of the third, who is sure to get the next mouthful—the present, the past and the future in one scene! (See frontispiece.)

There are perhaps many other families of chickadees that live and hunt thru the trees along Fulton Creek. I rarely visit the place that I do not hear some of them. But ever since the seven left the old alder stump; that has now fallen to pieces, I never see a flock about this haunt that they do not greet me with the same song I heard three years ago: "Chickadee-dee! Chickadee-dee!"

Portland, Oregon.

The English Sparrow in the Southwest

BY O. W. HOWARD

SO far as I can learn the English sparrow (*Passer domesticus*) is found in every state in the Union, and in most of our large cities they are so common as to be considered a plague.

Why are there no English sparrows in southern California where the climatic conditions are so mild and inviting?

My first experience with the English sparrow occurred in December, 1901, when I had occasion to visit the town of Bakersfield. I was much surprised to find the little fellows feeding on the paved streets in the center of town. I knew the sparrows were common in San Francisco and neighboring towns but had no idea they had found their way so far south. Later, in the spring of 1902, I found the sparrows nesting commonly about the principal buildings of Bakersfield; even at the court house they were occupying deserted swallows' nests.

In 1903, I again visited Bakersfield several times and found that the sparrows had increased considerably. A number of pairs were nesting in cypress trees in yards and seemed to take the place of linnets. Late in the fall of the same year I chanced to stop at the town of Tehachapi, about 4000 feet elevation, situated at the extreme summit of Tehachapi Pass thru which the Southern Pacific railroad runs. Here I found the English sparrow in flocks feeding around the railroad yard. This was another revelation to me for I took it for granted that Bakersfield was their southernmost limit and did not expect to find them at this high altitude.

The Tehachapi Mountains are considered the natural dividing line between northern and southern California, the San Joaquin Valley on the north and the Antelope Valley on the south. After finding the sparrows at Tehachapi, I naturally expected to find them next at the town of Mojave which is located on the edge of the desert in Antelope valley and only about twenty-five miles south of Tehachapi. I searched several times at the town of Mojave during the year 1903 but failed to find a single sparrow. I have not had opportunity to visit that locality since 1903, but in the meantime have made some observations in Arizona.

While located at Tucson, in May, 1904, I was very much surprised one morning to see an English sparrow alight within ten feet of me on the principal street and at once commence scratching for its favorite food. I saw several other birds the same day and later in the season found about half a dozen pairs nesting in the switch-board boxes which are placed on telephone poles about twenty-five feet