

Among the Flathead Birds

BY P. M. SILLOWAY

“THERE is a pleasure in the pathless woods,” wrote the poet, or something like that; for the present occasion finds me too far from my library to verify the accuracy of the quotation. There is a stack of birds in the Flathead woods around my headquarters, at any rate, and it was a pleasure to strike the forest at its best.

The first day of June, 1906, found me afield, roaming the woods for things new or old in bird nature. This portion of the forest is by no means pathless, altho on every side lies the interminable domain of one of the largest forest reserves in the United States. Around us is a little settlement, carved out of the wilderness; but a few steps leads into magnificent areas of mixed growth of towering tamaracks, yellow pines, red fir, Engelmann spruce, and related conifers, with others varying from the sapling stage to veterans of the wilderness. In the more swampy regions are cottonwoods, willows, alders, maples, and swamp-loving shrubs. A few running extracts from my notes will perhaps be of most interest to readers of THE CONDOR, and the outcome will depend upon material the woods afford.

June 1.—A nest of the Audubon warbler was found in the clearing west of the biological station. A bunch of grayish material in a likely place caught my glance. It was in a cottonwood sapling, one of several under a spreading veteran whose exposed roots were washed by the gentle ripple of the lake shore. A pair of bright eyes were twinkling over the brim of the nest, and as I gave the tree a shake, downward darted Mrs. *Dendroica auduboni* soon to appear in the large tree and chirp apprehensively. A step or two, or a couple of hitches, carried me up so that I could see the five handsome eggs. The nest was in an upright crotch formed by several small branches against the main stem, the top of the nest being eight feet from the ground. The site was remarkably exposed, and indicated a degree of familiarity not generally ascribed to this frequenter of the wilderness. The nest was made of rather coarse material, chiefly dark colored, such as rootlets, grass stems, weed-bark, and fine grasses, the latter forming a sort of middle layer. The lining was mostly white horsehair, soft feathers, and some white felt stuff in the bottom under the horsehair. The eggs were perfectly fresh. The male was moving around in neighboring trees, and frequently sang near the place.

June 2.—Today it was my fortune for the second time to find a nest of the Townsend warbler (*Dendroica townsendi*). The males were singing persistently in the woods, and I spent the day in exploring a rocky ridge on which I found my first nest of this warbler. It was on the side of a rugged fault, overgrown with bushes and fir trees in small and large sapling stage. The males were singing in the larger trees growing on lower ground around the fault. Toward the close of a wearisome afternoon I saw a nest near the top of a large fir sapling in the edge of a small clump. A gentle shake caused the sitting bird to dart downward among the bases of adjacent trees, where she skulked in silence, flitting around the periphery of my limited view. The large black area surrounded by yellow on the side of her head, with other markings, soon informed me that I had at length found the goal of my search. For twenty minutes I sat and waited, watching her movements. Only once did she make any noise, when she flitted quite near me and uttered a low chirp followed by a subdued chattering of three or four notes. The male did not appear while I was about the place.

The nest was ten feet from the ground, near the top of the fir. As I before

remarked, it closely resembled a chipping sparrow's, both in position and structure. It was on horizontal twigs against the main stem, and sat loosely in place. It was made externally of coarse weed-stems, within which were fine grass stems and a lining of white horsehair, all well-rounded and with substantial walls. The cavity was 1.75 inches in diameter and 1.25 inches deep. There were 5 eggs, but the dull white surface indicated that they were far advanced in incubation. When fresh they were probably faintly pinkish white, speckled all over with reddish and dark brown, sparsely over the smaller end and most of the surface, heavily on the larger end. I feared that I should not be able to save them as good specimens, but I wanted to photograph them well, so I carried them in. It was also likely that the birds would nest again in the same locality, and I would have another chance for a good set.

A day or two later I watched a male Townsend moving about and singing in a standard yellow pine. I had no glasses with me, but during the fifteen minutes I devoted to him he kept in the lower branches of the tree, and I had no difficulty in observing him. He was very leisurely in his movements, seldom flitting far, gleaning from the twigs and needles, and stopping to sing seven or eight times per minute. The song as I heard it ran like this: *Ree, ree, ree, ee, eh, cheet eh chee*—with emphasis on the *cheet*. The singing varied in the number of opening *ree* notes, and apparently when a syllable is dropped in the opening another is added in the ending. Frequently after the song he added a quiet, hurried, chattering soliloquy. Thinking that he might hurry homeward after his recital, I waited to follow him, but he merely moved to the next tree to continue his performance, and I wandered on my way.

The next morning I spent two hours following the movements of a singing male Townsend, searching the firs below as he sang in the tops of the taller conifers. It appeared that he was simply out to forage and sing, for in the given time he covered about a hundred yards of rugged hillside, and I was tired enough to give up the search. Other males were singing, and at one time I heard four which were probably within a radius of one hundred yards of me. My experience leads me to conclude that nests in the small firs are exceptions, but thus far I have given exclusive attention to them. The song of this warbler is the prevailing one now in the high coniferous trees.

June 5.—To-day an Audubon warbler gave as pretty an exhibition of maternal instinct as I ever witnessed in a small bird. She was sitting on her nest twelve feet up in a fir tree. As I gave the tree a shake, she fairly fell out and alighted prone on the ground under a nearby sapling, where she sprawled with quivering, outspread wing and expanded tail. In the same place she lay for a short time, then fluttered several inches away and continued her display. Thus she fluttered around me, always flitting in view with this demonstration and fluttering out of sight. Of course I knew what it meant—young birds in the nest; but from force of habit I went up the bending pole of the fir. The feathers protruding over the brim would have established the identity of the nest, if I had not known the parent bird. My suspicions were verified when I felt in the nest, for my fingers closed over the warm bodies of recently hatched younglings. Thus in the same week I found fresh eggs of the Audubon warbler, and young birds as well. But I haven't yet found fresh eggs of the Townsend.

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