

NOTES ON THE NORTHWESTERN CROSSBILL

By J. W. PRESTON

WITH TWO PHOTOS

FOR ten years past I have occasionally gone into regions inhabited by this interesting bird, whose movements are erratic in the extreme. Reports of their nesting have consequently been misleading. I had been taught that one should expect sets of their eggs in February, and it required almost the ten years to learn that such is not *always* the case, if ever in this region, Spokane, Washington.

From a bird which sports crost mandibles and chews its food we might expect some eccentricities. and the subject of this sketch certainly possesses them! A careful study of a large number of the birds as well as of their general habits, nests and eggs, would seem to prove the propriety of separating this form. If there is wisdom in the separation of a multitude of recognized forms, this one should by no means be an exception. In this northwestern region the male Crossbill is indeed a "red bird" and handsome as is his modest mate.

From late Autumn until the next June they appear in large flocks, coming down from their northern breeding range at the appearance of snow, and remaining in certain localities where pine nuts are plentiful, as that is their principal food supply. All winter long they may be seen moving about over the forests from place to place, frequently settling onto a large cone-covered pine to feed. I have seen large trees literally covered with them, and it was a lively sight, what with the rattling of the dry scales of the cones as they bit out the nut, the continual "peet-peet-peet" and the flying from cone to cone. Then all at once, at a quick call, every bird would fly away and the flock had gone.

The song is a series of clear, loud, sparrow-like notes, and pretty whistling effects which come riffing down from some pinnacle of a great tall pine tree. An occasional note resembles a quick, clear passage in the song of the rock wren—a rich, clear, single whistle-note. Another resembles a rich portion of the Baltimore Oriole's song. But the common note of the Crossbill is an energetic, strong, metallic "peet-peet" which is uttered on all occasions, and one seldom sees a Crossbill without also hearing this note. A male bird will gather a flock about him by means of this call. Another effort is like the twittering of the Goldfinch. Most of their movements are accompanied by the "zeet-zeet-zeet" in a sort of whizzing tone, or "chink-chink-chink," "peet-peet-peet" or "pit-pit-pit", metallicly. But the real singing is from the tree-tops and it is a happy, cheerful song. At times the male will float about overhead, singing, much as the Horned Lark does.

The latter part of June they separate into small colonies, and resort to remote mountain regions, at an altitude of from two thousand to four thousand feet, where, in a social way they rear their young. The food consists largely of pine nuts and fir seed. At nesting time fir seed is green and soft and these birds will feed by the hour in the top of a tree, cutting off a cone and holding it in the claws while dexterously extracting the seeds which they seemingly chew. On this nutritious substance the young birds are fed. No wonder they are strong and energetic. These birds are literally reared in the tree tops, and rocked by the rough winds that surge down over the hills from the mountain sides. While the Crossbill loves the lonely retreats he is by no means a wild bird, and I have seen them perch on dwelling houses and about stables. When the pine nuts have fallen,

they will come onto the city lawns and pick up the nuts right at ones feet, and I have had them come down and drink where I was watering the lawn. They are especially fond of salt, and a large flock of them was frequenting the salt-licks at the head of the Middle Weiser River, Idaho, when I was there some years since. They will eat the soil for the salt wherever they can find it.

The nest is built of dead tamarack twigs for a foundation and outer walls, interwoven with much dry fine grass and a few dry pine needles. The lining is an abundance of long, black moss from tamarack trees, and a few soft feathers, making a good, warm nest, placed in the divergent small branches of a horizontal branch from four to eight feet out from the tree-trunk. One was directly in the center of a heavy bunch of long needles at the very tip of a ninety-foot pine and

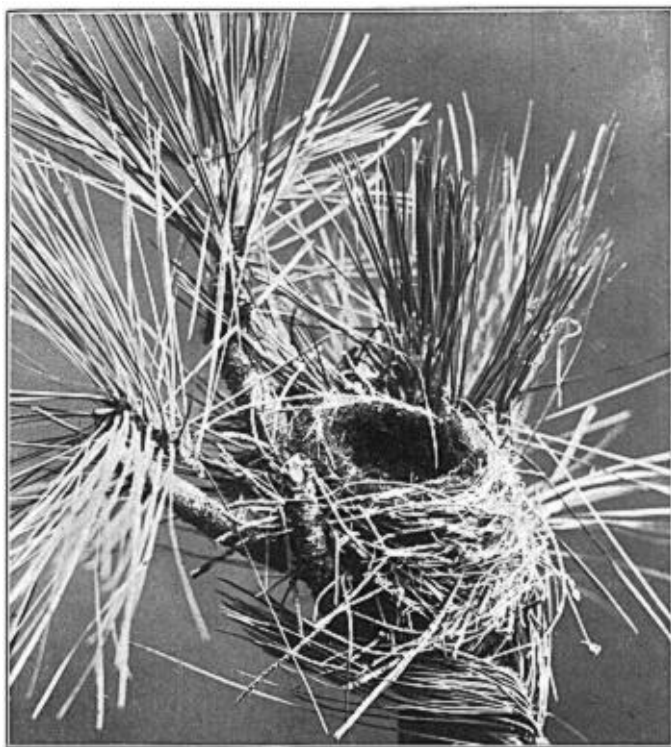


Fig. 27. NEST OF THE RED CROSSBILL

was so concealed by the denseness of the growth that the nest was not visible. The climber begged to come down, believing there was no nest there, but I had spent too many hours locating it to come away without it. It was no mean task to secure this nest, but my climber is an expert lineman. All these nests were built among the needles, so as to be perfectly concealed, and if the bird did not reveal the place, it would be impossible to locate it. All the nests were in pines and next to inaccessible. Measurements for one nest are sufficient, as they are as like as peas in a pod. Outside diameter, four by five inches; inside, two and one-half. Outside depth, three; inside, one and one-half. With the settings it is very artistic. The photos show how well hidden the nests are.

There are three sets of these pretty eggs before me, with their respective nests.

These eggs are plainly much larger than those of the eastern bird. Set number one contains four splendid eggs, measuring as follows: .85x.60, .86x.61, .87x.62, .88x.62. All are of quite uniform size, all plainly and plentifully marked about the larger end with irregular, kinky strokes and spots, varying from faint purplish to dark chestnut, over a dull greenish white ground somewhat clouded by the weak chocolate flush, which is present in some of these specimens. One egg of this set has the marks somewhat lengthwise giving it a waved or marbled appearance, with no marks darker than cinnamon brown. These extend well over the surface except the point. Three eggs of the set have the subdued purplish at the larger end approaching a wreath.

The eggs of set number two have a clear, bright greenish-white ground color, uniform over the entire surface. They measure: .79x.57, .85x.58, .83x.58. One egg is almost plain at the point, with small specks and spots of faint cinnamon over

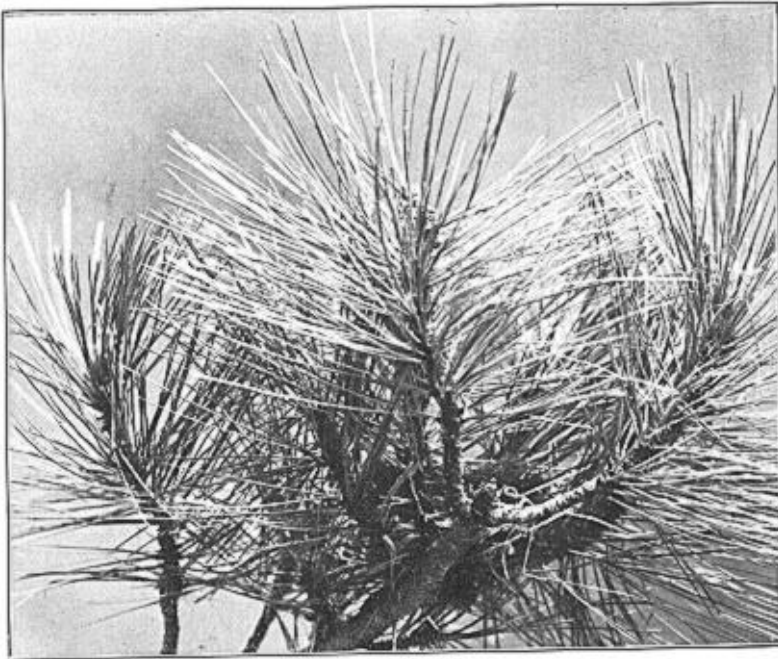


Fig. 28. ANOTHER VIEW OF THE NEST SHOWN IN FIG. 27

the larger part of the surface. The other two are almost alike, being sparsely flecked with cinnamon, with little of this below the center, but heavily specked with seal brown in an irregular wreath at the larger end. There are also a few kinky lines of the same color. These eggs have an exceedingly fragile shell, which may be said of all the sets, possibly caused by the character of food.

The eggs of set number three measure as follows: .86x.62, .87x.62, .90x.60, being decidedly elongated. The ground color is a dull greenish, with the markings, mostly at the larger end, consisting of splashes and specks of faint chocolate and cinnamon, forming a washed surface in form of a broad, dull wreath about the large end which is bare at the point, except in one egg in which the blotches extend over the entire surface. Then there is on each of these three eggs a delicate chocolate hair line encircling a small portion of the larger end. Hanging on

these lines are a few tear shaped dots of black. In all these sets there is a resemblance to eggs of the Orchard Oriole. In several eggs there is a faint flush of subdued purplish stain.

The flight is swift and strong, accomplished with quick beating of the wings, there being a peculiar, pent-up energy in their movements. They will start from a perch with an almost bullet-like swiftness. Their sociable nature is marked. They even feed together during the nesting season, there seemingly being no ill will among them. The scattered breeding colonies extend far into the wilderness. The past season I located three colonies which were nesting, and they did not vary in the time chosen nor in the selection of a nesting site; always in wild, mountain places, and the nests well hidden in the high branches of pine trees.

The nest-building began about the 10th of July and finished about the 20th. In their late nesting they resemble the goldfinch which postpones the nesting duties until July and August. One might believe that this was simply a second nesting, but the large flocks do not break up until late in June, no young birds can be found until late in summer, there are no young birds in the summer colonies where they nest, and that they do not settle to work until July, has been my observation. I have worn out more than one pair of "mountain" shoes looking for February and March nests in this country, but have learned to stay away during that portion of the year. Another peculiarity of the Crossbill is its propensity for changing its place of abode. Where they are abundant one season they may be entirely wanting the next. While my climber was at one of the nests the mother bird tried a number of times to come back onto her eggs, even venturing within two feet of him. The male came very close also. There were several pairs near about, which did not scold as many birds do, but seemed almost stupid.

The birds of this region seem to be quite constant in size and in the brighter coloration, being larger than the eastern race and of brighter plumage. Adult males are bright enough to pass as "red birds", by which name they are known. As we came from the place when the twilight glow was fading and dim shadows shrouded the mountain world, we could hear the gentle twittering from the nests far above us.

MISCELLANEOUS BIRD NOTES FROM THE LOWER RIO GRANDE

By AUSTIN PAUL SMITH

THIRTY years can bring as many changes in a bird community as into one composed of men. You can have an instance of this by perusing the published observations of Merrill or Sennett, appearing approximately that number of years ago—and then visiting the lower Rio Grande Valley. Today you will find it necessary to make some careful search to locate the Chachalaca (*Ortalis vetula macalli*) near Brownsville, while it would be hopeless to expect to discover a Wild Turkey (*Meleagris gallopavo intermedia*), or a Fulvous Tree-duck (*Dendrocygna fulva*). However it should be balm for regret, to realize that while these several species have gone, or are disappearing from the Valley's avifauna, at least a corresponding number of forms, have appeared. To this latter class belongs the Chestnut-bellied Scaled Quail (*Callipepla squamata castanogastris*) that now roams within a few miles of town. Along with this instance could be cited the