

its nesting material. After a few moments calling it was joined by the other one of the pair, and both were soon busy carrying nesting material into the oak. I quietly withdrew, to return ten days later. There were no birds about so I examined the cavity and was chagrined to find only the few bits of grass and fur I had seen them carry in. Some time later I discovered the real nest with its family of large young in an oak some distance farther up the mountain side. It then dawned upon me that they had played this trick, and I had to smile to myself as I realized how nicely I had been hoodwinked.



Fig. 84. NEST MATERIAL AND EGGS OF ROCKY MOUNTAIN NUTHATCH;  
A LITTLE LESS THAN NATURAL SIZE

## A HORSEBACK TRIP ACROSS MONTANA

By ARETAS A. SAUNDERS

IN the summer of 1911 it came to my fortune to take a horseback trip nearly across the State of Montana, starting from Bozeman in Gallatin County, and ending at Chouteau in Teton County. The trip led me through varied valley and mountain country lying on the eastern side of the continental divide. Just a week was occupied in making the trip, from July 10 to 16. At this season of the year the weather in Montana is at its best, and except for one or two days when the heat became a little too great for comfort, this was true of the weather I experienced. The June rains were over, but the dry weather of late summer had not yet come to rob the grass of its fresh green. Many varieties of flowers were in their fullest and freshest bloom, and most birds were finishing their nesting and were still in full song.

The streets of Bozeman are lined with cottonwood shade trees, in which many species of birds are common throughout the summer. On the morning when I started my trip most of them were singing. They were principally common species, such as the Robin, Warbling Vireo, Western Wood Pewee and Yellow Warbler. Among them, however, were two birds, usually occurring only in the evergreen forests of the mountains, that here in Bozeman nest down in the valley among the cottonwoods. These are the Cassin Purple Finch and the Pine Siskin. The song of the Purple Finch I heard in several places on this morning, and in one place watched a brilliantly colored male, rendering his performance from the high branch of a leafy cottonwood. The Pine Siskins were decidedly common. The goldfinch-like song, interspersed with whispered, long drawn out and rather unmusical trills, was heard in the cottonwoods everywhere, and the little brown streaked birds were frequently seen undulating from one tree top to the next.

The first part of my ride lay across the broad Gallatin Valley, through the towns of Belgrade and Manhattan. Everywhere were waving green fields of wheat, oats, barley, or clover and timothy. From a few favored spots came the song of the Bobolink, now fairly common in many places in the valley, but the two birds by far the most common, whose songs could be heard on every side, were the Western Vesper Sparrow and Western Meadowlark. In Montana the Meadowlark is the bird of the people, taking the place in their hearts that the Robin holds with people of the east, or the Mockingbird with those of the south. He is fully deserving of this place too, for no other bird is so well distributed throughout the state, so abundant, so full of joyous, overflowing, wonderful song. He comes with the first return of spring, and sings from the first day of his arrival till late summer, when he stops for a short time, only to burst forth again with the first cool days of fall. In some of the warmer spots he even remains throughout the bleak winter, and occasionally tries his voice on the warmer winter days.

Swallows were fairly common in the valley, wheeling about the ranch buildings. Nearly every barn had its colony of Cliff Swallows nesting under the eaves, and the Barn and Rough-winged swallows, though less common, were seen frequently. In one place where the road crossed an irrigating ditch over a small bridge, a pair of Barn Swallows flew out from under the bridge, and I stopped to investigate, and locate the nest that was plastered against a cross piece beneath. In the Gallatin Valley the Barn Swallow seems much fonder of bridges than barns, in fact one feels inclined to want to change the names of several swallows to suit the locality; to call the Barn Swallow, Bridge Swallow; the Cliff Swallow, Barn Swallow; and to bestow the name of Cliff Swallow upon the Violet-green.

A few miles past Manhattan came the end of the main Gallatin Valley. The road, formerly level, took a decided drop down hill, and, after a mile or so of this, came out at Logan in the Three Forks Valley. I stopped at Logan for a short rest and finally rode on to Three Forks for the night. For several miles the road led across a broad, flat, marshy area between the Gallatin and Madison Rivers. I remember seeing several Long-billed Curlews feeding about one of the pools, but I soon forgot to look for birds and paid all my attention to the myriads of mosquitoes. Nowhere else in Montana have I seen them so abundant as they were here. They swarmed about my head in thousands, and, though we traversed the flat at a lope, masses of them settled thickly on my horse's head

and neck. We were glad to cross the bridge over the Madison River and find shelter from the pests in the town of Three Forks.

In the morning I left Three Forks, crossing over the Jefferson, the third of the rivers which, uniting to form the Missouri a few miles north, gives the place its name. I had now entered Broadwater County. The road here leaves the river and traverses the hills several miles to the west of it. For some distance I climbed up the bare grass hills. The soil was dry and rocky and the country consequently unsettled and used only for stock range. On the east side of the road were several coulees, where sage-brush grew thickly. From one of these came the song of a Sage Thrasher, and I turned my horse up the coulee to hear it better, and finally get a glimpse of the bird. In this part of Montana the Sage Thrasher is decidedly rare. This one made my third in over three years experience, and all the three were in widely separated localities. Sage-brush is slowly disappearing before the advance of settlement in many places, and with it many sage-loving birds are becoming rare. The rarity of the Sage Thrasher, however, cannot be for this reason alone, for there are many places where sage is still common, in which there are no Thrashers.

The song of the Sage Thrasher is something between that of the Brown Thrasher and that of the Solitaire. His voice is very similar to the Solitaire's, and, heard at a distance, the songs sound much alike. From close at hand, however, the song becomes less a mixed jumble of sounds, and the rhythmic quality of the Thrasher is more noticeable. There are certain definite phrases, repeated two or three times as with the Brown Thrasher, but there is no pause between them. I believe the bird is more sparing of its song, not appreciating an audience, but slinking silently off into the sage at the first approach, as this one I was watching did when I drew near.

I soon reached the top of a low divide, in an area of flat open prairie. For several miles here the land was typical prairie land in every respect. The principal vegetation was buffalo-grass and prickly pear, and I was much delighted to find a typical prairie bird, the McCown Longspur. In fact Longspurs and Desert Horned Larks were the only birds there were on this area. The Horned Lark, while common throughout the prairie regions, is found in many other dry grassy areas also, that are not true prairie, but the Longspur belongs to the prairie and the prairie alone. I had not supposed before, that this species ever occurred westward and southward of the main prairie region of the state, and for the remainder of the day I felt the charm and delight of having made a new discovery.

The Longspurs were in full song, a charmingly sweet song, that tinkled across the prairie continually and from all sides. The song has been compared to that of the Horned Lark, but to my mind it is much better. The quality is sweeter and richer; the notes are louder and clearer, and above all, the manner in which it is rendered is so different from that of the lark or of any other bird, that the lark passes into insignificance in comparison. The song is nearly always rendered when in flight. The bird leaves the ground and flies upward on a long slant till fifteen or twenty feet high, then it spreads both wings outward and upward, lifts and spreads its white tail feathers, erects the upper tail coverts and feathers of the lower back, and bursting into song, floats downward into the grass like an animated parachute, singing all the way.

I soon left the prairie behind, and crossed an area where dry farmers had very recently taken up the land. New fences, without gates, stretched across the

former position of the road, and I had some difficulty to find my way. The road finally led northward and eastward, down into the Missouri Valley, through country not unlike that of the Gallatin Valley, seen the day before. I crossed the river on a long bridge and entered the small town of Toston. Both the horse and I were hot, tired and hungry, so I decided to rest the remainder of the afternoon and ride on to Townsend in the cool of the evening. I put the horse in a livery barn and after lunch in a small restaurant, finding nothing of interest in the town, I strolled a little way along the river bank, and sat down in the shade of the cottonwoods.

A pair of Western Kingbirds had a nest full of young in the fork of a cottonwood directly over my head. They started to scold me, but after a short time gave it up and went back to feeding the young again. Their scolding, however, brought out the other feathered inhabitants, consisting of several Robins and Yellow Warblers, a pair of Catbirds, a Western Wood Pewee, and a brilliantly colored Bullock Oriole. They watched me for a time but soon went away and left me to watch the Kingbirds. The young were very noisy. They kept up a continual clatter all the time, varied only when the parents came with food when it became much louder. This nest was the first one I had seen in the fork of a cottonwood. The commonest location for the Western Kingbird's nest in Montana seems to be between the cross arms of a telegraph pole. I had seen several such nests, near the railroad track at Logan the day before. When built in such a place, one of the birds may usually be seen on guard, sitting on the telegraph wire within five or six feet of the nest. In fact, whenever I see a Western Kingbird thus seated on a wire, I look for a nest nearby and am usually successful in finding it. Here in the Missouri Valley the Western Kingbird is decidedly commoner than the eastern species. The reverse is true in the Gallatin Valley, where the elevation is some 700 feet higher, the factor which probably causes the difference.

After some time I wandered out on the bridge I had crossed. Cliff Swallows were nesting somewhere beneath the bridge in large numbers. On the edge of the river not far from the bridge they were gathering mud for their nests, though it seemed to me rather late in the year for nest construction to be still going on. Fifteen or twenty birds were gathered in one spot, gathering the mud. They poised daintily, only their feet and bills touching the mud, while their wings were wide-spread and constantly fluttering.

In the evening I rode on, down the Missouri Valley to Townsend, where I stopped for the night. On the way I was glad to see many Bobolinks, and in one place, several Lark Buntings, a bird quite common in some parts of Montana, but with which I have yet to make intimate acquaintance. One of the Buntings favored me with a flight song, a performance I had never witnessed before.

The next day I rode over a low divide between the Missouri and Prickly Pear valleys, crossing from Broadwater to Lewis and Clark County, and stopping the next night at Helena. After leaving the Missouri Valley the road led for most of the way over a barren rocky stretch of country where there were no birds. When I reached the Prickly Pear Valley it was the middle of the afternoon, when birds were silent and not stirring. I remember but one observation that day that seems worth recording. An electric power line follows the road here for several miles, and near East Helena, I found beneath the wires, the dead body of a Wilson Phalarope. The bird had evidently killed itself by

flying against the wires and had not been dead more than a day or two. I presume from this that the Wilson Phalarope breeds in the marshes of the Prickly Pear Valley, though there were no marshes in the near vicinity of the place where I found the bird.

The next day I decided to take only a short ride, as the weather was hot and trips of the last two days had been rather hard ones, particularly for my horse. So I started rather late and stopped early, going north along the route of the Great Northern Railway as far as a ranch near the station of Mitchell. On the way out of Helena, I remember seeing a Solitaire, seated on a wire in the northern part of the town. It seemed to me a rather low elevation for this bird and decidedly not in its usual habitat. It is possible though, that this species breeds among the rocky cliffs of Mount Helena a few miles west of the town, though even there it would be at an unusually low elevation.

The people were early risers at the ranch where I stopped that night, so I was on my way early on the following morning. A short distance north of the ranch the road entered the Prickly Pear Canyon, and in the next ten miles, between here and Wolf Creek, I enjoyed the best scenery of my entire trip. High walls of reddish colored rock, seamed and broken into rectangular masses, rose on either side, while along the canyon bottom flowed a fair sized stream, its banks fringed with willows, alders, and occasionally tall cottonwoods. On the steep slopes above the canyon walls were clumps of Douglas firs and yellow pines. The road followed along the stream bottom, or occasionally climbed a little way up the hillside on one side or the other, where a better view up and down the canyon could be obtained. Wild rose bushes, covered with pink blossoms, grew in profusion along the road, while syringa bushes, growing in clefts of the rocks, formed dense white masses, often extending high up into the walls of the canyon, the fragrant blossoms filling the air with their sweet perfume.

At Wolf Creek I left the canyon road and turned westward, on the road to Stearns, which was my destination for the night. The road left the canyon and climbed up hill, till it reached a wide stretch of rolling grassy hills. This country, neither valley nor mountain, continued all the way to Stearns. Tall waving, green grass clothed the hillsides, and with it were many flowers of various colors, but the most abundant of these, one whose spire shaped clusters of blue flowers covered the hillsides everywhere, was the lupine. The two most abundant birds, in fact almost the only birds in this country, were the Meadowlark and the Vesper Sparrow. These two birds were everywhere and their songs rang from the grass hills on all sides.

The next morning I left Stearns, which is merely a ranch and post office on the South Fork of the Dearborn River, and rode on northward across the divide between the Dearborn and Sun rivers to Augusta. The same grassy hills continued through the Dearborn country, but where I crossed the main branch of the Dearborn, the road took me down into a steep-sided canyon, whose walls were grown with Douglas fir and limber pine. Here in the firs I heard the voices of two mountain birds, the Audubon Warbler and the Western Tanager.

On the other side of the river I found that the road carried me in decidedly the wrong direction, so, since there were no fences across the grassy hills as far as I could see, I left it and rode across the open country. As I crossed the divide between the drainages of the Dearborn and Sun Rivers, a decided change in the character of the country was noticeable. The rolling, round-topped hills changed to fantastically shaped, flat-topped, prairie buttes, the tall grass and

blue lupine changed to short buffalo-grass and prickly pear, and the bird voices changed from Vesper Sparrows and Meadowlarks, to Horned Larks and McCown Longspurs. Far to the north lay an irregular line of dark green cottonwoods, marking the course of the South Fork of the Sun River, and I knew that somewhere along its banks lay the town of Augusta. The town, however, was on the north side of the stream and completely hidden from my view behind the cottonwoods, so that I was at a loss to know toward which part of the stream to ride. As I drew nearer I made out a ranch building on the south side of the stream and heading toward that, soon struck a road which by good luck, crossed the stream on a bridge, but a quarter of a mile above the town.

The next day was the last of the trip, and over a road with which I was already familiar. Chouteau lay but twenty-eight miles to the north. Four miles out from Augusta I crossed the North Fork of the Sun River, which forms the boundary between Lewis and Clark and Teton counties. On the other side of the river the road led to the top of a long, level, prairie bench, where it remained nearly all the way to Chouteau. At one place in a hollow beside the road, lay one of the small alkaline ponds which are characteristic of this section of the country. I left my horse to graze beside the road, and took a walk around the borders of the pond to see what birds were in the vicinity. A few weeks ago I had explored this same pond, and had found many pairs of Avocets and Wilson Phalaropes evidently breeding. In fact I remember two half-grown Avocets, struggling through the green scum that bordered the pond and swimming away into the open water at my approach, while their parents circled about my head. Now they had all left and the only water birds seen were a flock of ducks, principally Mallards and Baldpates, swimming about near the edge of a small grassy island. Horned Larks and Longspurs fed about the edge of the pond, the Longspurs walking daintily over the green scum at the edge, and eating the small insects that swarmed there. Several young Longspurs, barely able to fly, were here with their parents, and one such had evidently come to grief in its efforts to imitate its parents' example, and was drowned in the midst of the scum.

So far the weather had been perfect throughout the trip, but now as I rode over the prairie bench, I noticed a thunderstorm coming up. I saw that unless I soon got under cover I was in for a wetting, so noticing an old sheep camp in a coulee on the east side of the bench, I turned down there and found shelter for myself and my horse under the shed. The storm came and I was glad I was not out in it, for the rain soon turned to hail, with stones large enough to be decidedly uncomfortable. Even during the storm I found birds to watch, for a Say Phoebe and a small flock of Longspurs came under the shed to seek shelter also. The Phoebe sat on a beam under the roof, quiet save for an occasional flirt of the tail, but the Longspurs walked about, feeding on the ground under the shed as though they were out in the open in the best of weather.

When the storm was over I proceeded on my way. The sun shone out again over the dripping prairie, and the Longspurs broke into song everywhere as though it were a morning chorus. Finally I came to the end of the long bench and the road wound downward through a group of curiously shaped rocks. A colony of Cliff Swallows were nesting on the sides of one of these rocks, while a Rock Wren in song, and a Duck Hawk, wheeling over the prairie were other birds that probably had their homes there. Around a bend in the road I soon came in sight of the Teton River Valley and the town of Chouteau among the cottonwoods of the river bank.