

SOME BIRDS OF THE GOLD LAKE DISTRICT OF THE SIERRA NEVADA, CALIFORNIA

WITH ONE ILLUSTRATION

By MARGARET W. WYTHE

AT THE NORTHERN end of the Sierra Nevada lie the two districts popularly known to California's summer vacationists as the "Feather River country" and the "Gold Lake region". Feather River has been a mecca for summer visitors for so long that it has lost much of the freshness and charm of more remote parts of the mountains. As yet the Gold Lake region is one of the accessible parts of the Sierra Nevada that has not been ruined by auto highways and tourist accommodations. Here the bird student may camp in primitive simplicity and have ideal opportunity for becoming acquainted with mountain bird life.

Located by maps, the Gold Lake region is situated on the southern border of Plumas County, extending a few miles south into Sierra County. Mount Elwell, 7846 feet altitude, is the only high, prominent peak in the Gold Lake district, although south of the group of Bear Lakes rises a ridge to a height of 7500 feet; and farther south, beyond Salmon Lakes and Sardine Lakes, rise the Sierra Buttes, 8616 feet high. Mount Elwell stands directly and steeply above the north shore of Long Lake, in a bare, rocky wall on the lake side, and is so much higher than the surrounding country, with such a sweeping vista in all directions, that it forms one of the forest reserve fire lookouts.

From the summit of Mount Elwell the Gold Lake region can be seen in great detail. All about the southern side of the mountain, in rocky basins with boulder-strewn shores, and in tree-rimmed hollows, nestle clusters of lakes, some large, some small. Gold Lake, with a length of nearly two miles, is the largest; Long Lake, at the base of Mount Elwell, is next in size. Five of the Bear Lakes group can be seen—the three Bears, Silver, and Round lakes. Gray Eagle Creek drains most of this lake region, being a tributary to the Middle Fork of Feather River. It carries the water of Long Lake, and, by Bear Creek, a short intermediary stream, the waters of the Bear Lakes group also. Gold Lake is drained by another stream, Frazier Creek, a few miles to the east of Gray Eagle canyon. In the region, as a whole, there is considerable forest; however, where the lakes are clustered the closest, from the southeast rocky face of Mount Elwell to the rocky ridge south of the Bear Lakes group, treeless, rocky and boulder-strewn surfaces appear on most of the higher slopes, these persisting at many points down to the borders of the lakes themselves. Thus, a bird's eye view of the area shows a "spotty" appearance, of alternate bare, rocky patches and wooded portions.

The predominating forest tree of the region is the red fir. Associated with the red fir are good stands of lodgepole pine. Next in point of numbers is the yellow pine. This tree, here at the upper limit of yellow pines, is represented by scattered, large-coned individuals (presumably Jeffrey pine), in thinner forested portions and in mixed tree-chaparral belts up to about 7000 feet. Less numerous than the yellow pine is the silver pine. This is not so generally distributed as the other conifers, and is found on the more shaded slopes bordering some of the lakes and canyons, beginning at about 6200 feet, where the silver fir peters out. Silver fir, at this altitude at the upper limit of its distribution, grows as single trees or small groups of trees, in stands of red fir. Alpine hemlock, in scattering groups of small trees, appears on a few

north-facing slopes. In moist, sheltered places near the borders of the lakes are a few small trees of the mountain ash. Aspen is also to be seen in a narrow belt along Bear Creek. There are two types of chaparral in the region. At lower altitudes it consists largely of green manzanita, service berry, deer brush, bitter cherry and chinquapin. At higher levels these plants are mostly replaced by huckleberry oak, Sierra plum, snow bush and dwarf manzanita. The most conspicuous shrubs along the margins of lakes, snow-water ponds and streams are narrow-leaf alder, creek dogwood and willows of several species.

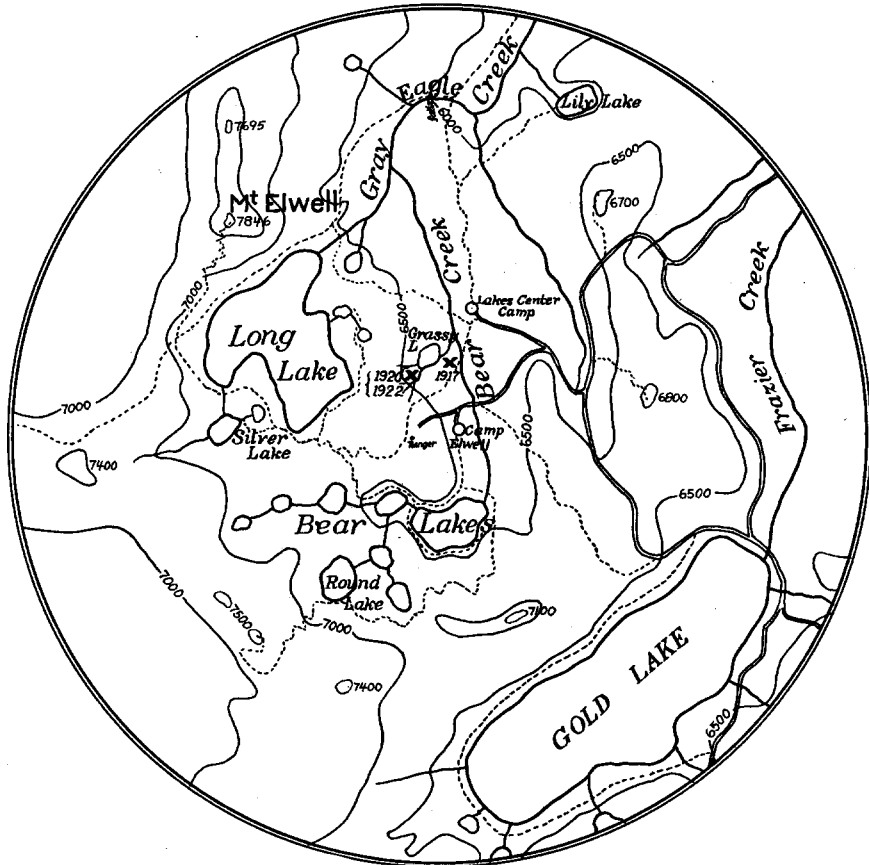


Fig. 31. THE GOLD LAKE REGION, SHOWING LOCATION OF CAMPS OF 1917, 1920, AND 1922; AND, APPROXIMATELY, THE ROADS AND TRAILS IN THE REGION.

Nine weeks, during three summer vacations, between the dates of June 26 and July 24, cover my total sojourn in the Gold Lake region. These nine weeks afield in the same place, with eyes and ears on the alert, have resulted in some more or less intimate acquaintance with the birds to be expected in this small bit of the Sierra Nevada.

The spot chosen for camp in 1917 (June 26 to July 14) was in a group of lodgepole pines at the edge of the narrow belt of aspens that flank Bear Creek. On the west of this aspen belt was a fringe of willows bordering the stream at the edge of a meadow. On the east of the group of lodgepoles was a rocky slope with a sparse growth of small trees and some chaparral. Behind this rose one of the steep, red-fir-lodgepole covered slopes, separating Gray Eagle canyon from Frazier Creek canyon.

It was at this camp site that three nesting birds proved especially interesting. For several days we had noted Tree Swallows (*Iridoprocne bicolor*) repeatedly flying through camp. They were picking up feathers that leaked from one of the sleeping bags each day when it was turned about for airing. We followed up the birds and found them using the feathers for nest lining in a nearby aspen. This led us to hunt for more nesting swallows among the aspens and we located nest holes of several other pairs of Tree Swallows during our stay. A female Calliope Hummingbird (*Stellula calliope*) was observed frequently about the canvas hammock and we supposed at first that it was after insects which had dropped from the trees, until one day, while lying in the hammock it was visited by the bird and I discovered the purpose. I was first aware of Calliope's presence by feeling it pecking on the under side of the canvas. It soon made its appearance above, at my feet, and continued to peck, soon having its bill well filled with lint from canvas and ropes. With this it flew in a bee-line to high up in a neighboring pine. These visits for nesting material lasted several days. The third nesting bird directly at our camp site was the Mountain Chickadee (*Penthestes gambeli abbreviatus*). When first noted, a pair was carrying food to young in a hole of a lodgepole pine, and the birds were still feeding the nestlings when we broke camp.

The camp site of 1920 (July 10 to 24) and 1922 (July 7 to 20) was in Bear Creek canyon, just over a low ridge north of Bear Lakes, and several hundred yards to the west of Bear Creek, on the 6300-foot contour. On three sides it was bordered by narrow streamlets coming from a number of nearby springs. The fourth side, on the north, was a marshy meadow which bordered a lake called Grassy Lake, where Bear Creek and other small streamlets flowed into it. The meadow was at one time undoubtedly a part of this lake. The camp site of 1917 lay on the east side of the same meadow. The area of the camp islet formed by the streams was about 200 by 300 feet.

Scarcely had we dragged our camp equipment over an improvised foot bridge before we had our first glimpse of what proved to be the best find of the trip. On one of the lower branches of the largest fir on the islet, about twenty feet above our heads, appeared a bright red Pine Grosbeak (*Pinicola enucleator californica*), which sang snatches of song for some minutes before flying away. Several times during the afternoon it reappeared in the same place and sang, apparently unconcerned by our presence. Early next morning (July 12) one of our party discovered that the Pine Grosbeaks were nesting in a young lodgepole pine near his sleeping bag (see R. Hunt, Condor, XXIII, 1921, p. 187).

It was quite a surprise to meet with nesting Pine Grosbeaks here, for, except for a few plants suggestive of the Hudsonian Zone, the surroundings were otherwise Canadian. In 1917 a male Pine Grosbeak had been seen; while in 1922 a pair frequented the island all during our stay, feeding on fir and lodgepole pine tips, calling and singing; but though carefully watched and followed about, no sign of nesting was manifested. The same year two other pairs were spotted in the near vicinity—always observed in the same places: one pair foraged at the junction of the main road and that leading to Camp Elwell; the other pair foraged at the intersection of Bear Creek and the main road. As in 1920, all these birds when observed were in red firs or lodgepole pines (both trees of the Canadian Zone).

Further evidence, however, was found to convince us that this camp site represented a tongue of Hudsonian Zone, or, at least, a mingling of so-called Canadian and Hudsonian elements. White-crowned Sparrows (*Zonotrichia leucophrys leucophrys*) were present in the willow thickets at the edge of the meadow. In both 1917 and 1920 they were heard singing daily, and at frequent intervals they foraged through the camp sites. It was suspected that they were nesting here, although no actual

evidence was observed. In 1922, the continued notes of alarm of an adult, sitting conspicuously on a lodgepole limb at the edge of the willows on the margin of the meadow, led to the discovery of a nest. This was situated a foot above the ground, the nest materials being interwoven about, and laid on top of, several slanting willow stems. On July 14 it contained three down-covered young and one infertile egg. A few days later the nestlings had disappeared, probably destroyed by some predacious animal, as they were still too small to leave the nest.

Birds of particular interest at this camp were the infrequent visitors, transients passing through in a day's foraging and not appearing again. Thus, Hermit Warblers (*Dendroica occidentalis*) were observed in both 1920 and 1922: one adult male, in an old lodgepole, in 1920; in 1922, a family group foraging through the conifers one day. In 1920, a singing parent and family of young Cassin Vireos (*Vireo solitarius cassini*) wandered into camp one day, foraging through the trees for a brief time. Once only, in 1922, just long enough to observe it while singing, a Lutescent Warbler (*Vermivora celata lutescens*) passed by along the willow margined meadow.

In our walks through the district we came definitely to associate certain birds with certain portions of the region. Mountain Quail (*Oreortyx picta plumifera*) were sure to be heard at sunset on the fir-covered ridge which separated Gray Eagle canyon from Frazier Creek canyon. Here, and also on the meadow near camp, at early morning and late afternoon till dark, were always Pacific Nighthawks (*Chordeiles virginianus hesperis*). The north-facing slope of this same ridge, far above Gold Lake, and in one of the heaviest forested areas, was the only place where Sierra Hermit Thrushes (*Hylocichla guttata sequoiensis*) were heard. In the stillness of early morning after sunrise, and again toward sunset, their songs greeted us at long intervals as we took the trail from Bear Lake to Gold Lake. Only a few Mountain Bluebirds (*Sialia currucoides*) were noted. Most of these were found on the north side of Gold Lake, in an open meadow which was recovering from the effects of previous sheeping. Two families of young were seen here in 1917, on snags of dead trees. Another place where Bluebirds were occasionally seen was on the east side of Round Lake. At Blairsdan a pair was found nesting in a hole under the eaves of the railroad station the day we broke camp, July 24, 1920.

At the islet camp (1920, 1922) several species were nesting during our July visits. Golden Pileolated Warblers (*Wilsonia pusilla chyseola*) and Western Warbling Vireos (*Vireo gilvus swainsoni*) built nests in the willows, the latter birds singing so persistently all day long as to become almost tiresome to listen to. In 1920 a male Ruby-crowned Kinglet (*Regulus calendula cineraceus*) sang from a favorite perch on the flat upper surface of a fir limb, where it sat for minutes at a time with fluffed out feathers and red crest gleaming in the sun. Its song was unique, never varying in utterance, and sounded more than anything else like the words "you're cheap, you're cheap, you're cheap"! We felt sure that there was a nest nearby but were unable to locate it. However, before we left, the family of young, fed by both parents, was observed for a few days on and near this fir tree. Other occupied nests observed at this camp site were Western Wood Pewee (*Myiochanes richardsoni*), Western Chipping Sparrow (*Spizella passerina arizonae*), and Audubon Warbler (*Dendroica auduboni*).

In the Gold Lake region as a whole, the nesting birds most frequently noted were Western Robin (*Planesticus migratorius propinquus*) and Sierra Junco (*Junco oreganus thurberi*), while a number of immature and one nestling Green-tailed Towhee (*Oreospiza chlorura*) showed that the nesting season was not yet quite passed for this species.

During the three summers spent in the Gold Lake region, 54 species of birds were observed. For other vacationists who may visit this part of the Sierra Nevada and wish to know what birds may be expected in the Gold Lake region, the following list of species is given. Further observations and study will be helpful in more accurately determining the proper niches of these birds than could be expected from the brief periods of observations of the present writer. The niches that many of the birds occupied among certain assemblages of plant growth soon became fairly well established in our minds. Four distinct associations are to be found in the region: forest association; mixed forest-chaparral association; riparian association; meadow association. All of these associations were within sight of the various camps, so that the studying of them was a matter of daily observation. A few of the birds seen have not been listed, some because seen but once in flight overhead, such as Red-winged and Brewer black-birds, Pelican, Red-tailed Hawk, etc., others because found on the Feather River at Blairsden, at a much lower altitude than the Gold Lake region itself, such as Screech Owl, Anna Hummingbird, Sparrow Hawk, etc. Some birds, observed constantly in more than one association, are so listed.

FOREST ASSOCIATION

- Sierra Grouse (*Dendragapus obscurus sierrae*)
- Modoc Woodpecker (*Dryobates villosus orius*)
- Sierra Red-breasted Sapsucker (*Sphyrapicus varius daggetti*)
- Williamson Sapsucker (*Sphyrapicus thyroideus thyroideus*)
- Northern White-headed Woodpecker (*Xenopicus albolarvatus albolarvatus*)
- Red-shafted Flicker (*Colaptes cafer collaris*)
- Olive-sided Flycatcher (*Nuttallornis borealis*)
- Western Wood Pewee (*Myiochanes richardsoni richardsoni*)
- Blue-fronted Jay (*Cyanocitta stelleri frontalis*)
- California Evening Grosbeak (*Hesperiphona vespertina californica*)
- California Pine Grosbeak (*Pinicola enucleator californica*)
- Cassin Purple Finch (*Carpodacus cassinii*)
- Pine Siskin (*Spinus pinus pinus*)
- Western Chipping Sparrow (*Spizella passerina arizonae*)
- Sierra Junco (*Junco oreganus thurberi*)
- Cassin Vireo (*Vireo solitarius cassinii*)
- Audubon Warbler (*Dendroica auduboni auduboni*)
- Hermit Warbler (*Dendroica occidentalis*)
- Sierra Creeper (*Certhia familiaris zelotes*)
- Slender-billed Nuthatch (*Sitta carolinensis aculeata*)
- Red-breasted Nuthatch (*Sitta canadensis*)
- Short-tailed Mountain Chickadee (*Penthestes gambeli abbreviatus*)
- Western Ruby-crowned Kinglet (*Regulus calendula cineraceus*)
- Townsend Solitaire (*Myadestes townsendi*)
- Sierra Hermit Thrush (*Hylocichla guttata sequoiensis*)
- Western Robin (*Planesticus migratorius propinquus*)

MIXED FOREST-CHAPARRAL ASSOCIATION

- Mountain Quail (*Oreortyx picta plumifera*)
- Pacific Horned Owl (*Bubo virginianus pacificus*)
- Pacific Nighthawk (*Chordeiles virginianus hesperis*)
- Sierra Junco (*Junco oreganus thurberi*)
- Yosemite Fox Sparrow (*Passerella iliaca mariposae*)
- Green-tailed Towhee (*Oreospiza chlorura*)
- Western Tanager (*Piranga ludoviciana*)
- Calaveras Warbler (*Vermivora ruficapilla gutturalis*)
- Mountain Bluebird (*Sialia currucoides*)

RIPARIAN ASSOCIATION

Spotted Sandpiper (*Actitis macularia*)
Calliope Hummingbird (*Stellula calliope*)
Small flycatcher (*Empidonax*, species ?)
White-crowned Sparrow (*Zonotrichia leucophrys leucophrys*)
Sierra Junco (*Junco oreganus thurberi*)
Green-tailed Towhee (*Oreospiza chlorura*)
Tree Swallow (*Iridoprocne bicolor*)
Western Warbling Vireo (*Vireo gilvus swainsoni*)
Golden Pileolated Warbler (*Wilsonia pusilla chryseola*)
American Dipper (*Cinclus mexicanus unicolor*)
Russet-backed Thrush (*Hylocichla ustulata*)

MEADOW ASSOCIATION

Pacific Nighthawk (*Chordeiles virginianus hesperis*)
Calliope Hummingbird (*Stellula calliope*)
Western Chipping Sparrow (*Spizella passerina arizonae*)
White-crowned Sparrow (*Zonotrichia leucophrys leucophrys*)
Sierra Junco (*Junco oreganus thurberi*)
Lincoln Sparrow (*Melospiza lincolni lincolni*)
Western Robin (*Planesticus migratorius propinquus*)
Mountain Bluebird (*Sialia currucoides*)

Museum of Vertebrate Zoology, Berkeley, California, April 9, 1926.