

EFFECTIVENESS OF BROWN CREEPER'S CONCEALMENT BEHAVIOR

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During a study of the relationships between forest snags and cavity-nesting birds in the northern Rocky Mountains, I observed the effectiveness of the Brown Creeper's (*Certhia familiaris*) cryptic color pattern and behavioral response. The combination made the bird nearly undetectable near its nest site on an Engelmann Spruce (*Picea engelmannii*) snag. The nest tree was located on the Coram Experimental Forest, Flathead National Forest, northwestern Montana, at an elevation of 5350 feet.

The nest site was 27 feet above the ground in a totally dead snag 74 feet high with a D.B.H. of 17 inches. The snag still retained most of its branches and bark. On 18 June 1974 I had been observing adult creepers enter their nest, located in a cavity between the trunk of the tree and a section of partially detached bark. The birds were carrying food and apparently feeding young, though the latter were not seen or heard.

As I watched, an adult flew to the tree, landed several feet below the nest, and "hitched" toward the entrance. When suddenly startled by a slight movement of my leg, the bird immediately "froze" in a position in which its body and outstretched wings were pressed tightly against the tree. Its mottled color pattern blended perfectly with the scaly bark of the spruce. I took my eyes off the bird to ascertain how difficult it would have been to locate had I not been following its movement before it "froze". Several minutes were required to relocate the bird even though I was only 25 feet from the tree, was using 7x binoculars and knew the bird's relative position on the tree. The creeper remained in this stationary, perfectly camouflaged position for another five minutes, after which it continued on to its nest.

This observation appears to be an exception to Bent's (U.S. Natl. Mus. Bull. 195, 1948) view that the creeper does not seem to look upon man as a danger. This behavior pattern may be common during the nestling period. However, the creepers at another nest discovered in a Douglas-fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*) during the 1974 study never assumed the above-described position in response to my presence. This pair also appeared to be feeding young.

Brown Creeper nests are not easily located, because of their location (between bark and main stem) and the adult's behavior and cryptic color pattern. Bent (ibid.) describes the difficulty in locating creepers because of their inconspicuous color. One instance is cited wherein creepers rested in the shadows of limbs, thus adding to their concealment. He also cites an account by William Brewster describing the escape of a Brown Creeper that was being pursued by a shrike. The creeper flattened itself against the bark of a tree and avoided detection. Bradford Torrey, also cited by Bent (ibid.: 67) describes a similar defensive response of a creeper to the scream of a hawk. When the hawk screamed overhead, the creeper "flattened himself against the trunk spreading his wings to their very utmost and ducking his head," making him nearly impossible to detect.

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