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NOTES ON THE LEUCOSTICTES—GRAY-  
CROWNED AND HELPBURN'S.

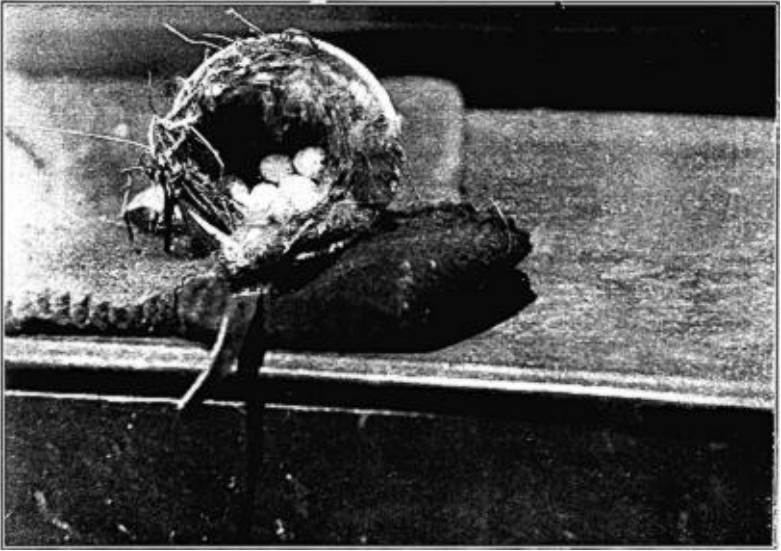
P. M. SILLOWAY.

(FROM THE WRITER'S MANUSCRIPT OF A FORTH-COMING LIST OF BIRDS  
OF FERGUS COUNTY, MONT.)

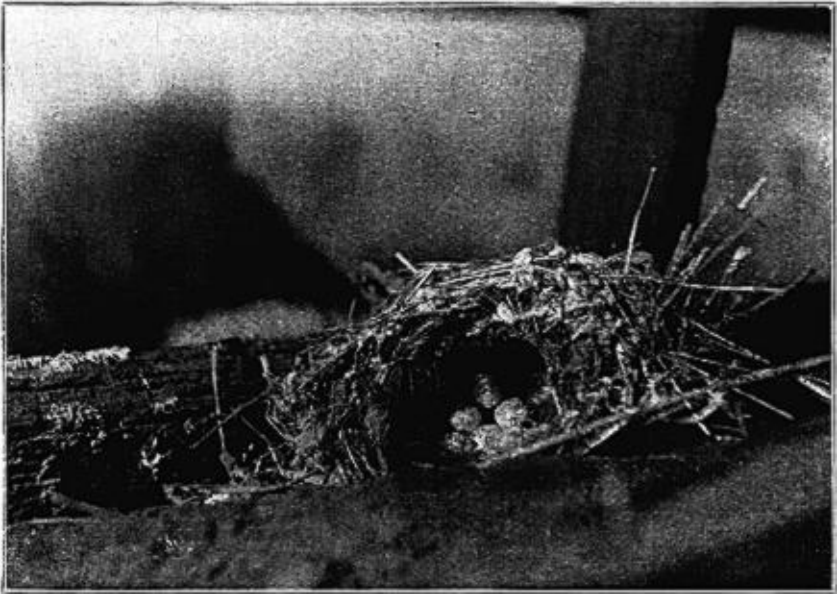
The Gray-crowned Leucosticte, (*Leucosticte tephrocotis*), is a regular winter resident at Lewistown, where it is known as the "brown snowbird." It generally appears about the first of November, though in pleasant weather it may not be observed before the 8th or 10th of that month. It is gregarious, moving about daily in flocks of varying size, usually scattering about town in smaller troops until severe weather, when most of the troops unite into one large flock, often containing from two to three hundred individuals.

The Leucostictes are our English Sparrows in social manners. They feed fearlessly at the door-steps or in the yards, though they are likely to whirl away when the door is opened or when anyone appears unexpectedly at a window near by. On a warm winter morning I have seen from forty to fifty of these birds sitting on a wood-pile in the door-yard, sunning themselves and gleaning from refuse on the ground.

Late in the afternoon the individuals of a flock scatter out to nooks they are accustomed to use for the night. A



Nest of Bewick's Wren (*Thryothorus bewickii*) in a coffee pot.



Nest of Bewick's Wren (*Thryothorus bewickii*) in a wood pile.

particular male, and sometimes a female, have regular sleeping-nooks in a porch of the writer's home, and long before nightfall the birds seek their quarters. I have seen a leucosticte enter a tubular eaves-trough and there spend the night. Frequently they flutter under projecting eaves, and cling to some protruding support for the night.

In 1899, I first noted the leucostictes on October 30, when a troop of fifteen was seen gleaning on a vacant lot on Main street at Lewiston. When disturbed, they arose with sharp, metallic, scolding notes, keeping together and flying away in irregular, undulating, capricious flight. By November 16, the number of the flock had increased to about sixty. They fed near the school building, and were quite fearless and friendly, an individual frequently alighting within six feet of me.

The leucostictes are extremely restless, flitting in irregular, jerky movements. They have a trilling chirp which they utter a-wing and on the ground. They alight about the buildings much like English Sparrows, preferring projecting parts, gutters, window sills, and gables. They frequently alight in a window, even if some one is standing at the window inside.

These birds feed on the seeds of the dwarf sage, or they glean from the snow around the bases of such plants. They often frequent the hillsides at the margins of snowy areas. In the spring, when a thaw is taking place, a whole flock will congregate on a spot eight or ten feet across, all pecking industriously at the bare ground. They also frequent the margins of dry ditches, or a walk or fence on sloping ground, where exposed spots are found. Some of a flock are in motion at any time, flitting nervously to another portion of the feeding-place. Often the entire flock will take wing with a dull whirr of wings, many of the birds uttering a quick alarm note like the syllable "quir," or "quie," or "quie quie." Rising in scattering order, with capricious, undulating movement, they may circle down immediately to the same forage-spot.

The rapid flitting of the wings of the leucostictes is noticeable, though sometimes one of the birds will soar through the air with outspread wings, fluttering the wings only enough to give movement to the body. The flitting of the wings appears to be caused by their tips being elevated above the general level of the bird's back.

Very early in the spring the leucostictes give evidence of the approach of the nuptial season. After the middle of January a male will frequently chase another or a female, like Meadowlarks in amorous sport. Occasionally, at this season, a male will alight for a few moments on some convenient perch, and utter a pretty little trill, like "tree-ree-ree ree," enunciating the syllables with great rapidity. As the season advances and the warm sunshine of late February indicates the further progress of the vernal period, the males become more prolific in their musical efforts. Sitting on the ridge of house or barn, generally at the end of the ridge, alone or in small troops, they utter their wheezy chants, sometimes with no more force than that used by the Grasshopper Sparrow, though often with greater force and more varied expression.

The males sing also when sitting on the ground, appearing to be picking up morsels of food and singing as a frequent variation. In such instances the song has a ventriloquist effect, seeming to arise from a point much farther away. A male singing on the ground will sometimes sidle toward a female, and if she coyly takes wing, a reckless amorous pursuit will follow.

In producing their musical numbers, the males care little for surroundings if an appreciative female listener is near. Late in February last year I observed a male sitting on a telephone pole in front of the post office at mail time, and disregarding the activity below, he uttered his low, hurried trills.

In early March the wing-bars of the leucostictes become more prominent, the purple of the sides begins to show more noticeably, and the colors generally assume their

nuptial hues. By the middle of April the last of the leucostictes has disappeared.

Hepburn's Leucosticte can easily be distinguished from the Gray-crowned by the greater amount of gray upon the head of the former, the color frequently marking the entire head above the lower part of the ears. In the flocks that visit us, the proportion is about one Hepburn's to six or eight Gray-crowned. In habits the one is a counter-part of the other.

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## THE BEST PLACE OF ALL.

### *An Amateur's Experience.*

MISS REBECCA M. LEETE.

Some three or four years ago my friend and I were returning on a late September day from a drive in the country. It was already growing dusk as we crossed a little valley before entering town, but from the dry reeds by the brook a belated bird—black and white with flashes of crimson—rose and swept over us, far out into the sky.

We followed him with longing eyes until he was lost in the distance and then vowed that when spring came again we would begin to study birds, never dreaming, in our ignorance, that we might have begun at once.

I recalled the fact that I possessed a fine copy of the Pennsylvania Bird Book and a battered pair of field glasses cherished until that moment as a relic of the Civil War only. We were never satisfied as to the identity of our bird and it seems to me now as if it were the spirit of all the birds and, soaring out into the twilight, it had left behind an undying joy in the study of nature and her children.

The following April found us a-field, and we learned many of our common birds which aforesaid had been strangers.