

# THE WREN-TIT

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## The Nest-pavement of the California Horned Lark

One of the fascinations to be found in birds reposes in the many habits and mannerisms they present which no simple explanation can solve. One that has aroused reams of discussion, and still remains unexplained, is the habit of the Crested Flycatcher, of Eastern United States, in placing a cast snake skin in its nest. Yet many other birds adorn their nest with a gew-gaw, a furbelow, a this or that, which, apparently, has no meaning. The Water Thrush hangs an apron on its nest and, many years ago, Silloway, in "Birds of Fergus County, Montana," described a "pavement" about the nest of the Desert Horned Lark. Next Mouseley, in the Auk for 1916 (pages 281 to 286), described a similar structure about the nest of the Prairie Horned Lark, and the writer has found it about the nests of the California Horned Lark. Of ten nests found since the spring of 1928 nine had a well-defined pavement.

Now the nest of the California Horned Lark is sunk in an earthen cup in the barren areas that are home to the bird. With a tuft of vegetation (Brome grasses on the hills, Salicornia at the salt marsh edge), nearly always on the south, the pavement naturally is placed about the northern rim. The pavement is not an elaborate affair; its component parts are merely the moveable flat elements in the bird's environment. Small bits of clods are frequently used but, since the hills are niggardly with clods, next best are "cow chips." The finest pavements line the nests in that oddest of all bird



CALIFORNIA HORNED LARK NEST WITH  
PAVEMENT OF ADOBE FLAKES

homes, the mud flats at the salt marsh fringe of the great Bay. Here late spring suns dry hard as flint the adobe that winter rains soaked up. But adobe, in drying, flakes nicely and the Larks seize on flakes as on cobble stones.

Why did eight nests out of nine have the plant tuft on the south and the pavement on the north? Perhaps this is merely a coincidence. Perhaps thus is provided a protection from the sun. In Eastern United States the Prairie Horned Lark does it the other way around. I thought, in that case, it was to protect from the stiff northwest wind that so frequently chills in early spring. Why a pavement? I make a guess that it comes from a Lark desire, a desire that keeps the bird always in the barest stretches, to have a bare ground nest-approach. But, more likely, the answer is not so simple. Reasons aside, we can add nest-pavements to our long list of evidences that prove the fascination of birds.

GAYLE PICKWELL.

### SOME SEASONAL NOTES

Long before Christmas, in 1928, the citizens of San Jose were complaining that Robins and Waxwings had eaten up all their dooryard berries that were to have been festive ornaments at the Yuletide. And certainly Robins and Waxwings were everywhere throughout the city and in great numbers for many months. But Christmas came, in 1929, and also the beginnings of 1930 with almost nary a berry touched in dooryard hedge and garden. No records are at hand for Robins prior to January 4, and then but a single bird. Records since show only one or two individuals. Likewise the first Waxwings were noted on December 30 and a very small flock has remained since.

The toyon bushes of the hills also are still red with berries and they are Robin favorites. Yet Robins are in the Valley. The foothills of the Santa Cruz Mountains rollic with their calls and the January field trip, on the 25th, showed hundreds, if not thousands, in the Llagas and Uvas Valleys. Perhaps a crop of food-stuff greater than usual keeps them in the hills.

Horned Larks have a multitude of characteristics that make them intriguing. Pavements at nests is one and "staking" nesting claims in January is another. On January 26, 1929, males were fighting and singing on the ground and aloft at Loyola Corners near Los Altos. Earlier than that by one day this year (January 25, 1930), males were noted in characteristic territory notes and actions on the New Almaden Road. For them flocking days are over, homesites now the urge. Yet the earliest nest discovered was on March 25, 1928, and though, apparently, the earliest recorded for the California Horned Lark, two full months after the males had decided where it was to be.

Bush-tits are still in flocks (January 26), though soon the merry troop must disband for the business of knitting nesting bags.

Miss Gladys Record of Los Gatos relates that a Junco with a distinctive white feather on its crown has returned to her feeding tray this winter, the fourth winter since the bird was first seen.

### REPORTS OF PAST MEETINGS

Mr. C. A. Bryant, ardent bird lover of San Francisco, spent his vacation in early fall of 1929 abirding across Southern California. He told of his observations in a talk of "Some Birds of the Tidelands and Deserts of Southern California" to an appreciative audience at the November 18th meeting of the Santa Clara Valley Audubon Society.

The December meeting, postponed to the 30th, had an unusually large attendance. Mr. Alton Alderman addressed this group with a resume of his extensive observations of the wild life of that most impressive of ice-clad American peaks, Mount Rainier. To re-enforce his remarks some fifty hand-colored lantern slides of photographs taken on "The Mountain" were shown.

Dr. Jean Linsdale, of the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology at Berkeley, gave the Society a most interesting synopsis of the past, the present, and the future as regards bird numbers and bird species in California when he presented his topic "Problems of Bird Protection in California" at the January 20th meeting. To him the Society is grateful for a thorough and intelligent presentation of the subject of bird conservation and protection in the various situations in the state.

## FALL SINGING NEAR LOS GATOS

The first rains that came early in December brought at least a semblance of spring to Santa Clara Valley. Almost over night the brown hills became softly green, and everywhere tiny green blades pushed up out of the bare ground. And so it did not seem unnatural to hear birds singing at Christmas time. But signs of spring had little if anything to do with their singing, for most of them had been more or less persistent singers all during the long dry fall.

The Wren-tit was perhaps the most persistent fall singer in the vicinity of Los Gatos. Even during the late summer when the birds were supposedly molting there was always a Wren-tit in song somewhere up on the chaparral slopes. In September several came down into our garden at the foot of the hills, apparently to spend the winter. All during the fall we heard their soft tooting notes, or their more characteristic song, sometimes full and clear, oftentimes incomplete, as if the singer was inexperienced. And almost as persistently our Anna Hummingbird squeaked a little song from his favorite perch in a pine tree. A Song Sparrow also was usually somewhere in our garden. When he began his rather fitful fall singing in September his song was uncertain and twittering, hardly suggesting his real song; but in October it became typical, although not so loud as at nesting time.

The fall singing of the California Thrasher began early in September. Up on the hillside two or three often were heard singing, clear and loud, well into October. Then for a while their singing was infrequent and casual; but with the coming of the rains they seemingly took heart again, and were heard daily during December.

The Meadowlark that sang what I took to be a territory-marking song last May in a nearby field was singing the same song in the same field in late September. Very incomplete records of his singing make it impossible to say that he sang regularly through the molt, but memory of hearing his song often during the summer months leads me to suppose that he did. My records however do show that Meadowlarks were persistent fall singers.

Other fall singers among our more or less permanent residents were the Linnets, Purple Finches, and Green-backed Goldfinches. The singing of the Linnets, which was only occasional, lacked the rattling, ecstatic fervor of the spring. The Purple Finches warbled also only occasionally; usually their presence was made known by their throaty "cherie," repeated over and over. The Plain Titmouse, that I expected would be a fall singer, apparently did not feel the urge to sing until the rains brought a bit of spring. Then during sunny days in December his clear notes, whistled with all the energy of spring singing, were not infrequently heard.

The winter visitors, far from their nesting grounds, were not entirely silent. In fact the Golden-crowned and White-crowned Sparrows were conspicuous among the fall singers. Robins and Hermit Thrushes were heard many times indulging in whisper songs, and Ruby-crowned Kinglets now and then rippling a delightful little melody. Last year I recorded hearing Fox Sparrows singing in our garden, an odd, incomplete song; but we have heard none this year.

These are not all the birds that sang near our home during the fall. Although the number of regular fall singers in one locality is no doubt small, careful daily records would probably show many more species singing at least sporadically. Even my very incomplete records show that Black Phoebes, Red-shafted Flickers, Lark Sparrows, Vigors Wrens, and Spotted Towhees sometimes sing in the fall near Los Gatos.

EMILY SMITH.

## FIELD TRIPS

The November field trip was taken on the 23rd to Alum Rock Canyon under the leadership of Dr. Charles Piper Smith. The day was cloudless but hazy, a lovely Indian Summer day. The members left their automobiles at the Resort and walked four miles up the Sycamore Canyon Road. At the start a Red-breasted Sapsucker was seen clinging upside down, chickadee fashion, to a bunch of Pepper Tree berries, eating them with evident relish. In the canyon bottom two Canyon Wrens were food-hunting in and out of

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crevices in the cliff; and up in the sagebrush two Rufous-crowned Sparrows were flitting from shrub to shrub. But the thrill of the trip was the sight of four White-throated Swifts coursing back and forth with shrill twittering opposite the cliff where nests were located last spring.

In all 43 species of birds were listed: Sharp-shinned Hawk; Cooper Hawk; Western Red-tailed Hawk; California Quail; Band-tailed Pigeon; Great Horned Owl; White-throated Swift; Anna Hummingbird; Hairy Woodpecker; Nuttall Woodpecker; Red-breasted Sapsucker; California Woodpecker; Lewis Woodpecker; Red-shafted Flicker; Yellow-billed Magpie; Coast Steller Jay; California Jay; Plain Titmouse; Chestnut-backed Chickadee; Bush-tit; Slender-billed Nuthatch; Wren-tit; Canyon Wren; Vigors Wren; California Thrasher; Hermit Thrush; Varied Thrush; Western Bluebird; Ruby-crowned Kinglet; Hutton Vireo; Audubon Warbler; California Linnet; Green-backed Goldfinch; Pine Siskin; Spotted Towhee; Brown Towhee; Western Lark Sparrow; Fox Sparrow; Rufous-crowned Sparrow; Oregon Junco; Gambel White-crowned Sparrow; Golden-crowned Sparrow; Santa Cruz Song Sparrow.

On the December trip a Christmas Bird Census was taken. The report has been sent to the editor of Bird Lore.

January 25 a field trip in automobiles was taken under the leadership of Dr. Gayle Pickwell along the Almaden Road from San Jose, and across into the country adjacent to the Llagas and Uvas Creeks. There were many stops and several short excursions on foot into field and along creeks. The day was mild with no wind, but clouds hung low, letting no sunlight through at all. Although no unusual species were listed the trip had several "high spots": a very large number, certainly more than five hundred, of Band-tailed Pigeons flying from oaks to other oaks close to the Uvas Creek in the vicinity of the Little Uvas; hundreds, if not thousands, of Robins, many of them caroling, in orchards, in fields, in groves of oaks, all along the Uvas and Llagas Creeks; thousands of Brewer Blackbirds, with Redwings interspersed, blackening oaks in a field in Arroyo Calero, all squeaking in chorus and making an amazing din of harsh notes.

A list of 50 species and subspecies was secured: White-tailed Kite (1 in Arroyo Calero); Sharp-shinned Hawk; Western Red-tailed Hawk; Desert Sparrow Hawk; California Quail; Killdeer; Band-tailed Pigeon; Anna Hummingbird; Downy Woodpecker; Nuttall Woodpecker; Red-breasted Sapsucker; California Woodpecker; Red-shafted Flicker; Say Phoebe (1 on Almaden Road, 1 in Llagas Valley); Black Phoebe; California Horned Lark (several males singing in vineyard beside Almaden Road); Yellow-billed Magpie (12 along Llagas Creek, 3 along Uvas Creek); Coast Steller Jay; California Jay; Western Crow (several near Almaden Road); Plain Titmouse; Bush-tit; Slender-billed Nuthatch; Wren-tit; Vigors Wren; California Thrasher; Hermit Thrush; Varied Thrush; Western Robin; Western Bluebird; Western Ruby-crowned Kinglet; Cedar Waxwing; California Shrike; Audubon Warbler; Red-winged Blackbird; Western Meadowlark; Brewer Blackbird; California Purple Finch; California Linnet; Willow Goldfinch; Green-backed Goldfinch; Pine Siskin; Spotted Towhee; Brown Towhee; Western Lark Sparrow; Oregon Junco; Gambel White-crowned Sparrow; Puget Sound White-crowned Sparrow; Golden-crowned Sparrow; Santa Cruz Song Sparrow.

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