

THE CONDOR

A Bi-Monthly Magazine of
Western Ornithology

Volume XXI

July-August, 1919

Number 4

[Issued July 31, 1919]

A FAVORITE NESTING HAUNT OF THE MERRILL SONG SPARROW

By HENRY J. RUST

WITH EIGHT PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR

OF the various song birds that nest in this locality, none seem to derive so many advantages from its preferred nesting site as does the Merrill Song Sparrow (*Melospiza melodia merrilli*). While this does not apply to every pair, it does seem applicable to the four or five pairs which have selected in close proximity what may be considered the most typical haunt. Nearness to water seems to be the dominating factor in the needs of this species, though I have found the birds in moderate numbers breeding and remaining throughout the season on low brushy hillsides bordering the city limits, and in thickets on used and vacant property at a considerable distance from open water.

The Merrill Song Sparrow is partially resident in this locality, and I believe from long continued observations many if not all the remaining birds are adult males, the females and young of the season migrating to a milder climate where more abundant food can be obtained during the winter months. The presence of the remaining birds from November until February would scarcely be noted if they were not occasionally routed out of their winter quarters, namely, old wood and brush piles, tangles of vines, and thickets about old out-buildings. The bird disturbed then will mount any low convenient perch and greet the intruder with a number of scolding chirps, and if not molested further will soon retire into seclusion—in striking contrast to the joyful melodious character of this little songster during the summer days. On sunny days in mild winters, during the month of February, the Merrill Song Sparrow will ascend to the top of a deciduous tree, bush or housetop and relieve his pent-up feelings in short outbursts of song. By the middle of March the males are joined by their mates, and after a few more days of sunshine and song, the willow catkins having burst their bonds and insect life begun to stir, the Song Sparrows retire to their preferred nesting places for the summer season. In describing a favorite haunt of this species, I have selected one that I have visited often, not very far from my home, and one that seems to meet well all the requirements in the home life of the Merrill Song Sparrow.

The extreme west end of Fernan Lake (see CONDOR, xvii, pp. 119, 122) narrows down and forms what is, during the early part of the season, the outlet for the spring overflow caused by the melting of snow from the surrounding hills. The amount of the water depends on the snow that has accumulated during the winter months, and usually covers the small meadow (fig. 26) to a depth of one to two feet. As the overflow recedes, generally by the middle of May, the various forms of plant life take on their growth activities. Beginning with the higher bank which is the limit of the overflow (foreground, fig. 26) is a fringe of wild rose bushes (*Rosa nutkana*) intermingled with *Spirea menziesii*, black haw (*Crataegus douglasii*) and serviceberry bushes, further to the right and left becoming a dense thicket, overshadowed by a grove of quaking



Fig. 26. NESTING HAUNT OF THE MERRILL SONG SPARROW; NEAR COEUR D'ALENE, IDAHO, MAY 15, 1918.

asp (*Populus tremuloides*) and a few cottonwood trees. These deciduous trees and bushes form a fairly heavy humus which harbors a host of insect life and constitutes the principal feeding ground for the several pairs of Song Sparrows which are nesting near by. The small open meadow is covered with a rank growth of several species of sedge, the dry blades and culms of which form the bulk of the outer nest material; it matches up closely with the dry clumps of similar material that have lodged in the larger spirea bushes and willows from previous overflows and makes it an easy matter to overlook nests because of this striking resemblance.

Scattered through the opening are clumps and single bushes of spirea which is the shrub preferred for the location of the first nest of the season. Then comes a fringe of small narrow-leaved willows (*Salix geyeriana*), these

affording the bright sunny look-outs from which the male Song Sparrow pours forth his sweet song throughout the summer days.

Beyond the willows, a fringe of spirea becomes very thick in places, and when in full leaf this makes a safe hiding place for a nest. This shrub, with occasional rose bushes and willows near the water, is very often selected for the second brood. Very few of these spirea shrubs have not waved their pretty dark pink plumes over a family of Song Sparrows in seasons past or else will not do so in seasons to come. Beyond the fringe of spirea, isolated and continuous clumps of sedge reach to the water's edge. As the water in the outlet becomes shallow and the low ground dry, such a clump is occasionally selected



Fig. 27. NEST AND YOUNG OF MERRILL SONG SPARROW, SITUATED IN SPIREA BUSH; PHOTOGRAPHED APRIL 28, 1918.

as a location for the second nest and probably also for a third. A few tules (*Scirpus occidentalis*) grow along the water's edge, and the balance of the water, depending on its depth, is fairly well covered with water lily pads (*Nymphaea polysepala*). This appears to be the Song Sparrows' playground, for they can be found any summer day flitting back and forth across the narrow outlet or hopping from pad to pad, sometimes wading along the edge in the shallow parts, reminding one of the Water Ouzel except in color. The setting is practically the same on the other side of the outlet except that at the beginning of the high ground several species of willow of a larger variety replace *Salix geyeriana*. The Douglas firs growing on the hillside tend to cast a sha-

dow over part of the open flat and while a few pairs of Song Sparrows nest in the fringe of spirea nearest the water they much prefer the open sunny side.

The type specimen of *Melospiza melodia merrilli* was collected not far from the haunt I have described, by Dr. J. C. Merrill, and described by Mr. William Brewster in the *Auk*, vol. 13, 1896, p. 46. In his notes on this species (*Auk*, vol. 15, 1898, p. 16) Dr. Merrill gives as his earliest nesting record, female incubating April 24, 1896, which was a cold backward season. My earliest nesting record, nest wedged amid group of spirea stems 18 inches from base of bush, four eggs, female incubating, ground slightly covered with water, was April 12, 1918, a warm advanced spring. Nests with the first set of eggs can be looked for with certainty from after the first week in April until the first



Fig. 28. NEST OF MERRILL SONG SPARROW CONTAINING FIVE YOUNG, WITH FEMALE PARENT FEEDING THEM; PHOTOGRAPHED MAY 25, 1918. THIS NEST, ALSO IN A SPIREA BUSH, WAS LOCATED 35 YARDS FROM THE ONE SHOWN IN THE PRECEDING PICTURE.

week in May and are invariably placed in bushes partly submerged in water. There is no doubt that many of the first nests are washed out and the contents destroyed, during backward seasons, by heavy freshets.

With incubation lasting twelve days and the young able to leave the nest at the age of 14 to 16 days, the first brood are able to rustle for themselves by the time the majority of the other song birds are just selecting nesting sites. The first nests of the season, built in spirea bushes, are rather bulky affairs, wedged in against a number of stems for support. It does not take much

pressure to tilt some of them on one side, and it is a wonder sometimes how the four or five young manage to keep right side up. (See fig. 27.) These nests are composed almost entirely of the dead blades and culms of the sedge grow-



Fig. 29. NESTING SITE OF MERRILL SONG SPARROW IN CLUMP OF SEDGE (WHERE MARKED WITH WHITE CROSS). VIEW TOWARDS THE EAST; PHOTOGRAPHED JUNE 15, 1918.

ing about the nesting site and are lined with a few fine dry grasses and horse-hair brought from a distance. While a great many song birds depend on foliage of some kind for concealment of their nests, the Merrill Song Sparrow

trusts mostly to the loose brown culms matching up with the numerous stems supporting the nest and to the dry clumps of sedge lodged here and there in the surrounding bushes.

The female when brooding will usually permit an approach of four or five feet; any further intrusion—just a flash of brown and she is gone, passing through the bushes as low as possible for some distance before ascending to a



Fig. 30. NEST AND TWO DIVERSELY COLORED EGGS OF MERRILL SONG SPARROW, SITUATED IN CLUMP OF SEDGE; PHOTOGRAPHED JUNE 15, 1918.

higher perch in the willows and beginning her scolding chirp. If the female happens to be away from the nest when strangers are about she will meet you half way and on drawing closer to the nest will often emit a continued harsh scolding note differing from that of any other species of song bird I have heard. Should there be young in the nest the male soon puts in his appearance and together they keep up a constant scolding as long as danger is near.

The young are not lacking in appetite and at the slightest provocation up go open mouths, each large enough to accommodate almost any size of bug (fig. 27). While the surroundings teem with insect life it seems an endless task for the mother bird to satisfy the hungry brood (fig. 28). A greater portion of the food is gleaned on or near the ground. I have noted a female Song Sparrow scratching among the dead leaves in search of food similar in manner to a domestic fowl.

Until the young birds are fairly strong on the wing a greater part of their time is spent among the clumps of sedge and in the dense underbrush where they can hide effectually on short notice. The second nests of the season,



Fig. 31: FEMALE MERRILL SONG SPARROW ON SAME NEST AS SHOWN IN PRECEDING PICTURE; PHOTOGRAPHED JUNE 15, 1918.

placed in spirea, rosebushes, occasional willows and clumps of sedge, are more compact in form and made of whatever species of sedge or grass that happens to be near, lined with finer material and a few strands of horsehair; eggs four or five in number, usually four.

The date of the second nesting depends somewhat on the date and success of the first brood. The second set of eggs can be looked for any time from the first until the third week in June, and usually by the second week in July the second brood are out of the nest and learning to care for themselves.

A female flushed from her nest in a clump of sedge (*Carex rostrata*) (fig. 29) near the water's edge, June 15, disclosed an incomplete set of two eggs showing the greatest variance in coloration (fig. 30). I returned several days later

expecting to find a larger set, but no more were added. This little mother bird was very attentive to her nest and its two treasures. When first disturbed she would dash to the left into some clumps of sedge and spirea bushes, then across the outlet where she would remain for a short time and then come hopping back from pad to pad. She would then approach under cover as near as possible to the clump sheltering the nest, make a short run, hop up over the fallen blades, and settle down on her nest (fig. 31). After being disturbed a number of times she would dash away as at first into the sedge but would return almost immediately and resume her task of incubating, seemingly unconcerned with the many dangers that seemed to beset her on all sides. A pair of

Sharp-shinned Hawks were nesting on the wooded hillside across the outlet, a family of skunks had its den under the root of a fallen tree hardly 30 yards away, snakes were plentiful among the sedge, minks and weasels passed up and down the outlet, and many bare-foot boys wended their way past the nesting site to the fishing holes farther up along the shores. The unusual spring freshets take a heavy toll of the first nestlings and these other agencies destroy many of the second and third broods; so that the number of Merrill Song Sparrows are kept at a minimum.

Very few species of birds are to be found in or about this haunt during the first nesting period of the Song Sparrows. A few pairs of Long-tailed Chickadees pass through the willows looking for a promising nesting stub,



Fig. 32. YOUNG MERRILL SONG SPARROW, ABOUT FIFTEEN DAYS OLD AND READY TO LEAVE NEST. THERE WERE BUT TWO YOUNG IN THIS NEST, WHICH WAS 48 YARDS FROM THE NEST SHOWN IN FIGURE 28. PHOTOGRAPHED MAY 25, 1918.



Fig. 33. FOUR OF THE FIVE YOUNG MERRILL SONG SPARROWS FROM THE NEST SHOWN IN FIGURE 28.

and there is an occasional pair of Montana Juncos, Western Robins, and now and then a flock of Brewer Blackbirds. The mating calls of the Red-shafted

Flicker are frequently heard from the other side of the outlet, as also the song of the Western Meadowlark from the open fields bordering on the north side.

How different during the second nesting period. It is the middle of June; the water lilies are in bloom, the large flowering spikes of the spirea are waving in the breeze, the odor of the wild rose is in the air, the Merrill Song Sparrows are now nesting near the edge of the outlet, and the willows and thickets at either end of the small meadow on both sides of the outlet seem fairly alive with birds; the Song Sparrows have many neighbors now. Yellow Warblers, Tolmie Warblers, Western Yellowthroats, Western Warbling Vireos, Red-eyed Vireos, American Redstarts, Western Robins, Black-headed Grosbeaks and Catbirds are nesting in and about the haunt.

All through the morning hours, and late in the afternoon, the songs of the various males can be heard. but with all their love and good cheer, the Song Sparrow is able to hold his own, and he makes the surroundings ring with his sweet melody. As the day draws to its close the Robin sings his evening lay, and as the dark shadows creep over the outlet, the little brown bats steal forth from their hiding places and join company with the Pacific Nighthawks in their circling flight over the chosen home of the Merrill Song Sparrow.

Couer d'Alene, Idaho, February 6, 1919.

NESTING OF THE NORTHERN PILEATED WOODPECKER

By H. W. CARRIGER and GURNIE WELLS

WITH ONE PHOTO

THE Northern Pileated Woodpecker (*Phloeotomus pileatus abieticola*), while not rare, is such a wary bird that its nesting habits in California are but little known. In a search through our various publications dealing with such subjects we fail to find a record of the taking of a single set of eggs of this species in the State. It seems probable that there are fewer California taken eggs of this bird in collections than even eggs of the California Condor. Barlow (CONDOR, III, 1901, p. 163) records a nest with young birds at Fyffe on June 13, 1897. Sheldon (CONDOR, IX, 1907, p. 188) records a nest with young near Big Meadows, Plumas County. The date is not given but it is assumed to be early in July.

This paper embraces a partial account of our joint studies of this species over a period of five years (1914 to 1918), and the final culmination of our efforts in the taking of two sets of the eggs. The region worked lies near Cisco, Placer County, California, and it seems probable that the same pair of birds was observed during the five-year period.

While working among the dead and dying trees at the upper end of a large mountain lake in June of 1914 the loud cackle of this unique bird was frequently heard. The type of country appeared to be suitable for the residence of the bird and it was then determined to pay especial attention to this species when next we should visit the lake, it then being too late in the season for eggs. Some