

NESTING HABITS OF THE EVENING GROSBKAK  
(*COCCOTHRRAUSTES VESPERTINUS*).BY FRANCIS J. BIRTWELL.<sup>1</sup>*Plate VII.*

Photographs from nature by the author.

JUNE 5, 1901, Willis, New Mexico. — Bright and pleasant, temperature 70° F. In company with Olivia I took a short stroll on the bench west of the cabin. There the slope showed abundant signs of avian activity. Evening Grosbeaks were abundant and common, their shrill whistles not infrequently preventing the identification of other sounds. Both males and females were present, and I observed several feeding upon the ground, where they hopped very sparrow-like.

June 6. — Evening Grosbeaks were common, apparently doing nothing but shriek.

June 11. — Olivia and I to-day went up, as usual, to the bench. The usual birds were seen and nothing important noted except the two finds of the day. A male and female Black-headed Grosbeak flew to the ground, and, a moment later, came back, the female first, bearing nesting material. Both flew to a large limb of a great pine tree by the trail, where the material was undoubtedly deposited. I was, however, unable to see distinctly.

June 18. — I shot a female *Coccothraustes vespertinus*; bill apple-green, legs light brown. The stomach was filled with hairless caterpillars about half an inch long.

June 20. — Our last finds to-day were the most important I have ever made, ornithologically; and the secret of the shrieking Evening Grosbeaks about the slopes is explained. The quick flight of a female (closely followed by a male) bearing nesting material

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<sup>1</sup> From the Field Notes of Francis J. Birtwell, Pecos River Forest Reserve, Summer of 1901. Copied and completed by his wife, Olivia M. Birtwell.

[This article has a peculiarly sad interest, owing to the fact that the author met with a fatal accident while conducting these investigations. See 'Notes and News' in the present number of 'The Auk.' — *Edd.*]

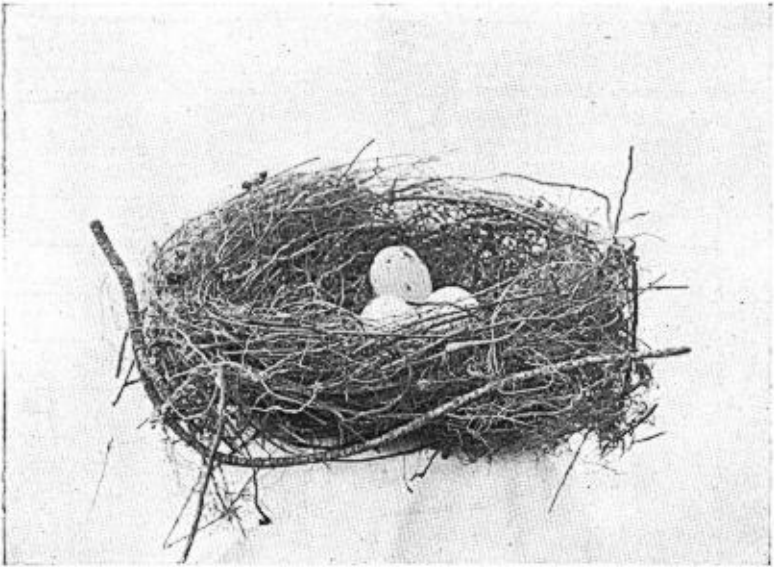


FIG. 1. NEST AND EGGS OF EVENING GROSBEEK.  $\frac{1}{2}$  natural size.



FIG. 2. EVENING GROSBEEK ON NEST. Photographed in Situ.

directed me to a tree growing almost in the yard, — a pine; and, as I watched, the bird descended to her nest, situated on a horizontal limb overhanging the road. We had hardly finished watching the pair, the male of which did absolutely no work whatever but whistled peculiar, sharp notes from a tree near, when we noticed a similar performance which led us to an immense spruce-tree growing near by, where the female settled upon a nest near the end of a swaying limb. She remained there for some minutes, the male whistling meanwhile and flying about from tree to tree. Then she left and both fed about the vicinity. Many times she returned to the nest, apparently unfreighted, and we left them feeding about the trees near by.

June 22. — During the night some mystic power gifted my eyes as well as Olivia's, for every lump on a tree that we looked at today turned into a nest and every bird with any pretensions or right to be breeding offered introduction to its home with implied invitations for future calls. This latter, however, was not necessary.

It began by my supposed Black-headed Grosbeak's nest of the 11th turning into that of the Evening Grosbeak, and throughout the morning the pair of birds entertained us royally. The female sat upon the nest, on and off, and during the former periods, the male howled encouragingly near in tones only the avian ear could deem *dulce*. Then from the nest, with curious, soliciting cries and fluttering wings, like a great overgrown nestling, she followed him about and by the patient bird was regularly fed. He was willing, however, for when I ceased, it was easy to lead her back to the nest, from which he departed to shriek about the neighboring trees when she had settled herself.

All three Evening Grosbeak's nests are within 100 yards of each other, and, since several other pairs are about, we infer that the species breeds gregariously and somewhat uniformly, too.

After supper, just before dusk, we revisited the scene of the morning's operations to observe the evening attitude of the birds. All the Grosbeaks were silent and apparently absent.

June 23. — Olivia and I visited again the Vale of Vespertina, as we have named the place where *Coccothraustes* and so many birds abound, — the slope behind the cabin. I was yet too lamed from

climbing to get to my Grosbeak's nest so we merely watched the wonderful avian life going on about us in the musical, deep-voiced pines.

The Grosbeaks were all silent and came into the trees from distances. At times the coaxing voices of the females were heard and a shrill whistle or two, but the silence was noticeable. I found two more nests (Grosbeak's), one at the end of a spruce limb near the others, the other similarly placed but farther back some hundreds of yards. The birds were seen on and off the nests at various times. The nest of the great pine, taken for the nest of *Habia melanocephala*, had the bird sitting. With shot I cut the twigs off all about, but she merely elevated her head. The climb is risky and I am married. Unless I am forced I shall not attempt to collect the set but will secure specimens of young later on.

June 26. — The actions of the Grosbeaks assured us that the sets of eggs were complete and should be taken without further delay. Accordingly this morning we went to the spruce tree where the nest was discovered June 20, as recorded in the notes for that day. The male bird approached the vicinity of the nest several times as we prepared for the climb, uttering his sharp call, and the female answered, at intervals, with her querulous note from the nest.

The tree was about seven feet in circumference and studded for some distance from the ground with short, barkless limbs, of which some would support a man's weight and some had to be chopped off in making the ascent. Measurements showed the height of the nest above the ground to be 41 feet. The birds had evidently selected the location of their domicile with a view to doing as little work as possible. It was visible from no direction but the one from which we had discovered it and was placed flatly upon the horizontal branch with a smaller fork propping it on one side and heavy clusters of needles surrounding it. It was composed of flimsy material and a very little of it, the floor so thin as to barely cover the underlying branch.

From the only resting-place, the fork made by the tree-trunk and the branch next above the one on which the nest rested, Mr. Birtwell scooped the eggs, one by one, from the nest with a tiny

net on the end of a trout-rod and loosened the nest from the bough. There were four eggs, in color, size, form, texture and markings indistinguishable from those of the Red-winged Black-bird.

The sitting bird left her trust only when the cries of warning from her mate became most frantic, and the pair were loudly assisted by two other Grosbeaks, who flew madly about with them. Only the female was taken, the male perching far out of harm's way.

The next nest, the one found in the spruce tree June 25, was harder to get. As we approached the tree, but ten rods from the other, all the Grosbeaks in the neighborhood seemed to have taken the alarm and to keep a corresponding silence. This nest was not so well hidden. From the ground we could see the sitting bird, seemingly calm in her dizzy cradle, which swayed in the gentle breeze at the end of the long, slender branch, 46 feet above us. Moreover, a fact important to the egg-crank, there was no branch above or below the nest for some distance. Only a small twig helped to hold the frail structure in place.

With a long rope tied to himself and the tree trunk, Mr. Birtwell crawled out on the all too small branch to a point where he could reach with outstretched hand to loosen the precious, egg-filled nest, and placed it between his teeth. Thus burdened, he cautiously backed to comparative safety and there packed the three blue treasures in cotton. The owners of this nest had to mourn alone, no others of their tribe appearing. Both birds were, with difficulty, shot. Both flew. The female was found in hiding, standing behind a small gray weed. The male eluded us and, as we had at least one more Grosbeak's nest to collect, we determined that the next must furnish a male bird, if it took a day's work.

As may be conjectured, this nest was more strongly built than the first, the difference being in the greater amount of material used and the more secure fastening to the bough. But certain it is that the Evening Grosbeak puts little work into the building of her nest. The outside is of a few rather coarse sticks. *Usnea* is wadded together next and fine rootlets make the lining.

Both sets of eggs were slightly incubated so that we concluded that the second set of three was complete.