

## RECENT EXPERIENCES WITH NESTING CATBIRDS.

BY HELEN GRANGER WHITTLE.

A PAIR of Catbirds (*Dumetella carolinensis*) favored me during the past summer (1922) by choosing, for their home, overgrown shrubbery close to my house in Peterborough, N. H. The nest was built within three feet of a window which was constantly open and was only slightly below the level of the window-sill. From the placing of the first twigs on June 13, to the hurried little parting visit of the female (?) on August 2, the whole experience was a most delightful one for me, and I think I helped to make easier the parents' duties in bringing to full maturity four lusty Catbird youngsters.

Several interesting facts were brought out. The parent birds were of course similar in appearance but the female seemed slightly larger, particularly as to head and eyes. Various little habits and mannerisms soon distinguished the birds with practical certainty even when only one was present.

The male assisted at nest building, always deferring, however, to the chief architect, his wife. When he brought material and found her at the nest he gave over his load to her for placing in the structure; but if she brought material when he was at the nest, he hurriedly got out of her way. The nest was made of twigs, felted with dry leaves, and lined with what appeared to be fine rootlets. It was not anchored over securely, and tilted somewhat with its subsequent load.

The male took no share in incubating, nor did he ever, I think, make any attempt to brood the young. If he came to the nest and found the female absent, during incubation, he would fidget on a nearby twig in a helpless, worried fashion, but apparently never thought of taking her place.

For an hour or two in the morning, on fair days, the sun shone directly on the nest. The female showed distress at these times. After the young were hatched, she would sit on the nest rim, with wings widespread (and mouth open) to shade the young. The male learned to do this only in the last day or two before the young left the nest, and then, I think, only when the female was also doing it. I secured an additional leafy branch and propped

it over the nest, to help in shading. This was accepted apparently with gratitude and no misgivings.

During incubation, the male sang very infrequently within my hearing, and brought food to the female on the nest so seldom, that I wondered how she could survive. His absences were so prolonged and remarkable that I suspected possible bigamy on his part, but perhaps such absences are the usual thing in Catbird families. Certainly his devotion during nest-building and the feeding of the young as all that could be asked. There was, however, evidence that the male of this pair was an inexperienced bird, possibly young, and this his first family.

The female, left to do all the incubating, was very faithful to her task and sat patiently day after day through an extremely rainy period, which continued with only brief respites, all through June and early July in southern New Hampshire. One afternoon there was a severe hailstorm, and the female on the nest with feathers drawn close, bill pointing straight up and eyes shut, made as good a watershed of herself as possible, while hailstones the size of large peas pelted her unmercifully.

The hurried little dashes which she made from her eggs to my back-yard bird bounty for a sip of water and for cracker crumbs led me to place a small shelf outside the window near her nest. On this, at first, I placed cracker crumbs. She made use of this nearer food station almost immediately. Then, in a quest for more nourishing food which should be to her taste, I put out in addition, small seedless raisins. For half a day she ate the crumbs and passed by the raisins, but then, in my absence, evidently tested a raisin and found it good. The male also discovered them, and thereafter only the raisins interested the birds. I tried fresh fruit, as cherries and raspberries, but they were ignored. The raisins were placed on the shelf in groups of five, domino-fashion, usually twenty at a time, that I might the more easily note and record the number taken at each visit, and the total numbers consumed per day. Before the young were hatched, the old birds ate twenty to thirty raisins a day. Most of these were taken in the early morning and just before dusk; but a few were taken at intervals all day. Not more than three were eaten at a single visit. The shelf was small and the birds took turns in visiting it.

At hungry times they made alternate visits in rapid succession. If I was neglectful and allowed the shelf to remain empty for too long a time, a peculiar, complaining call notified me that raisins were needed. The birds became very fearless and the female would remain on the nest while I pounded the window-screen to loosen and raise it and while I arranged the raisins geometrically on the shelf. Almost before my hand left the shelf, a bird would be approaching by one of several established paths through the syringa bushes.

On the third day after the last egg hatched, I saw the male thrust a raisin down one of the young throats. I was inclined to add this to his evidences of inexperience. The female did not begin to feed raisins until several days later, though she ate them herself.

For a week or more, while the young remained in the nest the family consumed sixty to seventy raisins a day. Thereafter was instituted that half neglect of the young which seems to be the accepted way of getting them so hungry that they will begin to forage for themselves. The young birds were never shown the way to the raisin shelf. Indeed they seemed to be gently but very firmly led straight away from it; first, to an adjoining garden, and very shortly entirely away from my knowledge. Could it be that the instinct of the parents was to keep this very convenient and rich food supply entirely for themselves, against later need, next year, perhaps?

For a few days the old birds returned to the shelf occasionally, from a distance, and several times carried raisins away, but their disappearance from the locality was early and complete.

The first egg was laid June seventh, the last egg hatched on July fourth. On August second, when I had seen nothing of the Catbirds, old or young for about a week,—a week during which the twenty raisins remained untouched on the shelf—suddenly I heard the familiar “quit” call in the garden west of my house to which the young Catbirds had been first removed. I hurried out, hoping the whole family had returned, but only one dark form swooped swiftly down by my house, and around the corner to the east end where the nest had been. She (I think it was the female) alighted on the shelf, hastily snatched and swallowed

three raisins, and was gone,—for the season. I am confidently expecting, however, that the memory of that raisin shelf will be a factor in their next year's selection of a nesting site.

One extremely interesting fact was noted regarding the song of the birds. The male was not a markedly good singer as Catbirds go, though he seldom spoiled his song with his cat call. He sang infrequently, also; but at such times as he could be heard singing at a little distance, the female on the nest always showed signs of excitement and restlessness. One day, as I sat close to the window, within three or four feet of her, I was amazed and delighted to hear her, while sitting on the nest, take up the strain her lord was singing. She followed it in all its intricacies, perfectly and beautifully, but in a "whisper" voice. On a later day she did a similar thing, though in briefer, less brilliant fashion. This raised several queries. Did she sing softly to avoid attracting attention to her nest? Could this particular bird have sung with loudness equal to the male's if she had chosen to do so? Do female Catbirds commonly sing? Are all whisper songs, perhaps, confined to female birds?

Next year's experience may help to answer some of these questions.

*Cohasset, Mass.*

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## NOTES ON THE NESTING OF A PAIR OF DICKCISSELS (SPIZA AMERICANA).

BY EDWARD D. CRABB.

DICKCISSELS breed very commonly in central Oklahoma, where during the early summer they may be seen in surprising numbers. Yukon, the location of the observations related in this account, is in this territory. On May 18, 1919, the writer noticed a female Dickcissel carrying nesting material, and at once decided to find her nest in order to gather data on the progress of the construction of the home and on the behavior of the family. From a place of concealment I could watch the activities of the female, who was doing all the work. Several times while busily engaged she alighted on a peach limb from which she dived into