

## THE CHRONICLE OF A FLICKER'S COURTSHIP.

BY CHARLES E. JOHNSON.

ON the morning of April 7, 1923, at Lawrence, Kansas, a male Flicker (*Colaptes auritus luteus*) suddenly began calling from an old elm about fifty feet from my house. I had not seen or heard the bird previously, in or about this tree nor in the general vicinity. There was a nest hole in the tree, and when the Flicker thus abruptly announced his presence he was clinging to the trunk at the lower edge of this hole. The tree was conveniently situated for observation from my window, and since it was evident that the Flicker had just discovered a suitable nesting place and was now loudly proclaiming the gladsome news to any listening lady Flicker within hearing distance, it occurred to me to try to follow his fortunes in his quest for a mate, whatever they might be. With the help of my wife, who kept up the notes for much of the time when I was absent, I was able to secure a much better daily record than would otherwise have been possible. As events proved, the task to which the Flicker had set himself required a much longer time than I had anticipated.

On this first day the Flicker kept repeating his ringing calls at short intervals until 4:40 p. m., when he flew away. On two or three occasions after a period of calling he would suddenly appear to become deeply dejected, when he would cling to the tree trunk in a sort of stupor, hunched up, his head hanging low. At the end of such a spell he would perk up, lift his head and start calling again at full throat. As will appear, these periods of depression, exhaustion or whatever it might be termed, also came upon him later. The chronicle from this day on follows.

*April 8.*—The Flicker began calling from his tree at 6 a. m. He remained about the tree, sometimes in it, sometimes on the ground near by (a vacant lot from which the grass had been burned), until 8:45 a. m., when he flew away. He returned at 9:30 and called from a limb near the hole, for about fifteen minutes, then left, but returned again at 10:40; flew away at 11:30, returned at 1:30 p. m., remained for but a short time and was seen no more that day.

*April 9.*—The Flicker began calling from his tree at 6:10 a. m.

Called repeatedly for a period of 15 minutes, then flew to a tree half a block distant and called from there a few times. His call series were spaced from five to fifteen seconds apart, with twenty-five to thirty-two "kucks" in each series. Called from his tree at intervals during the forenoon and in the early part of the afternoon, beyond which I made no further observations on this date.

*April 10.*—At 6 a. m., *three* female Flickers were at the nesting hole. One after another these females looked into the hole, climbed around the trunk of the tree as if to make sure that no other possibilities existed, and in general made what had all the appearance of a careful appraisal of the entire situation. The attitude of these females when at times they got too near to one another was ludicrous. Each would spread her tail, bow low and with the utmost dignity, and utter an icy "weechu-weechu," as if to say, "Your pardon, madam, I did not mean to intrude; I really have only a very slight interest in this entire matter." At times one of them would fly away to some other tree, and forthwith the other two would follow, whereupon all three, in the harmony of a common purpose, would proceed to circle the trunk as if to satisfy themselves that no more desirable nesting hole had been overlooked by the anxious swain.

The male also was present, but, as if wholly unmindful of his three lady visitors, kept up his loud, far-reaching broadcast, now on his chosen tree, now on a nearby telephone pole. Such rudeness! But it was, perhaps, only another instance of uncontrolled instincts. At about 11:30 the male and one of the females flew away. The two remaining females chased each other about in a mildly belligerent fashion, spreading their tails and erecting their crown feathers, and at the same time uttering a weak "weechu-weechu." They followed each other about thus, along the larger limbs of the nest-hole tree as well as on another tree a few yards away. Jealousy was evident.

At 6:30 the third female had not returned. But the male had returned and was sitting with the two other females on a limb of his tree. At times these two females would go through their previously mentioned antics and "weech-weechu" toward each other. The male occasionally uttered his "chee-up"—in a bored sort of way. At 7 p. m. all three flew away.

*April 11.*—The male and the two remaining females were in and about the tree all forenoon. The male did not call so frequently to-day. At 1 p. m., all three were feeding on the ground not far from the tree. It rained for about half the time during the day. The third female has not yet returned.

This evening the male was clinging to the trunk just below and to one side of the nest-hole, looking very much depressed again. I first saw him thus some time after 5 p. m., and he did not move until 7:05 p. m., when he flew away. None of the females was about during this period.

*April 12.*—The male alone was at the tree this morning, and called at frequent intervals. No females appeared until afternoon. At 6 p. m., the male and one of the females were in the tree, the male occasionally chasing the female and performing by spreading his tail and bowing very deferentially. Later both flew away.

*April 13.*—The male and the two females were in and about the tree all afternoon. (No observations for the forenoon.)

*April 14.*—Two house-hunting Chickadees have on two occasions to-day looked into the nesting hole in the Flicker's tree. Their inspection was brief but competent and they passed on.

One of the female Flickers was on the tree trunk at 8 a. m., and later the second one arrived. These two and the male divided their time between the tree and the ground all forenoon. (No observations for the afternoon.)

*April 15.*—At 9 a. m., the male appeared at the nesting hole and began calling. At 10 a. m. one of the females arrived. Much of the day all the Flickers were away, and when present stayed only for brief periods. The day was chilly, with a strong north wind.

*April 16.*—At 8 a. m. the male was clinging to the trunk near the nesting hole and again looked overcome in one of his spells of profound dejection. No females were seen about the tree to-day.

*April 17.*—The male was at the tree a number of times during the day, but no females were seen.

*April 18.*—The male was present and called at intervals throughout the forenoon. At 12:40 p. m. the two females arrived, alighting in a nearby tree. The male immediately joined them and started chasing one of them. At 2:15 p. m. the male was clinging to the trunk again in deep dejection. The females had left.

*April 19.*—The females were absent to-day; likewise the male for most of the day, but at noon he arrived and called for a time. A very disagreeable day, with a strong southwest wind.

*April 20.*—The male alone at the tree at 7 a. m., calling. Raining. At 2:30 p. m. the male and one of the females were in the tree. Still raining.

*April 21.*—The male called from the tree early this morning. I saw no females about the tree to-day, but I was away much of the time and my observations pertain only to the morning and evening periods.

*April 22.*—The male began calling from his tree at 8:30 a. m. Later in the forenoon he started chiseling a new hole in a tree a few rods distant. This hole was only about six or seven feet from the ground. He flies back to his first tree now and then, looking into the nest hole with a critical air as if the idea had occurred to him that this hole might not, after all, be as desirable as he had supposed. No females were seen about the tree to-day.

*April 26.*—Since the 22nd the male has been present at his tree more or less each day, but no females have been seen until this morning, when one of them returned; and the male did some courting. The male to-day started another new hole, this one about two feet below and a little to one side of the original one. However, he soon gave up the attempt.

*May 2.*—The Flickers seem to be deserting the tree. Occasionally the male has been present to-day and uttered his ringing call, as if making a few last efforts, but only for short intervals. Then he flew away. He has done no more work on either of the new holes he started.

*May 4.*—The male and one of the females unexpectedly returned to the tree to-day—and mated.

*May 5.*—The male is inside the nesting hole—for the first time since these observations began. Preparations for house-keeping evidently are progressing rapidly.

This, then, was the rather abrupt but nevertheless successful conclusion of a Flicker affair that in the last few days of the period of my observations I had begun to think was about to end in failure. But the acquisition of a mate by this Flicker was an undertaking that required practically an entire month, As early as the

fourth day he had, by effective broadcasting, succeeded in attracting no less than three good "prospects." One of these entrants in the elimination contest, so to speak, withdrew early. Each of the remaining two was of the determined kind, apparently; neither would yield, and a deadlock threatened. The male, meanwhile, from all appearances, assumed a neutral, wholly impartial attitude toward the two rivals. He even went so far as to continue to broadcast his advertisements, as if serving notice that he felt under no obligation to restrict his choice—if he really had any choice—to these two. But no further candidates responded, and the purpose of his behavior was questionable—as seems to be true of course of much instinctive action among animals.

Then something seems to have happened, an amicable settlement or some sort of compromise between the two rivals, seemingly; and the swain, true to his previous impartial if not indifferent attitude, accepted the arrangement without murmur. Thus in Flicker world, too, it would appear that the darkest hours are sometimes those that herald the dawn.

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