

FROM COLORADO SPRINGS TO HORSE CREEK IN 1878

BY CHARLES E. H. AIKEN

FOREWORD

THE following pages were copied from the late Charles E. H. Aiken's notebook some twenty years ago. When I read this account I thought it so interesting that I asked and received his permission to copy it, and I have also received permission from his sisters to publish it in 'The Auk.' The only liberties I have taken with it are to add in brackets the present-day names of the birds he mentions, and to make a few other insertions, also in brackets. The Holt (not Hoyt) Ranch was on Little Horse Creek, as I have ascertained. The main Horse Creek appears to be a dry creek without waterholes.—EDWARD R. WARREN.

Leaving Colorado Springs May 11, 1878, at about 2 o'clock p. m. we traveled ten miles to the Coal Bank [probably at the village of Franceville]. Next day to [Black] Squirrel Creek (cold and foggy). Next day to within ten miles of Davis's Ranch (65 miles) which we finally reached on the day following (14th), and on the 15th of May pushed on to Hoyt's [Holt's] Ranch (75 miles) on Little Horse Creek. The country comprises both level and rolling prairie, with sandy patches west of coal banks, Squirrel Creek, and the vicinity of Cramer's Ranch. Bird life was scarce, Skylarks [Desert Horned Lark, *Otocoris a. leucolaema*] found everywhere, Grass Finches [Western Vesper Sparrow, *Poocetes gramineus confinis*] occasionally. Meadowlarks wherever there was water and in green hollows. Mountain Plover [*Eupoda montana*] not seen in the first 15 miles but became common as we proceeded eastward. The first White-winged Blackbirds [Lark Bunting, *Calamospiza melanocorys*] were seen at Squirrel Creek, where there was a flock of several hundred, and they were constantly in sight in all places to the eastward. Small flocks of Brewer's Blackbirds haunted all the ranches. An occasional Squirrel or Swainson's Buzzard sailed overhead and several Golden Eagles were seen. Pond Creek and Horse Creek were each the home of two or three pairs of White-necked Ravens. Careful observation over this entire stretch of country fails to reveal a single individual of Baird's Sparrow. Wherever trees or bushes occurred some of the more strictly timber species are liable to be found during the migration. We observed in such places Bullock's Oriole, Louisiana Tanager, Yellow, Audubon's and Black-capped Flycatching [Wilson's or Pileolated] Warblers, Black-headed Grosbeak, Green-tailed and Long-spurred Towhees [*Pipilo maculatus arcticus* and perhaps *P. m. montanus*], Traill's Flycatcher, Say's Flycatcher, Parkman's Wren [*Troglodytes aëdon parkmani*], Red-headed Woodpecker, etc. The Rock Wren, as I have noticed on other occasions, may be found along arroyas and washouts far from either rocks or timber of any kind. I was surprised to find a Lewis's Woodpecker among the cottonwoods on Horse Creek. The Lark Finch [*Chondestes grammacus confinis*] occurs commonly at intervals.

Horse Creek presents the unusual feature in western prairies of permanent pools of water and marshy ground, and I had hopes of finding some unusual conditions

in its fauna. These hopes were but partially fulfilled though some interesting observations were made. The 'creek,' which extends along a hollow or valley between two mesas consists at the northward of a dry creek bed with an occasional waterhole, but its southern extremity consists of deep waterholes of various sizes and purity and alternating with alkaline marshes and brackish pools. The various ducks and geese of the country abound here during the migration seasons, and several species remained at our arrival. Among other Grallae we noticed the Killdeer (of course), Lesser Tattler [Lesser Yellowlegs, *Totanus flavipes*], Red-breasted Snipe [American Knot, *Calidris canutus rufus*], Wilson's Sandpiper [? Wilson's Phalarope, *Steganopus tricolor*], and Baird's Sandpiper, also American Bittern, and Night Heron. In the few bunches of reeds were the (Western) Long-billed Marsh Wren [*Telmatodytes palustris plesius*] and the marshy grounds abounded with Savannah Sparrows.

In the occasional cottonwood trees which occur at intervals along the sand washes may nearly always be found a hawk's nest (Swainson's or the Squirrel Hawk), or, as I have found in three instances, a nest of the White-necked Raven. Sometimes a very small tree is appropriated for this purpose, as in the case where I found a *B. swainsoni* sitting on a nest in a cottonwood only about ten feet high. Eight or ten nests of this species were found but it was evidently a little early for the eggs as but three pairs had laid by the 17th of May. *A. ferrugineus* [*Buteo regalis*] apparently breeds earlier; a clutch of four eggs obtained at the above date were considerably incubated, and a clutch of three taken three days later were at the point of hatching. However, a nest found about the 22d contained but one egg, fresh. This species, it seems, builds both in trees and on the ground, nests having been found in the latter location by Dr. Coues and the sheep-herder who brought me in a set of their eggs in 1876. The full clutch is probably four, but in *B. swainsoni* the greatest number I have known was three. In the method of construction in the nests of these two hawks considerable difference exists. One nest of *A. ferrugineus* which I examined closely was a bulky structure built up of rather slender twigs and matted at the top with dead soapweeds, roots, manure, etc., so as to make a solid bed for the eggs. The nest of *swainsoni* is considerably smaller in size, and constructed mainly of coarse dead twigs. One peculiarity which in itself is almost sufficient to determine the nest is at the time of laying two or three green cottonwood twigs with leaves may always be found in the nest. A parallel phase, however, was noticed in the newest nest of *ferrugineus* where a couple of green weed-stalks were similarly placed.

I was delighted to obtain my first nest of White-necked Raven on the 17th which contained seven nearly hatched eggs. Of two others of the same species found five days later, one contained five half-grown young, and the other six (traces of a seventh having been broken) nearly fresh eggs. Nest cup-shaped, inside of hair and wool firmly matted and woven, outwardly of dry twigs. Another nest not less interesting was that of *Aegialitis* [*Eupoda*] *montana*, one of which containing three eggs was discovered beside the road through the anxiety of the bird. The eggs were laid upon the leaves of a soft prairie thistle with no indication of a nest save the slight depression which the body of the bird had made. The only other eggs found were those of the Skylark and Meadowlark. The White-winged Blackbird is a notably characteristic bird of the prairie, arriving from the south early in May in large flocks; they soon distribute themselves over the prairie where the peculiar actions and contrasted plumage of the males force themselves upon the notice of the most casual observer. Joyous frolicsome little

fellows are they with much resemblance to the eastern Bobolink in habit, song, and general appearance, but with an individuality in all which could not confound it with any other living species. Rising as he begins his song to the height of 15 or 20 feet, he floats along with an easy bat-like flight for several rods, and as the song draws towards its close he sinks slowly to his grass bower. At early morn, at sultry noon, at dewy eve, his song is heard, and even in the stilly night as we lie waking, his pleasant music falls upon our ears.

POSTSCRIPT.—A postscript to Aiken's notes concerning the changes that have taken place in the avifauna in sixty years may be of interest. It is a number of years since I have been in that general region, but the notes then made show that many of the birds Aiken mentions are still to be found in much the same abundance as then. It is quite possible that, because of the settlement of that country in these past years, some of the species have increased in numbers.

The Mountain Plover has decreased greatly in numbers, although there are still a few left. Another bird that has almost vanished is the White-necked Raven. Several years ago it was reported to Aiken that a pair was nesting at either Black Squirrel or Horse Creek, I have forgotten which, and have no note of it. He was much interested in this as in the early days this raven was a common bird here, and this was the first instance of its occurrence he had heard of in a long time. I think these two species are the ones whose numbers have greatly diminished. Probably the Ferruginous Rough-leg and Swainson's Hawks have suffered from thoughtless or ignorant gunners, but even up to his very last years Aiken used to have a good many brought to him. Probably Golden Eagles are not as common.

I doubt if the smaller land birds have diminished much, if any, in numbers; very likely some species have increased. While Horned Larks are not seen in numbers in winter near the city, as they once were, I think that is due to the increase in farms where these birds can obtain food at that season. Ducks and shorebirds still come to the various waterholes and pools, and there are a few reservoirs on the plains to attract them.

Aiken traveled about 75 miles to reach a point about 55 miles due east from his starting point. Geological Survey maps made some forty years ago show only a few roads wandering over the prairie. Now there are plenty of roads and the country has been well settled.

At exactly the same time in May, 1916, I was out on the Colorado Plains about fifty miles farther east than Aiken was. The migration seemed to be in full swing at a ranch where there was a grove of small trees, and I noted many more species than Aiken records. There were seven species of warblers as against his three, and three

sparrows not mentioned by him, besides various other birds. It seems strange to me that Aiken did not see these birds among the trees on Horse Creek, for, with but two or three exceptions, they are birds also to be found about Colorado Springs, either as residents or as migrants.—E. R. W.

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