

Vocal Powers of the Yellow-billed Magpie.

BY H. R. NOACK, OAKLAND, CAL.

MY acquaintance with the yellow-billed magpie (*Pica nuttalli*) began eight years ago while I was visiting near Wheatland in Placer County, and through the medium of two members of the family has continued from that time to the present day with a constantly growing feeling of friendship and an unconcealed admiration for the intelligence, good nature, and native good humor hidden beneath their little coats of black and white.

It was on June 3, 1895, that I was riding horseback through a grove of white oaks with my eyes open for anything that might turn up, when I noticed a magpie's nest about thirty feet up, and well out toward the end of the limb. After a rather hard climb I came within four feet of the nest, and was pretty well aware by that time that it was inhabited, judging by the vociferous cries of two old birds who came swooping down uncomfortably near my head. A good sharp shake of the branch in which the nest was located, brought forth a screaming cloud of young, fairly well feathered, and in fact just old enough not to venture from the nest unless disturbed, but about the right age to consider seriously the desirability of trying a short flight. I counted seven young birds, and after considerable scrambling captured one and forced two more down to the grass below, where they were easily taken.

After getting them home and safely caged I found that instead of being at an end my troubles had only begun, for whenever I came within sight three big, red, gaping mouths opened automatically and spelled in words that could not be misunderstood—"Grasshoppers—more grasshoppers." The remainder of my vacation was given over to the care of my charges, and they responded so well that one died during the first week but the remaining two grew fat and were not contented out of my sight.

Upon returning home in July a large wire cage with plenty of flying room was provided, more as a precaution against cats than as a preventative of escape, and the two magpies, John Henry and Hattie, settled down to civilized life. I had heard a good deal said and had read accounts of the talking qualities of crows, ravens and magpies, but scarcely believed that the native magpies of our state would develop this power. However, I was very agreeably surprised and much amused one morning about three months after the capture of the magpies to be greeted by John Henry with the words "come on." He had learned his first words by hearing them used during feeding time. He used this phrase daily for several months and later added his own name and said, "Come on John."

From the time of learning his first words he learned new expressions very rapidly, and without any effort on my part to teach him. After hearing "Come on John," he began calling my name "Harry" which has always been his favorite utterance, and is pronounced in an endless variety of tones from a shrill treble voice to a deep guttural expression seeming to emanate from far down in the throat. After "Harry" he learned "Hattie," the name of his mate, and "Helen," the name of one of my sisters. The family living next door had a very lively member in the person of a son named George, and his mother's calls soon taught John Henry to call "Georg-ie" with so much facility that Georgie would come running to see what was wanted.

Our stable is within fifty feet of the magpie's cage and my brother, who was acting as hostler, was often about ready to swear when hitching up or currying the horse, when John Henry would cluck to the horse, "ck ck ck," and then say, "Get up, Peter, get up, get up," following immediately with "Whoa boy,

whoa," and continuing with such a variation of "whoas," "get-ups" and clucks that the poor horse would not know what to do.

One of the most amusing uses to which the magpie puts his powers is to call the chickens—"chick-chick-chick-chick" and when they have run eager and expectant in the direction from which the sounds come, which is naturally the cage, to seize one by the comb or the back of the neck and pull out a few feathers or spill a little blood. An old game hen used to respond to his calls, and as soon as she received a tweak on the head would ruffle up and begin a regular fight through the wire netting. At this time John Henry exhibited himself at his best. While flying at the hen he would keep saying "chick-chick-chick, come on, come on, Harry, Harry—get up—hello," in fact, he would go through almost his entire vocabulary while fighting and pulling out feathers.

He will sit by the hour on bright warm days and whistle and jabber, bringing in an intelligible word once in a while, but as a rule giving utterance to sounds, not native magpie language, yet still not capable of being translated into English. These sounds are similar to those uttered by very young children during their play in imitation of their elders. At times the bird's words are so opportunely chosen as to almost lead to a belief that they are spoken intelligently. I feel sure that this is the case when he calls "Harry" under certain conditions, such as when frightened or hungry, as my name pronounced in certain peculiar tones conveys these meanings.

Both of my magpies talk and whistle,

but it is John Henry who is most proficient; in fact the talking and whistling qualities in the female are not developed to any such extent as in the male, but my experience has been too limited to permit me to judge whether this peculiarity is due to the sexes or not. I understand, however, that male parrots talk better than females.

As to the question of "splitting the tongue" as commonly expressed, which consists merely in cutting the membrane beneath the tongue to allow that member more freedom in movement, I am of the opinion that this operation would not be productive of any material improvement in articulation. My birds can speak almost as clearly when holding a stick or food or any kind of solid in the bill as when it is empty, the movement producing the sound coming from the throat.

Mischievous by nature, they are always looking around for bright objects to play with. They will spend half a day with a tin spoon, a piece of glass or a key. All play-things not too large are buried in sand or grass or covered over with sticks and leaves or poked into nooks and crevices in the cage. I have never experienced any difficulty in providing suitable food. They take kindly to raw meat, fresh fruit and berries, boiled eggs, nuts and bread. They are also very fond of cheese, and any kind of insects which have moderately hard shells and are not soft or slimy to the touch. Considering the comparative lack of attention necessary for their proper care, and the highly interesting results obtained for the time and labor spent, a pair of pet magpies is a very desirable acquisition to the list of household pets.

Some Echoes from the Sierras.

BY C. BARLOW.

THE Lake Tahoe stage road was traversed by a goodly number of Cooper Club members during June 1902, indicating that this interesting

region still holds charms for the ornithologist. W. W. Price has his usual summer school at Glen Alpine, while John M. Willard of Oakland is looking