

Birds of Fort Custer, Montana

BY EDGAR A. MEARNS

MY visit to Fort Custer was a brief one. Leaving Custer station on the Northern Pacific railroad very early on the morning of July 23, 1889, in the kind of conveyance known throughout the Army as an "ambulance," drawn by an excellent team of four mules, we reached Fort Custer (since abandoned), located on a bluff beside the Bighorn River, about noon. The rest of that day, and the one following, were chiefly spent in looking about the country; and on July 25th, towards evening, we commenced the return trip to the railroad at Custer. Following is a list of the birds observed:

Actitis macularia (Linn.). Spotted Sandpiper. One was seen on the bank of the Bighorn River.

Ægialitis vocifera (Linn.). Killdeer. Very many were seen along the streams, and on the *mesa* back of Fort Custer.

Dendragapus obscurus richardsoni (Doug.). Richardson Grouse. I saw wings and tails of this grouse that had been brought in to the fort from a sawmill in the neighboring mountains.

Pediæcetes phasianellus campestris (Ridg.). Prairie Sharp-tailed Grouse. This is known as the "Willow Grouse." I saw several flocks as we drove along the Bighorn River, and shot two birds that were near the road.

Centrocercus urophasianus (Bon.). Sage Grouse. Abundant on the grassy plain back of Fort Custer. On July 24th, my host, Doctor William R. Hall, U. S. Army, took me afield in his buckboard to shoot sage grouse. A few miles from the post the Captain's setter dog caught a half-grown one, which made a delicious meal; but, when older, the flesh is said to become tough and permeated with sage, for which reason these grouse were only shot by the officers of Fort Custer during the months of July and August. On this occasion a heavy thunder-storm drove us from the field before another covey could be found.

Zenaidura macroura (Linn.). Mourning Dove. Very abundant, especially in the heavy timber bordering the Bighorn River.

Cathartes aura (Linn.). Turkey Vulture. Abundant.

Circus hudsonius (Linn.). Marsh Hawk. Common. Seen coursing the prairie in every direction.

Buteo or *Archibuteo*. Several buzzard hawks were seen on telegraph poles at a distance. Both genera may have been represented.

Falco sparverius deserticola Mearns. Desert Sparrow Hawk. Very abundant; fluttering and hovering over one spot, searching for grasshoppers on which they were feeding. They were very fearless, allowing the ambulance to pass within a few yards of them, sometimes following it in pursuit of grasshoppers disturbed by the passing vehicle.

Speotyto cunicularia hypogæa (Bon.). Burrowing Owl. Many were seen in prairie-dog towns between Custer station and the Bighorn River. On the *mesa* around Fort Custer it was also numerous.

Colaptes cafer collaris (Vigors). Red-shafted Flicker. Abundant wherever there was timber.

Melanerpes erythrocephalus (Linn.). Red-headed Woodpecker. Abundant in the cottonwood timber of the river-bottoms.

Chordeiles virginianus sennetti (Coues). Sennett Nighthawk. Nighthawks

were common everywhere, and especially plentiful on the *mesa* behind Fort Custer, where they were continually swooping down towards one, with a startling boom. One was shot.

Tyrannus tyrannus (Linn.). Kingbird. Common along Bighorn River.

Tyrannus verticalis Say. Arkansas Kingbird. Abundant, especially so among the cottonwoods of the Bighorn River.

Otocoris alpestris leucolæma (Coues). Pallid Horned Lark. Abundant.

Pica hudsonica Sabine. Black-billed Magpie. Some were seen among the cottonwood trees beside the Bighorn, others about the slaughtering pens. The appearance of this bird gives one an impression of length and striking contrast of colors; and its habits suggest a mixture of cunning and audacity.

Corvus corax sinuatus (Wagler). American Raven. Common. Some were extremely unsuspecting of man.

Molothrus ater (Bodd.). Cowbird. Abundant on the Bighorn River and in the post of Fort Custer.

Sturnella neglecta (Aud.). Western Meadowlark. A common species of the region, abundant on the plain around Fort Custer.

Icterus bullocki (Swain.). Bullock Oriole. Several families of them were seen in the cottonwood trees bordering the Bighorn River.

Scolecophagus cyanocephalus (Wagler). Brewer Blackbird. Abundant. As usual, flocks of these birds followed the herds, and frequented the corrals and slaughter pens as well as the timbered river-bottom.

Quiscalus quiscula æneus (Ridg.). Bronzed Grackle. Flocks of these birds frequented the outskirts of Fort Custer, and the neighboring riverbanks. They seemed to have copied some of the actions of the Brewer blackbirds, such as loafing around corrals, fences and wood-ranks.

Coccothraustes vespertinus montanus (Ridg.). Western Evening Grosbeak. A small flock was seen beside the Bighorn River, near Fort Custer.

Astragalinus tristis pallidus (Mearns). Pale Goldfinch. A few were noted at Fort Custer.

Calcarius ornatus (Towns.). Chestnut-collared Longspur. At Fort Custer it is quite common.

Poecetes grammens confinis (Baird). Western Vesper Sparrow. A common species.

Chondestes grammacus strigatus (Swain.). Western Lark Sparrow. Very abundant.

Progne subis (Linn.). Purple Martin. Numerous in the timbered river bottom.

Petrochelidon lunifrons (Say). Cliff Swallow. Abundant.

Hirundo erythrogastra Bodd. Barn Swallow. Common.

Tachycineta thalassina lepida (Mearns). Northern Violet-green Swallow. Abundant along the bluff bank of the Bighorn River.

Lanius ludovicianus excubitorides (Swain.). White-rumped Shrike. Common.

Oroscoptes montanus (Towns.). Sage Thrasher. Common.

Toxostoma rufum (Linn.). Brown Thrasher. Several were seen on the Bighorn River.