

most carefully close to its body. The bird hopped about from one side to the other, getting within eight or ten inches of the cat at times, but either seemed afraid to peck at quite such close range or else hoped to disturb the animal enough to cause it to switch its tail back a little. After trying these tactics for a while the jay flew back to the bush, but four times in perhaps ten minutes it hopped down again and went through the same performance. Finally it hopped to about six inches from the after end of the cat and screeched with all its might. One would naturally suspect that the cat would turn on the bird, but not a bit of it. He simply cocked up his ears a bit, gave a careless glance rearward, snugged up his tail closer yet and went to sleep again. A fifth time the jay renewed the attack, but just at this moment another cat came strolling by and the proposed victim arose and joined it, leaving me to speculate as to how long the bird would have amused himself in this somewhat unusual manner. There was no food nearby and nothing to attract the bird except a strong desire to have some sport at the cat's expense.

One of the queerest pranks of these jays, reported to me by a member of the household, was one I would have given something to have seen. It happens that our cats have the kitten habit to what seems an excessive degree, and, as their numbers must be limited, each batch of kittens is searched for assiduously as soon as their presence is suspected. Not long ago a certain tabby kept disappearing at short intervals for a couple of days and there was every reason to suspect that she had had a relapse of the above little failing. Diligent search failed to reveal the whereabouts of any "nestlings," but one day a faint mewing outside the window attracted the attention of some one in the kitchen when lo and behold there was a jay hauling a very young kitten out from under a young artichoke plant in the garden. The jay lugged the poor kitten along for a little way, seeming to enjoy its feeble wails, and then stopped and screeched in exultation over the find, only to repeat the process again and again. Needless to say the old cat was not present at the moment or things would have been made more lively. The bird certainly did not want to eat the kitten, and the affair seems to have been nothing else than a matter of pure mischief. Since this episode a jay chased a cat clear across the back yard—some fifty or sixty feet—by merely screeching at it and pretending to peck at its tail, the cat never stopping to show fight in any way. Lately nothing exciting seems to have transpired in this happy community and I think Mr. and Mrs. Jay are busy with household cares of their own at present, though I have not been able to locate their domicile.

*San Geronimo, Marin Co., California.*

### The Leconte Thrasher

BY M. FRENCH GILMAN

MY introduction to this interesting bird, *Toxostoma lecontei*, was during the summer of 1882 when his whistling note nearly confirmed my boyish belief in ghosts. In a mesquite and creosote bush thicket at Whitewater ranch was buried a Mexican horsethief who had died with his boots on. Near this thicket I frequently wandered though it was said to be haunted. On several oc-

casions a whistle would send me to the ranch house to see what was wanted, only to find no one had whistled. This puzzled me until I found the noise came from the thicket and of course must be the Mexican ghost. This I believed until a few days later accident revealed to me the real whistler, a Leconte thrasher. The note of the thrasher can be mistaken for that of no other bird. It resembles closely the whistle a man employs on calling a dog, short, with rising inflection at the end. So striking is the resemblance that it is nearly impossible to distinguish one from the other. The calls are uttered at intervals of about a minute, when the bird is in the mood, and are easily imitated. If done accurately the bird will continue answering your call for a long time but care must be taken not to repeat the whistle too rapidly or he sees through the deception. In addition to the call note he has a very attractive song which much resembles that of an uneducated mock-bird, though fuller and richer and pitched in a higher key.

The only drawback to the song is its infrequency even where the birds are most abundant. You may be in their midst all day and see several pairs, but if one song rewards you it may be counted a red-letter day. At least this has been my experience during an intimacy with them of nine years in particular. For some time I doubted the statement made by some writers that this thrasher was a fine singer, but was finally "shown" by the bird himself.

While standing one evening on a high-drifted hill of white sand about two miles west of the rim of ancient Salton sea I heard the sweet strains of a new bird song and began to look for the singer. I expected to find a mocking bird whose individuality had been developed by the desert solitudes and who had learned a new song. On an adjoining sand hill, perched on the exposed tip of a sand buried mesquite I saw the singer—a Leconte thrasher. Perhaps environment enhanced the music for the spot was a most lonesome, God-forsaken one, near an ancient Indian encampment and burial ground, but I have heard no sweeter bird song and the memory still lingers. Since then I have heard the song a few times but not oftener than once or twice a year, though I have been frequently among the birds. Not only do they seldom sing but the whistling call note is not often heard. They appear to be silent, unsociable creatures, never more than a pair being found together, unless a brood of young birds and parents, and then only until the former can shift for themselves.

In no place between Banning and Salton can this thrasher be termed abundant or even fairly common, though in two localities I have seen as many as six pairs in a day and at one place found six nests in one day. It is a bird of the cactus region and is not often found away from it. The wide desert washes, sparsely populated by cholla cactus seem ideal homes for these birds and there they may be found more often than in greener surroundings.

Banning is the western limit of their range and they seem resident wherever found. They are nearly as much ground birds as roadrunners and will not often take to flight unless pressed, then only for a short distance and the running is resumed. A few years ago cowboys in Banning amused themselves by capturing them on horseback. They would run the bird till it took wing, then after it again till its wings failed altogether, and becoming tired of running it would take refuge in a bush or hole and be captured.

The Leconte thrasher may readily be distinguished from the California or the crissal thrasher by its lighter, sandy color, and blackish tip to the tail. The geographical range of the Leconte and crissal thrasher is very similar but the California thrasher does not often intrude upon them or they upon him. In Banning,

however, Leconte and California thrashers overlap while at Palm Springs the three species may be found.

For a nesting site the Leconte usually selects the interior of a thick cholla cactus though I have seen the nests in mesquites and thorn trees. But if cactus be available the nest is placed in nothing else. It is constructed of coarse twigs rather loosely put together and the lining is nearly always made of a woolly desert plant that can be felted or packed closely together. How the builders get the large twigs into the middle of the bushy mass of spines is a puzzle. I have seen nests where to insert the hand it was necessary to cut away several branches of the cactus. The nests are from two to five feet from the ground—average about two and a half feet. They are easily located but not so easily seen. This sounds contradictory, but not so. In riding along the desert, when you see a cholla cactus that appears thicker or denser than usual, go examine it for a Leconte's nest. Perhaps you ride within six feet without seeing any nest, when a gray or drab bird slips quietly from the opposite side and melts away into the sand-gray vegetation. A nearer approach shows a foreign mass in the center of the cactus and on peering into it from directly above three or four eggs may be seen resting on the gray felted lining of the nest. Occasionally the nest is in a more exposed position and may be distinguished at several rods distance. But in looking for nests be sure to investigate all the dense bushy cholla cactuses you see.

The bird is a close sitter and will rarely leave the nest before the intruder approaches within ten feet of the home. Often the hand may come about twenty inches from her before she leaves. She makes no fuss or outcry but silently takes to the brush and is seen no more.

Nest building begins very early in the season. February 17, 1899, is my earliest record, three eggs in set; and the latest. June 4, 1902, two fresh eggs—probably incomplete set. Of the twenty-eight sets I have recorded—to set the Audubonian mind at rest I will state that *recorded* does not mean *taken* in this case—four were in February, as follows: Feb. 17, 1899, Feb. 19, 1894, Feb. 24, 1901, and Feb. 26, 1895. In March I have only two records and in April sixteen, but six of these were of young birds and nearly all the rest date near the first of the month. In May I find five records and in June one. Perhaps more than one brood is raised in a season but I doubt it.

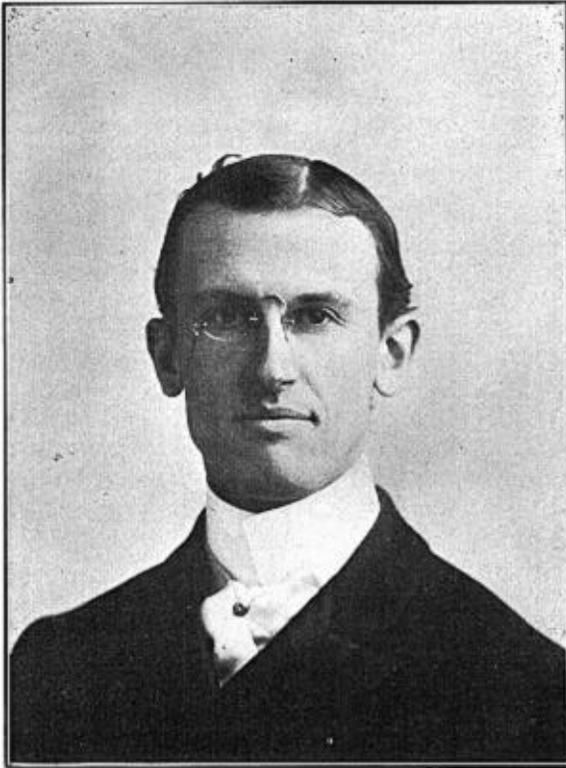
The eggs are light green in color, finely speckled with shades of brown, usually on the large end but often scattered all over the egg. Sometimes the specks are larger, approaching spots or even blotches. The usual set contains three eggs but four are not uncommon and two are sometimes found. Of the records made I find six sets of four eggs, twelve of three, and four of two—complete sets as advanced incubation showed. Other sets were obviously incomplete and sometimes the task of getting into the nest to count the young was too much for even scientific ardor. Of the twenty-eight nests all but four were in the cholla cactus, the others being as follows: one in a mesquite, one in an unidentified desert shrub and two in thorn trees, about as bad as the cholla.

In size the eggs average 1.09 by .75 inches. Some of the extremes measure 1.17 by .77, 1.14 by .74, 1.12 by .78 and 1.00 by .73.

Climatic variations in the seasons appear to have an effect on the numbers of the birds. In seasons of more than normal rainfall they seem more numerous and nest more than in dry seasons. The spring of 1895 was a very favorable one, the desert enjoying heavy spring rains, and consequently an abnormal growth of vegetation, making of the desert wastes a perfect flower garden. The sand hills were covered with desert primroses, acres of country were tinged pink with the sand

verbenas or abronias and other acres were flaming with the yellow annual encelias. Insect life fairly swarmed and birds, especially Leconte thrashers and mocking-birds, were more numerous than before or since. I found eight Leconte's nests on one trip near Palm Springs and saw many of the birds. The next three years were dry on the desert and I saw only six nests, though frequently in their territory.

*Banning, California.*



MR. HARRY C. OBERHOLSER

Mr. Oberholser is well known to the readers of this magazine, as the author of a valuable series of critical papers on ornithological subjects. His work may be said to have begun with "A Description of Two New Subspecies of the Downy Woodpecker" which appeared in 1895, followed in 1896 by "A Preliminary List of the Birds of Wayne Co., Ohio. Perhaps his best-known revisions are: "A Review of the Wrens of the Genus *Thryomanes*" (1899) and "A Review of the Larks of the Genus *Otocoris*" (1902). Mr. Oberholser is responsible for a long list of papers, which, for the most part, have appeared in *The Auk*, and in the Proceedings of the U. S. National Museum.