

THE CONDOR A MAGAZINE OF WESTERN ORNITHOLOGY.



Volume VII

July-August 1905

Number 4

A Study in Bird Confidence

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WITH PHOTOGRAPHS BY HERMAN T. BOHLMAN

I LAY on my back under the hemlock and marvelled at the little mansion hanging in the glint of the warm June sun. Yes, a real bird mansion; not open-roofed for impudent passers-by to spy out family secrets; not set in a crotch so it could be tipped over or blown out, but carefully tied, cradle-like, to the drooping branches.

It is not an easy matter to get a site suited for a bush-tit's mansion. There should be one or two firm upright twigs, about which to weave the walls, a cross branch or two for rafters, and, if the house is to be modern, a little support for a porch or promenade. Contrary to our first maxim of architectural success, these little builders begin at the top and build down. Each is the architect of his own home and each is a born master-builder.

Once I found a bush-tit's nest twenty inches long. The little weavers had started their home on a limb and apparently it was not low enough to suit them, for they wove a fibrous strap ten inches long and then swung their gourd-shaped nest to that, so that it hung in a tussock of willow leaves.

We happened to find the nest in the hemlock when they were putting in the first spider-web cross-beams and supports. It took days to furnish the home. At first we were put in the same category with small boys and sparrow hawks. They wouldn't go near the nest for fear we would see it. But a titmouse might make twenty resolutions not to trust and the very next minute he'd throw himself and all his hopes right into your arms. There wasn't a bit of suspicion in his little body, but his race had suffered so long that a good bit of caution had been embedded in his tiny brain.

I stood almost within reach of the nest. The little lover looked me over from all sides. Then, as a final test, he popped right into the round door. He knew I would make a grab at him nest and all. He was out in a twink. He looked amazed, for I didn't move. That was his test of friendship, and from that time he gave me his confidence.

Anybody would fall in love with a bush-tit. The fluffy midget does not possess the aerial grace of a swallow, or even the nimbleness of a warbler. He bustles along in such a jerky way, he often looks as if he would topple heels over head

and go whirling to the ground like a tailless kite. But he is a skilled hunter. He skirmishes every tree and bush. He is not so successful a wing-shot as a flycatcher but he has an eye that few can beat in stalking. He is no mean assistant of the gardener. He is not the kind that hoes a whole garden in a day, cutting off half the new tender shoots, but he is at work early and late and he is constantly at it.

We kept run of bush-tit affairs for several days after the young had hatched. The father fed the nestlings as often as the mother. He generally paused on the fern-tops just below the nest. The real drama of life came when the youngsters were fluttering, full-grown, vigorous, impatient to get one glimpse at the outside world from where the mother and father came so often with morsels. We had watched and waited two weeks for this day. The minute one nestling took the idea into his head to get out into the sunshine, it spread like contagion among the whole household. The round door poured out young birds with the rapidity of a Gatling gun shooting in every direction at once, and bullets could hardly be any more difficult than the youngsters were to find.

By watching the parents carefully we finally found several of the young



BUSH-TIT NEST IN WILLOW. PARENT ENTERING TO FEED
YOUNG

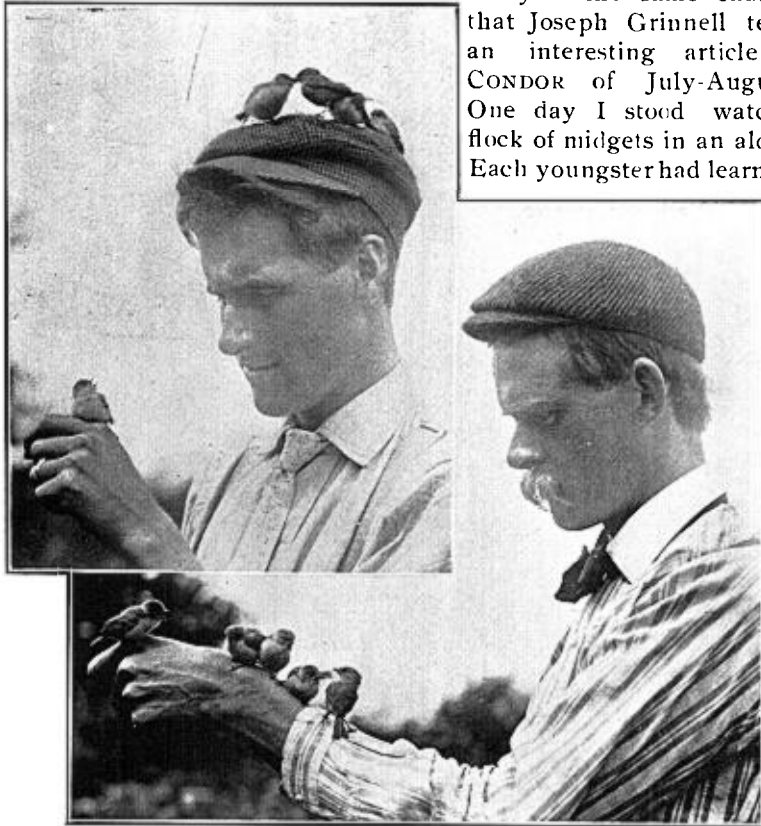
bush-tits. They were readily tamed, and we were soon fairly over-run with tit-mouses. They climbed into our camera, and clung to our clothes as easily as a fly walks up a wall. They perched on our fingers and our heads and the parents had such implicit trust in us that they alighted wherever they found their children.

Birds differ only in size and dress from some people, but to one who has studied long and carefully at the homes of different species, each feathered creature has a real character of its own. What does a cut-and-dried catalogue description mean?

Name, *Psaltriparus minimus*, bush-tit. Nest in hemlock tree six feet from ground. Identity, positive. Eggs, seven, pure white, etc. This is all right for a city directory, and is almost as interesting. You don't know a bush-tit any more when you have found him with a field-glass and identified him in your bird manual, than you do a man when you are introduced to him and shove his card in your pocket. Each bird has a real individuality. Each is different in character and disposition. Any careful observer would know the bush-tit and chickadee were cousins, even if they had never heard of the Paridæ family.

I found the little family in the hemlock tree even more interesting after they all learned to fly. Several times I saw them about the patch of woods. I observed

many of the same characteristics that Joseph Grinnell tells of in an interesting article in *THE CONDOR* of July-August, 1903. One day I stood watching the flock of midgets in an alder copse. Each youngster had learned to keep



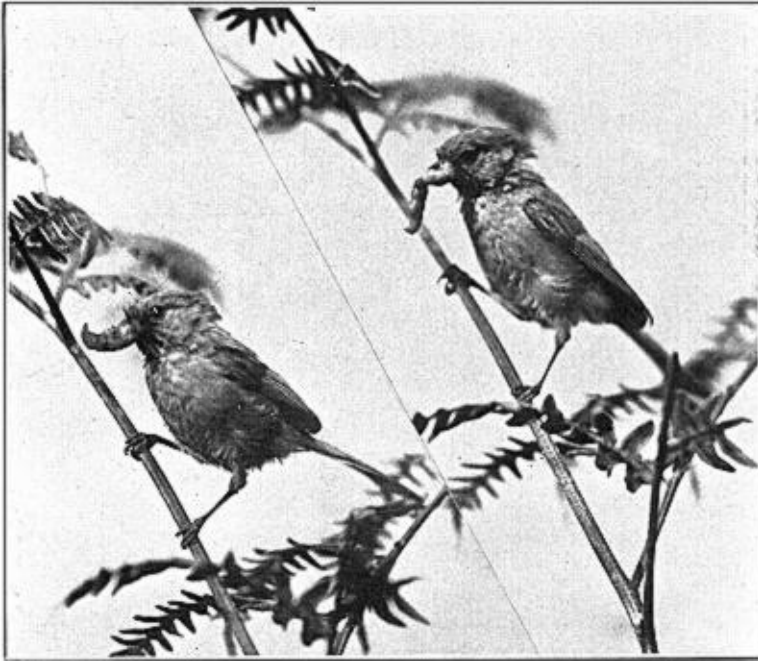
A BIRD IN THE HAND IS WORTH SEVERAL ON THE HAT. A STUDY IN BIRD CONFIDENCE *a*

up a constant "Tscree-e ! Tscree-e-e ! Tsit ! Tscree-e !" as if always saying something, but I do not think this gossip is as much for the sake of the conversation as merely to keep the whole flock constantly together. While I was watching, three or four of the little fellows were within a few feet of me. One of the parents in the next tree began a shrill, quavering whistle, and instantly it was taken up by every one of the band. The two tiny birds near me, as well as every one of the others, froze to their perches as still as death. Had I not known, I couldn't have told just where the whistle was coming from, it sounded so scattering like the elusive grating call of the cicada. Then I saw a hawk sweeping slowly overhead, and the confus-

a Upper figure, Mr. William Lovell Finley; lower figure, Mr. Herman T. Bohlman.—Ed.

ing chorus lasted as long as the hawk was in sight, nor did one of the little bush-tits seem to move a feather, but just sat motionless and trilled in perfect unison. It served as a unique method of protection; the whole flock had learned to act as a unit. It would have been hard for an enemy to tell where a single bird was, the alarm note was so scattering, they were so quiet, and their clothing harmonized so perfectly with the shadows of the foliage.

Millions of destructive insects lay their eggs, live and multiply in the buds and bark of trees, and it seems to be the bush-tit's life work to keep this horde of insects in check. After the little family left their home, I never found them quiet for a



PARENTS BRINGING CUT-WORMS TO YOUNG : TWO PHOTOGRAPHS

minute. When they took possession of a tree, they took it by storm. It looked as if it had suddenly grown wings, and every limb was alive. They turned every leaf, looked into every cranny, and scratched up the moss and lichens. They hung by their toes to peek into every bud, they swung around the branches to pry into every crack, then, in a few moments, they tilted off to the next tree to continue the hunt.

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