

THE CONDOR A MAGAZINE OF WESTERN ORNITHOLOGY.



Volume IX

September-October 1907

Number 5

TWO STUDIES IN BLUE

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY HERMAN T. BOHLMAN

BLUE is not a common color among our birds. There are many more clad in neutral tints of brown and gray than in bright blue. But a list of birds could not be complete without our two commonest studies in blue, the blue-bird and the blue jay. ¹ In all our woods from the Atlantic to the Pacific, one may find these two, one gentle and friendly, the other bold, boisterous and untrustful.

A small flock of jays are such a noisy pack in the autumn. They squawk thru the woods as if they wanted everybody to know just where they were; but in the spring after they have paired and are nesting, they suddenly go speechless as if they couldn't trust themselves to talk out loud. And indeed they can't when anywhere about the nest. They talk in whispers and flit as silently as shadows thru the trees.

In the early spring I heard the jays squawking about the maples on the hill, but I knew they would not nest there; that was only a play ground. A quarter of a mile below this was a thick clump of fir saplings. They would take this thicket for a home. The last week in May I searched thru this and found the nest eight feet from the ground among the close limbs.

A little earlier these same birds were blustering, bragging and full of noise. When I found the nest, one of the birds was at home. She didn't move till I shook the tree; then she slid off silently and went for her mate. In another minute they were both there, not threatening and swearing as I had expected. It was pitiful to see how meek and confiding they had become. There was not a single harsh word. They had lost even the blue jay tongue and talked like two chippies in love. They had a peculiar little note like the mewling of a pussy-cat. I felt ashamed to touch the home of such a gentle pair. If this was not a two-fold bird

¹ This article refers to the Western Bluebird (*Sialia mexicana occidentalis*), the California Jay (*Aphelocoma californica*), and the Steller Jay (*Cyanocitta stelleri*), as observed in Oregon.



NEARLY FULL-FLEDGED CALIFORNIA JAY ABOUT TO LEAVE HOME

character, I never expect to see one. They go sneaking thru the woods, stealing eggs and wrecking homes of others, and squealing in delight at every chance to pillage—but this is legitimate in the blue jay code of morals. I have often wondered whether jays plunder other jays, or whether there is honor among bird thieves. Are there robber barons among birds as among men? But doves could not be more gentle and loving about the home, for the jays were devoted parents.

If this pair of jays carried on their nest robbing, they did it on the quiet away from home, for in the thicket and only a few yards away I found a robin's nest with eggs, and the nest of a thrush with young birds. Perhaps the jays wanted to



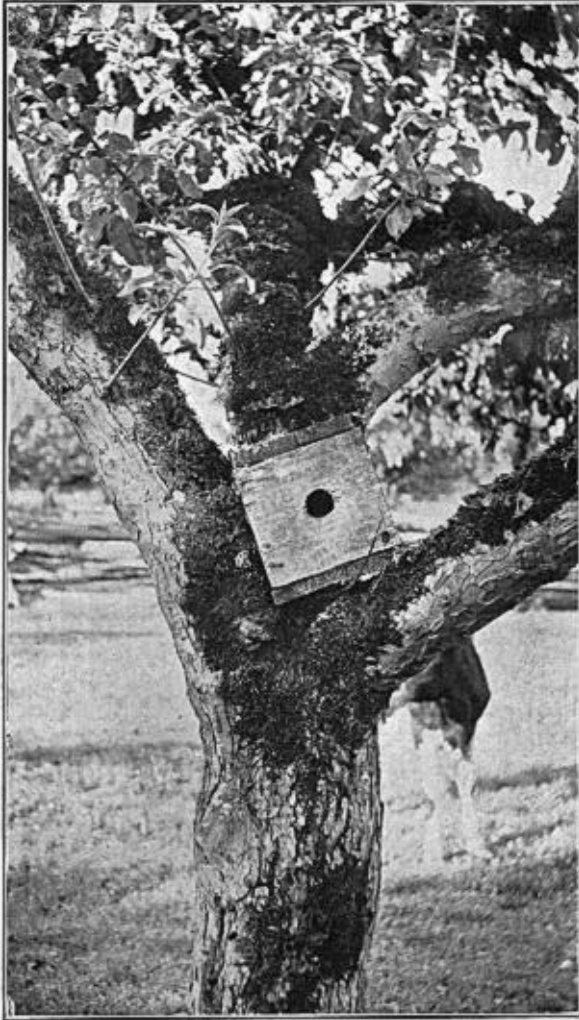
NEST AND EGGS OF THE STELLER JAY IN FIR TREE

stand well with their neighbors and live in peace. I am sure if the robins had thought the jays were up to mischief, they would have hustled them out of the thicket. I think we give both the crow and the jay more blame for nest robbing than they deserve; for investigation shows that they eat many insects, and in some cases I have known the jays to live largely on wheat and other grains.

Thruout the East the bluebird is known as the forerunner of spring. The bluebirds are the first to return and they bring the spring with them. But in the West where the winters are not so cold, a few always stay the year around. They fly together in small flocks during the day and sleep together at night. One even-

ing I saw four huddled in one of my bird-boxes. During the hard days of rain and snow they were continually together and returned at night to stay in the box. I think they were partly drawn to return each day by the food I put out. When I first saw them in the back yard, I tossed a worm out of the window and it had hardly struck the ground when it was snapped up. They ate half a cupful of worms.

The bluebird, the wren and the swallow have taken remarkably to civilization.



A MOSS-COVERED BIRD-BOX IN THE ORCHARD, OCCUPIED BY BLUEBIRDS SINCE 1897; OVER 110 YOUNG HAVE BEEN HATCHED HERE

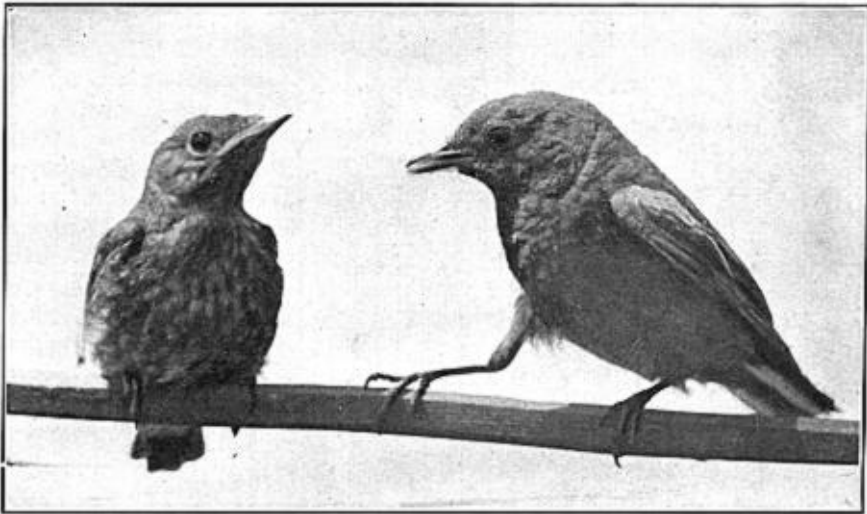
They formerly built in holes in old trees in the midst of the woods, but now they prefer a house in the back yard. In one locality near my home we used to find the bluebirds nesting every year in some old stumps. Now several residences have been built nearby and in three of the yards there are bird-boxes, and the bluebirds have abandoned the stumps and taken to modern homes. A bluebird has better protection in a back yard and he knows it. Then if the owners like him, he grows fond enough of them to perch on the hand, and he pays rent in the quality of his song and by ridding trees of harmful worms.

Altho the bluebird often lives about the city, I associate him with country life. I imagine he likes a farm home better than a city flat. I have a friend in the country who has bird-boxes up in various places about his farm. Most of them find occupants every year. An old square box that is set in the crotch of an apple tree is ahead in the record. This box was put up in the spring of 1897 and was taken by a pair of bluebirds. It is only four feet from the ground and has a removable

top so that the owner may readily make friends with the tenants. When I opened the box and looked in, the mother sat quietly on her eggs and was tame enough to allow us to stroke her feathers. The box is now covered with moss and lichens, but it is famous in bluebird history. It has been occupied every year since it was put up, and not a single

year has there been less than two broods reared and several times three. The record year was in 1904 when the bluebirds had two families of seven and one of five birds, and succeeded in raising them all. Seven is a large family for bluebirds and it is more remarkable that there should have been seven in the second brood and then a third brood. In the eight years there have been over one hundred and ten young bluebirds hatched in this box in the apple tree. One would think the bird world would soon be overcrowded with bluebirds about the farm. There seem to be no more bluebirds there than eight years ago, altho there are generally two or three other broods raised in other boxes nearby. It all goes to show how the bird population decreases in numbers. The new birds of each year take the place of the numbers that die during the winter. Birds have so many enemies that we know not of. Many die of disease, many starve or die of cold, and many are killed by birds of prey and animals that hunt small birds.

It would be interesting to know whether the same pair returns each year to the box in the tree, or how many different pairs have lived there. Sometimes the same



PARENT BLUEBIRD JUST DRAWING BACK AFTER PLACING FOOD IN YOUNG BIRD'S MOUTH

pair have returned, but it is improbable that they have lived longer than three or four years. If one of the birds died, the other may have taken another mate and returned to the same home.

In the side of our tank-house we bored two holes about four feet apart and nailed up boxes on the inside. One of these was soon taken by a bluebird. The female went in and looked the box thru and in a moment came out and perched on the wire while the male took a look. The next day the female began carrying straws. She had a devoted husband, but he was merely an attendant when it came to work. He watched and applauded, but he didn't help build. I don't know but that he was too lazy; or maybe he didn't know whether his wife wanted him bothering while she was building to suit herself. It looked to me as if he were ornamental without being useful. But after watching awhile, it seemed that it was her duty to build and his to watch and encourage. When she carried in the material and fixed it, she popped out of the hole and waited while he went in to

look, and then out he would come with words of praise and away they would fly together.

I had a splendid arrangement to watch the builders at close quarters. I could go in the tank-house and close the door and then in the darkness I could look thru a crack in the box, and with my eyes less than a foot away, could watch every movement the birds made. While the mother was sitting on the eggs, she became very tame and we often reached in and stroked her feathers.

When the young birds came, I watched the mother come to feed and brood her young. The father was the ever-watchful admirer, but the mother was all busi-

ness and paid no attention to him except to knock him out of the way when he was too devoted. The mother always brought in the food, and the father kept staying away more and more until the young birds were grown.

One day while I was watching, the mother was feeding the youngsters on maggots almost entirely. She would be gone quite a while, but each time would return with a large mouthful which she fed to the young. Occasionally one of the young failed to get all of them and if one dropped, the mother picked it up and ate it herself.

One of the eggs was addled and did not hatch, but the mother was very fond of it. She would look at it almost every time she returned and would turn it over and then hover it a few moments as if she were sure it contained a baby bird.

The nest was lined with horse-hair and once when the mother fed one of the chicks, the food caught and the little bird swallowed the hair too, but both ends stuck out of his mouth. He kept shaking his head, but could not get rid of it. I waited to see if



WESTERN BLUEBIRD ABOUT TO ENTER HOLE IN SIDE OF TANK-HOUSE, WITH FOOD FOR YOUNG

the mother would assist him, but she didn't seem to notice his trouble, so I had to reach in and dislodge the hair. Otherwise I am afraid it would have fared hard with the chick.

These bluebirds had five young in their first brood. When the first youngsters left the nest, the father became more attentive and helped care for the little ones that were just starting out in the world. They all stayed about the yard till the young knew how to hunt for themselves. Finally three of them disappeared; I suppose they went off with other bluebirds, and two of the young still stayed with us. The parents themselves seemed to disappear for a few days and I

thought they had left for good. Then one morning I saw the mother enter the house again and the father was there too, perched on the wire. He was more attentive than formerly. The next day I found a fresh egg in the nest. They had returned to raise a new family.

There were only three eggs in the second setting, and all hatched. The two young birds of the first brood followed the father about while the mother was sitting. Then when the mother began feeding her second family, I made some interesting observations. Her older children began following her about to hunt food, and to my surprise, I saw one of them bring some worms and after the mother fed, the young bluebird went into the box and fed her small brothers and sisters. After that I watched closely and often saw the birds of the first brood feed the little ones of the second brood. Perhaps the two birds of the first brood were girls and took readily to housework. They may have been learning for the next season when they themselves expected to have homes.

One of the young birds was very enthusiastic in helping her mother. Several times when the latter brought food, the young bird flew at her and tried to take the morsel she had in her mouth, as if saying: "Let me feed the children." And twice I saw the mother yield and let her older child feed the younger ones. It was a very pretty bit of bird life to watch these bluebirds. We were anxious to get a photograph of the mother and the young bird



MALE WESTERN BLUEBIRD AT NEST-HOLE IN APPLE TREE

helping her. We tried by getting on top of the house and focusing the camera on the wire where the birds often alighted. We finally got one view of the two as the young bird was just in the act of jumping for the worm the mother held.

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