

THE TAWNY CREEPER IN WESTERN WASHINGTON

By J. H. BOWLES

ALTHO resident thruout the year, the Tawny Creeper (*Certhia familiaris occidentalis*) is locally distributed and must be considered as rather rare even in the most favored sections. Its retiring, unobtrusive habits and weak, kinklet-like squeaking note tend to make it all the more elusive, even to the most experienced bird student.

After the nesting season is over it may be found only in the most heavily-wooded districts remote from civilization. It is solitary in its habits and even during the winter months, when the nuthatches, kinklets and others of its near relations are traveling together in bands, the creepers are most often found alone, or else working over the trees with two or three more of their own kind.

In hunting over a tree in the pursuit of the spiders, tiny beetles and other insects which make up its food supply, the creeper invariably starts at the base, only a foot or two from the ground. It then works upward around the tree in spirals to a height of from twenty to forty feet, seldom higher, and then swoops suddenly down to the base of another tree, acting much as if it had accidentally lost its hold and fallen.

A curious feature in its habits is that swampy land and the vicinity of water are the favorite haunts during the rainy winter months,

while during our dry summers it retires to the dryest woods it can find. This latter fact was unknown to me until the spring of 1905, and for years I had looked unsuccessfully for the nest in the low-lying, swampy districts such as the Brown Creeper (*C. familiaris*) frequents in eastern Massachusetts.

The mystery was solved, however, on May 17, 1905, by Mr. W. Leon Dawson, of Seattle, Wash., while we were putting in the day on the outskirts of Tacoma. He marked down a creeper gathering food, and we soon traced it to the nest which contained six well-grown young. The locality was very dry, on the



NESTING SITE OF THE TAWNY CREEPER

edge of a clearing in the dense fir woods, and fully exposed to the sun. Since then I have found a number of nests in similar locations, the vast majority, unfortunately, being either old ones or decoys. These last are quite plentiful, tho I am by no means certain that they are not nests which for some reason had proved unsatisfactory before completion and on that account were deserted.

Nest-building commences about the third week in April, either an oak or a fir being selected for the purpose. The only exception I have ever known to this was one bird that I had watched until it disappeared under a strip of bark fully sixty feet up in a giant cedar. Since the bird did not come out while I was watching, it is fair to presume that the nest was there.



NEST AND EGGS OF THE TAWNY CREEPER EXPOSED

The nest is placed, as a rule, from two to twenty feet above the ground, tho the majority that I have seen were under ten feet. As is customary with the other creepers it is built under a strip of bark that has scaled away from the trunk of the tree. The bird student cannot be too careful in examining every tree, as it is surprising how small a piece of bark is sufficient to hold the nest. I passed by one nest that was in plain sight and must have had eggs at the time, simply because the fir that held it was only three inches in diameter and seemed too small to be worthy of a close examination. Usually the twigs in the nest project beyond the sides of the protecting strip of bark and thus betray its whereabouts, but in some instances the strip of bark is so broad as to completely hide all signs of nesting material.

Another matter that must be guarded against I learned by a most annoying experience. Scarce as the birds are, if the surrounding conditions are suitable at least two pairs may be found nesting in the same vicinity. On May 5th of the present year I took a nest containing five slightly incubated eggs, and, as the birds are so rare, it did not occur to me to search for any more just there. Visiting the place again two weeks later in search of a possible second nesting, I found another nest containing five young only a little more than a hundred feet from the first one. This seemed a little remarkable from the fact that hundreds of bark scales may be found in apparently suitable locations without any indications of creepers being in the neighborhood.

In its composition the nest has a groundwork of twigs, the size of which de-

pends entirely on the dimensions of the space between the bark and the main trunk of the tree. Sometimes only a scant handful is sufficient, while in one nest the twigs would have filled a quart measure to overflowing. Slender dead fir twigs, from four to eight inches long, are almost invariably used, and this must frequently be a most arduous piece of business. Twigs have to be thrust into the crevice until the first dozen or so lodge firmly, then the rest is easy. In every nest quite a little mound of twigs is found on the ground below, showing how persevering the little architects must have been in the face of repeated failure. Probably they consider such twigs as unsuitable; at any rate it never seems to occur to them to pick up a twig when once it has fallen. Scattered amongst this net-work of twigs is always a little green moss and a considerable amount of down taken from ferns, willows and cotton-woods. What purpose these serve, beyond ornamentation, must be known only to the birds themselves. On top, and firmly embedded, is the egg cup of the nest, which is composed of a thick felting of fine strips from the inner bark of the cedar, with occasionally a few feathers.

The eggs are laid during the first week of May, and are usually five in number, rarely six. In color they are a dull white, plentifully sprinkled with dots of red-brown, most heavily about the larger end. The two sets that I have been fortunate enough to take are a well rounded ovate in shape. In another nest, that was torn down while I was waiting for the bird to complete her set, the broken eggs showed a decided approach to long ovate. My two sets show practically no variation in either size or shape, averaging .47x.58 inches.

In spite of the early nesting date it is very much open to doubt if more than one brood is reared in a season. Most of my spare time during the past summer was devoted to studying these birds, yet no evidences of a second nesting could be found anywhere.

A curious fatality seems connected with the young of these birds. In the two nests containing young that I have watched, all the occupants died shortly before they were ready to fly. I could not discover any positive cause for this, but am inclined to attribute it to ants with which the trees were infested. In fact it has always seemed strange to me that more nestlings are not destroyed in this manner.

The birds are very shy in the vicinity of their home, excepting after the eggs are hatched. Even when I knew just where it was and posted myself at a considerable distance, the most patient watching has never enabled me to see a bird return to her treasures.

Tacoma, Washington.

THE SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA CHICKADEE

By JOSEPH GRINNELL

Parus gambeli baileyæ

SUBSPECIFIC CHARACTERS.—Similar to *Parus gambeli gambeli*, but coloration dorsally and laterally more plumbeous, less brownish, and bill larger.

TYPE.—♂ ad.; No. 5516 Coll. J. G.; Mount Wilson, 5500 feet altitude, Sierra San Gabriel, Los Angeles County, California; November 27, 1903; collected by J. Grinnell.

COLORATION OF TYPE.—Top of head and hind neck, including loreal region, continuously black, save for a pure white superciliary stripe on each side; chin,