

FROM BIG CREEK TO BIG BASIN

By MILTON S. RAY

WITH TWO PHOTOS BY OLUF J. HEINEMANN

IT was early in the afternoon of June 10, 1908, that Oluf J. Heinemann and the writer arrived at Swanton. We had journeyed from Capitola to Folger by rail, from which place a short walk brought us to Swanton, which lies on and near the mouth of Big Creek. It was here that our road branched off leading up the Big Creek Canyon and over the mountains to the Big Basin.

With packs on our backs, which, besides blankets, held provisions for one week, we tramped along the thickly foliated road which winds along with the creek, stopping occasionally to pluck the wild blackberries which grew in such profusion. I do not know of a more picturesque gorge anywhere in Santa Cruz County than the Big Creek Canyon. The territory is wild, and with the exception of the power station at the foot of the grade and the lonely cabins at the dam on the summit, the whole region is peopled only by those furred and feathered dwellers who have held forth since primitive times.

After leaving the power station the road ascends abruptly, so steeply that it bars almost everyone except he be on horseback or afoot. It is the steepest road I have ever traveled, for not even those impromptu dairy roads leading to the summer pasture lands in the high Sierras can compare with it. Our pack weighed about forty pounds and the steepness of the road, and the heat of the day accentuated the weight. Thus we meandered rather leisurely and more so as we disliked to miss any of the entrancing views of this heavily wooded canyon, still in all its primeval beauty, but soon, it is said, to be stripped as many others in the country have to the last vestige.

It was almost six o'clock when we reached the group of cabins at the Boyea creek dam on the summit. Failing to find anyone about we proceeded to make ourselves comfortable in an empty bungalow, when Oscar Ewald, who has charge of the dam, made his appearance and with a hearty hospitality insisted on our sharing the best he had to offer.

Even at six o'clock, when we arrived, it was still quite a while before sunset and we sat before Ewald's cabin enjoying the rare view, for the lake, lofty trees and other surroundings strongly reminded one of those incomparable Sierran landscapes. Nearby, at a pretty little stream, Boyea Creek, which led from the dam, a Winter Wren (*Nannus hiemalis pacificus*) was pouring forth a crystal song, trilling in that silvery way, which altho it seems almost continually on a single key is extremely beautiful. A finished artist like the winter wren, it seems, does not need the range of notes that are given to a meadow lark or grosbeak. In the giant spruces and redwoods which towered above, dwarfing the cabins, Coast Jays (*Cyanocitta stelleri carbonacea*), the conspicuous bird of this section, limb by limb were ascending the great trees or anon would assemble in the rear of the cabin to dispute ownership with Ewald's cats over a dish of provender, while out among their nests in the dead trees standing in the clear waters of the lake Brewer Blackbirds (*Euphagus cyanocephalus*) discussed matters in their characteristic way.

Ewald was a man of wide experience: for many years he had been to sea, visiting all four corners of the earth, and around the evening fire many a tale he told of other lands, tho, too, much of hunting, fishing and trapping in these wilds; for here coons, foxes, deer, wild cats and even the lordly California lions still abound.

The following morning, our host insisting, we decided to remain another day. By opening the gates of the dam Ewald produced a waterfall a quarter of a mile below, which gladdened the heart of that camera fiend, Heinemann, who I think took it from six positions all looking very pleasant as it fell over the water-worn precipices among the moss and ferns. Ewald on joining us led the way along the flume which brings the water from the other dam at the head of Big Creek. Here, among those great trees, the redwood and spruce, is a region of wonderful beauty. Silent and still the great green forest walls the view in every direction, while half hidden by fallen logs, great boulders and the overhanging smaller trees and shrubs in all their bright greenery, run the ever singing brooks.

It was near the head of that pellucid stream, Big Creek, that I found a nest of considerable rarity. I noticed a Western Winter Wren disappear beneath a huge fallen redwood which lay across the stream and on examination found what was



CABINS AT BOVEA CREEK DAM, SANTA CRUZ MOUNTAINS

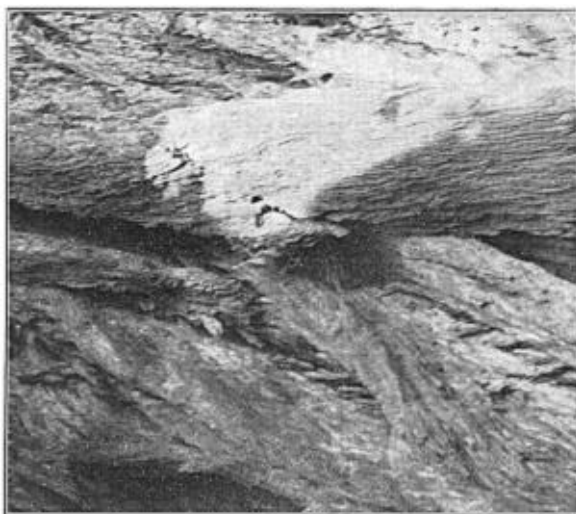
rather unusual, three nests! Two were of previous seasons, one holding an infertile egg. The third nest was but newly built. All were made of twigs, leaves and lined with moss and feathers, and placed among the bark-folds of the redwood which were particularly deep on this tree. If the nest was hard to find it was still more difficult to photograph, situated as it was, directly over and not far above the water. But Oluf's determined spirit rises when he finds a rebellious subject and after some considerable maneuvering the telling of which would reveal several state secrets, he snapped the bulb with the result shown herewith.

The trail, for this is almost a roadless country, took us away from the Big Creek Dam and up the steep mountain sides towards the coast. After reaching the top of the ridge we came to Gregory Heights where we found a large open clearing with grain fields and orchards and tenanted by many birds of the lower zones. For here, while the Black-headed Grosbeaks (*Zamelodia melanocephala capitalis*)

trilled among the orchard trees or House Finches (*Carpodacus mexicanus frontalis*) made merry along the ridge of the hotel roof, I could faintly hear songs from the realm of the Western Winter Wren and Monterey Hermit Thrush in the dark, wooded canyon below.

While returning Ewald rather surprised us by naming forty-five different trees and plants in the canyons and by the erudite way in which he discoursed on the properties of spigmint, yerba santos and other herbs.

At noon on June 12, after the meal prepared by Oscar which made up in quantity what it lacked in courses, he escorted us some distance up the road where he took leave after giving some farewell advice on roads and trails. A rocky ridge of shale, sparsely covered with brush, rises above the northern end of the dam. On these rocky ridges birdlife is almost nil and no bird songs are heard except the occasional twittering-cry of some lonely, forlorn Wren-tit. The road, dusty and dazzling white, reflected the light and heat of a torrid sun and caused us to gaze longingly to the north where the timber lands again appeared. After several miles we reached a range of mountains covered with oak and other timber but with no redwoods or spruce altho we were a thousand feet higher in elevation than the Big Creek Summit; but as Joseph Grinnell has already noted, this condition is not unusual along the coast, where the Upper Sonoran Zone is frequently found above the Transition. Orchards and many farms lie along the summit plateau of the Ben Lomond Mountains and at times the bird-life formed a rather curious combination of both zones. As a



NESTING SITE OF WESTERN WINTER WREN IN REDWOOD LOG

further illustration compare typical species found here at an altitude ranging from 2000 to 2500 feet with those noted at Big Creek Summit among the redwoods, elevation 1000 to 1500 feet.

BIG CREEK BIRDS: HUMID TRANSITION ZONE

- Coast Jay (*Cyanocitta stelleri carbonacea*)
- Santa Cruz Chickadee (*Penthestes rufescens barlowi*)
- Golden Pileolated Warbler (*Wilsonia pusilla chryseola*)
- Western Winter Wren (*Nannus hiemalis pacificus*)
- Brewer Blackbird (*Euphagus cyanocephalus*)
- Red-shafted Flicker (*Colaptes cafer collaris*)
- Olive-sided Flycatcher (*Contopus borealis*)
- Western Wood Pewee (*Contopus richardsoni richardsoni*)
- Vaux Swift (*Chaetura vauxi*)
- California Quail (*Lophortyx californicus californicus*)
- Point Pinos Junco (*Junco hyemalis pinosus*)
- Russet-backed Thrush (*Hylocichla ustulata ustulata*)
- Monterey Hermit Thrush (*Hylocichla guttata slevini*)

BIRDS ON THE PLATEAU, BEN LOMOND: UPPER SONORAN ZONE

California Thrasher (*Toxostoma redivivum redivivum*)
 San Francisco Towhee (*Pipilo maculatus falcifer*)
 Vaux Swift (*Chetura vauxi*)
 Tree Swallow (*Tachycineta bicolor*)
 Intermediate Wren-tit (*Chamaea fasciata intermedia*)
 California Purple Finch (*Carpodacus purpureus californicus*)
 Green-backed Goldfinch (*Astragalinus psaltria hesperophilus*)
 Bush-tit (*Psaltriparus minimus minimus*)
 California Jay (*Aphelocoma californica californica*)
 California Woodpecker (*Melanerpes formicivorus bairdi*)
 Willow Woodpecker (*Dryobates pubescens turati*)

Perhaps nowhere in the county can a more magnificent view be had than from the heights west of Eagle Rock where looking over the precipitous mountain sides the whole eastern section of Santa Cruz County lies before one, stretching out canyon after canyon eastward to that giant peak, Loma Prieta, and with peaks and peaks still further east fading away into dim blues and grays. Scenery such as this always made me fear for our supply of film packs, for Heinemann, would give a subject like this a dozen exposures and simply wear a guilty smile when I remonstrated.

On the summit we could find no one who could speak English and the Italian farmers could only direct us on two roads. "This way, Santa Cruz; that way, Boulder Creek," was the limit of their road knowledge and almost of their vocabulary. At last wearying of trying to find the Big Basin Road we took the Jamison Creek Road, altho it took us at least fifteen miles out of our way, in the direction of Boulder Creek. This road meets the one from Boulder Creek about five miles from the latter town and it was at these cross roads, in a deserted cabin that we spent the night.

Resuming our tramp in the morning we repassed over the same ground we had before the previous year. The site of the water-ouzel's nest* was visited, but no sign of it remained. We left the route of last year at the head of the grade, however, and took a short cut, which with devious windings went thru a stumpy country shorn of its timber, to Blume's Old Mill on the very edge of the Big Basin forest wall. Here we paused for lunch. Built under the eaves of one of the deserted buildings I noticed a nest of the Black Phoebe (*Sayornis nigricans nigricans*) with large young and on Blume's Creek close by, an arm's length in a sand bank, I pulled forth three young Belted Kingfishers (*Ceryle alcyon*) who posed for us on a log. The juveniles amused themselves in the interim by locking bills and paddling across the log in an awkward, flat-footed fashion, and I noticed it was always a backward movement. Might not this be a provision of nature to prevent young birds leaving the nest?

A short walk from here thru the thick woods brought us to the main road in the Basin and another along it equally short, to the Governor's Camp in the very heart of this, the great Santa Cruzan forest, where we had arranged to spend some time, and a paper treating of which, if the editor be in a lenient mood, may be laid before CONDOR readers at a future date.

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*CONDOR IX, 1907, p. 175.