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FROM TAHOE TO WASHOE

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IN PLANNING the season's field work at our 1909 base, Bijou, Lake Tahoe, the trip to Washoe Lake, Nevada, was one that very favorably impressed us, as not only the lake itself but the country intervening, promised much to the student of bird-life.

On the morning of June 22 we left Bijou in our motor-boat, which took us as far as Glenbrook, Nevada. Glenbrook was formerly a town, in fact the principal one on the lake. The place now, however, is merely an obscure summer resort. The surrounding mountains, once magnificently timbered, now show but a sparse second-growth, with here and there a great gnarled pine or fir which give some idea of their former grandeur. At half past ten Heinemann and I, each with a pack of about forty pounds, set out on the Carson Road. The day was warm, and the road, except where crossed by some stream bordered by willows and aspens, was unsheltered. On reaching Spooner we took the Marlette Lake Road, this being the best route to Washoe. About Spooner, which is situated on the summit of one of the lower ranges at an elevation of 7,000 feet, are tracts of country typically Nevadan, being dry, rocky and brushy. In these patches we found the Brewer Sparrow abundant, and I was fortunate in discovering a nest along the road in the top of a sage bush two feet up. It was made of weed stems and bark strips, lined with fine, reddish rootlets and a few horsehairs, and contained two small young and an infertile egg. *Spizella breweri* evidently possesses no marked vocal ability and its dull plumage matches the arid region it inhabits.

Leaving Spooner, the road, after some preliminary bends and turns, finally sallied forth up a long, narrow, wooded canyon through which coursed a small stream of limpid water. The road, following the waterway, led through pines and firs, thickets of willow, and wonderfully beautiful aspen groves. Several nests of the Western Robin (*Planesticus migratorius propinquus*) were found, which either contained, or had recently contained, young. Although we were continually ascend-

ing, yet, as a condition which prevails on the Nevadan side of Tahoe, birds of much lower levels were not uncommon. Above Spooner a small colony of Red-wings (*Agelaius phoeniceus neutralis*) was noted nesting in a swampy meadow; and here, well up the canyon, at an elevation of 7500 feet, where patches of snow still lay on the road, was the Black-headed Grosbeak (*Zamelodia melanocephala capitalis*) tossing exhilarating melody from the tree-tops along the brook.

For five miles or more we followed the narrow canyon until, after a sharp turn, we reached the top of a snow-covered ridge, than from which perhaps there is no rarer view in all the region, for directly below, surrounded by virgin forests, is Marlette Lake, and rising farther back, that lofty snow-peak, Mount Rose. About the lake the altitude, 8000 feet, was evidently a little too high for *Agelaius* and *Zamelodia*, and all the species noted were typically high Sierran and were as follows: Sierra Grouse (*Dendragapus obscurus sierrae*), Red-shafted Flicker (*Colaptes cafer collaris*), Olive-sided Flycatcher (*Nuttallornis borealis*), Western Wood Pewee (*Myiochanes richardsoni*), Blue-fronted Jay (*Cyanocitta stelleri frontalis*), Clarke Nutcracker, (*Nucifraga columbiana*), White-crowned Sparrow (*Zonotrichia leucophrys*), Sierra Junco (*Junco hyemalis thurberi*), Western Warbling Vireo (*Vireosylva gilva swainsoni*), Ruby-crowned Kinglet (*Regulus calendula*), Sierra Hermit Thrush (*Hylocichla guttata sequoiensis*).

After taking some views of Marlette we descended with the road to the lake shore, along its edge for some distance, and then, ascending the opposite mountain-side, we found ourselves on the eastern summit of the Sierras. Far below lay the foothills and valley lands, and farther eastward the numberless barren mountain chains. Such deep snow covered the road, however, that we lost all trace of it and had to cut across the country as best we could. We met the road again at Hobart Creek Reservoir, a muddy lake in the open country, after a down-grade tramp which gave more of experience than pleasure. At the villa near the Hobart Pumping Station we spent the night and early next morning started down the long winding road which leads straight to Washoe Lake. Desiring to secure a good photograph of the lake we focust from numerous turns of the road but Washoe does not lend itself well to the camera, for we either had too much or too little lake or mountain, and once, when the view was fair, a great dead tree persisted in occupying half the plate. From a pictorial point too, each curve of the road below appeared better than the one we were on, and in this way, altho we failed to get a picture of Washoe we soon reached the level valley lands, where we made a short cut thru grainfields and orchards towards the lake. By a small brook we came upon a colony of American Magpies (*Pica hudsonia*), and, altho knowing this bird to be a very early breeder, I inspected some half dozen nests in willow trees, but in each case the young birds had left. Crossing some wide pasture lands where countless cattle were grazing we came to the shores of Washoe.

This lake with its murky water and surrounded by desert ranges, tule tracts or swampy pasture lands, is a striking contrast to Tahoe with its deep, clear water, and its great forests that run up lofty mountains and end in the snow. But I am not at all sure that Tahoe is richer in marsh and water birds. The Al Tahoe marsh (formerly known as Rowlands) is the only swamp of consequence at Lake Tahoe, where most of the shore line is either sandy or rocky, and it is smaller in extent than the great tule fields at the northern end of Washoe Lake.

As we crossed the pasture lands, we found the Killdeer (*Oxyechus vociferus*) exceedingly common, in fact I know of no place where I have found them equally so, and our first nest (found by Heinemann) was of this bird with four well incubated eggs. The latter were placed on a bed of even-sized pebbles, in a slight

hollow. Bird life became more and more abundant as we walkt towards the northern end of the lake, Red-winged Blackbirds (*Agelaius phoeniceus neutralis*), Yellow-headed Blackbirds (*Xanthocephalus xanthocephalus*), and Wilson Phalaropes (*Steganopus tricolor*) being especially common. One of the latter fluttered along the ground almost at our feet, but a careful search failed to reveal the nest. We soon realized, however, that not much could be accomplisht without the use of a boat, and as all those about were securely chained, and, to reach the boat-house meant a walk of twenty miles, with the chance of finding no one in, our prospects for a series of views of water-bird homes were not very bright.

After wading some distance among the tules, from where coot and various ducks and grebes headed out, we began to appreciate the wealth of Washoe's water bird-life, and felt that a region so rich as this deserved the work of a summer's



Fig. 25. OUR FIRST VIEW OF MARLETTE LAKE

vacation rather than the short time we were able to give it. Consulting our watch, we found we had been at the lake two hours and a half, and that we still had ample time to catch the train to Carson City. Leaving the great marsh almost untouched we walkt west to the railroad station at Franktown, but even in this short span of territory a number of interesting nests were discovered. The first, that of a Brewer Blackbird (*Euphagus cyanocephalus*) was in the top of a sage two feet up, made of weed stems, and grasses and lined with horsehair. The four eggs it held appeared to be in a condition of advanced incubation.

Not far from here in a grain field, altho the growing grain offered no concealment, being but little above the ground, I found a nest of the Dusky Horned Lark (*Otocoris alpestris merrilli*), made of weed-stems, with two eggs which to my surprise showed incubation had already begun. In a thick patch of clover along an irrigation ditch a Cinnamon Teal (*Querquedula cyanoptera*), was flusht;

and disclosed five fresh eggs lying in a grass lined hollow; while a little farther on in an alfalfa field which was being almost flooded by irrigation I found a nest of the Mountain Song Sparrow (*Melospiza melodia montana*) with the large complement of six eggs. The nest, of grasses and weed stems with a lining of horse-hair, was placed on slightly higher ground, and was well concealed by the thick alfalfa. The eggs were in a state of advanced incubation.

A short journey from Franktown, on the train, brought us to Carson City, the State Capital, a very pretty little town with countless shade trees lining every road and lane and tempering the torrid heat of the Nevada summer sun. The altitude of Carson is 4,675 feet being about 350 feet lower than Washoe Lake, and the bird-life noted was about what we expected to find. The following were the most common species: Western Wood Pewee (*Myiochanes richardsoni*), Western Meadowlark (*Sturnella neglecta*), Bullock Oriole (*Icterus bullocki*), House Finch (*Carpodacus mexicanus frontalis*), English Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*), Western Yellow Warbler (*Dendroica aestiva brewsteri*), Western Robin (*Planesticus migratorius propinquus*).

The following morning we made the trip by rail to Virginia City. After traveling thru the mountains of California, this region, like that between Franktown and Carson, must impress everyone by its lack of timber. Rocky, brush-covered ridges rolled by in unvarying succession. In some places there were small, scattered trees but the highest of these did not appear to be over fifteen feet. The only exceptions were the thickets of willow, cottonwood and other trees along the muddy Carson River, which the train followed for a considerable distance. Here we noted from the car-windows three birds as being especially common, the Mourning Dove (*Zenaidura macroura carolinensis*), the Arkansas Kingbird (*Tyrannus verticalis*) and the American Magpie (*Pica hudsonia*).

After a long, slow, up-grade grind the train pulled into historic Virginia, once a great city but now in ruins. Located at an elevation of about 6,000 feet on the side of a steep mountain and not far from its summit, it is hardly the place where one would expect to compile an extensive check-list. We found bird-life not entirely wanting however. Two characteristic birds were the Slate-colored Sparrow (*Passerella iliaca schistacea?*) and the Rock Wren (*Salpinctes obsoletus*). The rich song of the former came wandering down from the brushy brookless gullies, while in the town itself we heard the wren's wild sweet melody. In one of the many deserted buildings, where uneven stones cemented in '49 style formed the wall, we found the pebbled pathway which led to an unseen nest. Among the few scattered trees in the town the Bullock Oriole and the House Finch were noted, and, in an empty frame building, a pair of Mountain Bluebirds (*Sialia currucoides*).

On our return to Carson, altho it was late in the afternoon, we still had time to tramp quite a way on the Tahoe Road, and nightfall found us well up in the foothills, encampment in the hay-barn of a friendly farmer. The ingenious architect of the structure we occupied had saved considerable lumber in its construction by leaving a generous space between each of the side-boards, thru which the night winds entered with remarkable freedom. This, coupled with the fact that we were able to find but little hay to soften the board floor on which we unrolled our sleeping bags, caused us to arise at a very early hour. We arranged our pack beneath the paling stars, and, at the first faint streak of dawn were on the road.

King's Canyon Road, the route by which we were traveling, while not possessing the scenic attractions of the Marlette Lake Road still leads thru much pleasant scenery of the lower altitudes. Spooner, at the end of the road is at its

highest point, and the ascent all the way from Carson is remarkably gradual. The timber, characteristic of the eastern slopes of the Sierras, is rather sparse and the majority of it second growth. The prevailing species of birds noted were the American Magpie, Mourning Dove, Thick-billed Sparrow (*Passercella iliaca megarhyncha*), and the Woodhouse Jay (*Aphelocoma woodhousei*). The latter was especially interesting on account of its close resemblance in song, habits and color-



Fig. 26. NEST OF KILLDEER PLOVER ON SHORE OF WASHOE LAKE

tion to our common California bird. We met with the species up to an elevation of at least 6,500 feet, the last bird being seen just below Spooner.

Leaving the latter place, we reach Glenbrook, on the lake, at the very time we had left it three days previously. From here we telephoned to Bijou for our motor boat, and it was not long before we caught sight of it rounding the pine-fringed point. As we had a strong head wind returning, however, it was a considerably longer time before we reach Bijou, the end of our journey.