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THE YELLOW PINES OF MESA DEL AGUA DE LA YEGUA

By FLORENCE MERRIAM BAILEY

WITH ONE PHOTO

NONE of the mesas we had seen so far between the Staked Plains and the Rocky Mountains had had any trees higher than the orchard-like junipers and nut pines; they had all belonged to the arid juniper zone, and all had the same set of birds, mammals and plants. We had been working in this juniper zone in New Mexico not only thru most of this field season but thru most of the previous season, with occasional dips down into the warmer zone of the mesquite country, so that our appetites for big trees and mountains had grown into a veritable hunger.

Now as we approacht Mesa del Agua de la Yegua, named apparently for some locally historic springs used for watering a band of mares, its western fringe of trees lookt surprizingly high to us, and the more we lookt, straining our eyes with eager hungry gaze, the higher they seemed, the longer stretcht the bare trunks below the bushy tops, and the more excited we got.

"Yellow pines!" was at last pronounced, conclusively. What a thrill it gave us and what a flood of rich associations the name brought us! Had we at last come to something higher than a juniper? Should we finally, to express our enthusiasm in working terms, get above the low trees of the arid Sonoran zone into the Transition zone yellow pines with their old familiar birds and mammals? Haunted by visions of New Mexico's noble coniferous forests, it had seemed as if we would never get above the Upper Sonoran orchards. "Transition! Transition!" we repeated to ourselves, for the word was rich in memories of noble-boled, fragrant pine woods and sweet-voiced birds. It was too good to be true—I lookt at the trees fearful lest their imagined hight dwarf under my gaze. Still, in spite of my doubts, we were working west toward the Rocky Mountains and this section of the plateau rose one thousand feet from the plains, so it might well reach into the yellow pines. The thought opened a beautiful vista—we were really approaching the mountains at last!

We followed up the juniper bottom parallel to the mesa and camped at the nearest point where we could find water, climbed a butte three or four hundred feet high to get the lay of the land—on top flushing a nighthawk from her eggs on the ground—picked out the best place from which to climb the mesa, and the next morning made an early start for it. At the foot of the mesa, near a Mexican adobe we encountered two small boys with skins so white that I spoke to them in English, thereby filling them with such amazement and terror that the only answers they could make were unintelligible sounds like the noises of frightened little animals.

Here, at the foot of the mesa, there was no longer any possible doubt about the pines; but looking up a distance of a thousand feet they were painfully suggestive of two-inch Noah's Ark trees. As we climbed, at 6500 feet by the barometer a halt was called, for besides the crowing of a rooster from the adobe below us, we heard an unfamiliar persistent sparrow song from the oak brush that made us slip from our saddles. The songster was soon found, sitting on the top of a low bush with his head thrown back while he sang, but though unafraid he was so full of song that he could not bear to be interrupted and flew ahead out of our way where he could keep on singing. When finally caught up with, however, he proved to be the Scott sparrow, greatly to our satisfaction, for it was a substantial extension of his range. This was still in the Upper Sonoran junipers, with even a touch of Lower Sonoran mesquite, and as we climbed up a warm southwest slope to the top most of the birds except the hummingbird that flashed before our delighted eyes still belonged to the juniper zone, among them the familiar ash-throated flycatcher, gray titmouse, canyon towhee, and rock wren. At 7000 feet, however, 400 feet below the top, to our great delight we at last reached the edge of the Transition zone; at last, after endless treeless plains and orchards of juniper and nut pine we stood and looked up the trunk of a yellow pine—a real tree!

Here, leaving the horses in a beautiful grassy park, unsaddled and picketed so they could graze while we were gone, we climbed on up to the crown of the mesa. The barometer now registered 7400 feet, and we were really in the pines, that is, in a strip of varying width along the western rim of the mesa. Bordering them was a fringe of oak brush and beyond that the plains stretched away as far—farther than the eye could reach—to Kansas, as was said grandly with a sweep of the hand toward the horizon. As we wandered about under the tall trees it seemed as if pines had never smelled so sweet, nor the wind in them ever blown so musically. It made us more than ever hungry for the mountains and made us rejoice with new realization that we were actually on the way to them at last.

Some of the juniper birds, such as bush-tits, vireos, and lark sparrows, were here, of course, with the mixture of country, but we were soon discovering bird after bird of the yellow pines, each discovery bringing a double thrill of delight and promise. Towhees with their handsome black and brown coats were singing all about in the oak brush just as we had seen and heard them a thousand times before—how good it seemed! A red-shafted flicker's familiar call reverberated thru the pines rousing echoes from many long closed chambers of memory; a bird flying away from the back of the tree trunk by which I was standing was recognized with a start as the slender-billed nuthatch—another bird of the forest—and—oh!—the busy pigmy nuthatch, one of the pleasantest of all little birds to come back to—what rare music his tinkling notes made in my ears. His cousin, *Sitta nelsoni*, is all business, but *pygmaea*—the plump, fluffy ball of feathers—seems to have a confidential way with his tree trunk and you can imagine him choosing out cozy corners among the branches in which to sleep.

In a pine top there was a long-crested jay with his handsome white-pointed

crest, his dark coat set off with turquoise blue. The first sight of *Cyanocitta*! How it brings back the richness of mountain life! *Aphelocoma*—the flat-headed jay—you are glad to see after an absence, but it is with a mild nut pine and juniper gladness; while at the first sight of the dark, crested figure of *Cyanocitta* in the yellow pines you seem to have reached a new altitude—to have reached the mountains. To be sure there are heights beyond, but this is a way station at which to take deep draughts from the full cup Nature is holding out to you—take deep breaths of the sweet piney air, quaff the cooling waters of the mountain streams, and look up at the beautiful yellow pines with their glistening spun glass needles as a foretaste of the firs and mountain tops beyond. You are in the mountains—the low country is left behind.



Fig. 56. THE YELLOW PINES

Courtesy of Forest Service

But what was that? Could it be? Yes! the glass revealed the pink glow on his breast and as he vaulted into the sky the form of the broad oval wings settled it—it was that handsome and most interesting bird, the Lewis woodpecker! Working and singing loudly among the tips of the pine branches were some warblers that to our delight proved to be the charming little gray and yellow Grace warblers.

A flash of red led us thru the pines till we came to a beautiful clear pool. Was this the Agua from which the Yegua had come to drink, so giving the Mesa its name? If so, the mares had had a beautiful woodland spring. The red flash here materialized into a hepatic tanager—how I hugged myself—preening its feathers for a bath in the pool. While we sat in sight of the water so many birds came

to drink that we concluded that it was the fountain for all the woodland folk. And in their number we included a beautiful deer whose fresh track we found not far away. On the floor of the woods an occasional red cactus, a blue tradescantia, or a single pink phlox made a bright spot of color.

When we were thinking that we had this most remote mesa top with its wild-wood friends all to ourselves we were surprized by a fresh horse track, a shod track; and then something white thru the trees made us raise the field glass—a white rooster on the fence of an adobe! Of course, we might have expected it, for like all the rest of the country the mesa had been sheept. Even now, once disillusioned, we caught the suggestion of sheep bells in the air. On the way down, too, we found old sheep camps and a salt log. It brought the same surprize we felt everywhere in New Mexico, for while to us the country was new, in very fact this land of *poco tiempo* is an old, old land. But after all, what did it matter to us, for on the Mesa del Agua de la Yegua we had come back to the yellow pines!

NOTES FROM LOS CORONADOS ISLANDS

By ALFRED B. HOWELL

WITH TWO PHOTOS

WITH the exception of four days, I was at Los Coronados Islands, Baja California, Mexico, from May 22 until July 15 of this year, and during this time I made a special study of the Xantus Murrelet (*Brachyramphus hypoleucus*), which species is found upon these islands breeding in limited numbers. Altho in former years they were known to breed on Santa Barbara Island, Los Coronados is now believed to be the northernmost place where they make their home. Surprizingly little is really known regarding the habits of this species, and it is not known with any degree of certainty just how far south their range extends.

From my observations, it seems to be beyond dout that these birds nest twice during the year, once towards the last of March, as has been proved time and again, and once more during the middle of June; for I found fully as many of their eggs at this latter date as did Mr. P. I. Osburn earlier in the season. Mr. Osburn has done considerable collecting here within the last few years, and spent four days with me during June. I have even taken half-incubated eggs from under the sitting bird as late as July 11, and it seems hardly likely that one nesting could straggle along continuously from March until July. And besides, no ornithologist has ever taken eggs of this species in May, as far as I can find out, and there are plenty of them who have visited the islands in that month in order to collect eggs of the other kinds of birds that are found nesting here.

A point that has puzzled me is the question as to what becomes of the young murrelets after they are hatcht. I greatly dislike the practice of advancing theories in order to try and prove scientific problems, but nevertheless I am now tempted to try and reach some conclusion by the process of elimination. The nests which I kept under careful observation numbered five. When discovered, the contents of these nests were in every stage of progress from eggs half-incubated, to young that were barely dry. In every case did I find the nests deserted when the latter were at the uniform age of four days. The obvious explanation to this would