

NOTES ON A FEW BIRDS OF THE GRAND CANYON, ARIZONA

By MELICENT HUMASON LEE

IT IS six o'clock in the morning, daylight saving time, on the fourth day of June, in the Grand Canyon of Arizona. I am sitting under a red-bud tree near a little pool beside Bright Angel Trail, a short distance from the Indian Gardens. I am waiting for the hummingbirds to bathe in the dawn-cool water.

The ground is cold as a marble pavement. The abundant leaves of the red-bud bear too intense a shade for a pre-sunlit morning; the dense clusters of seedpods hang luxuriantly from the twigs. Across the path, at the base of the bank, the Indian paint brush glows between the softer-toned blossoms of the mallow, and the yellow plume of the *Stanleya*, to which the hummingbirds have not yet darted. In a dark, little niche, overhung by grape-vines, one beautiful, solitary thistle poppy blooms.

Suddenly, I hear a vibrant hum in the air, mingled with excited twitterings, and shrill squeaks. Buzz, buzz, buz-z-z over the willow tips, over the tules, over the graceful stems of the tall, waxy-flowered dogbane. Then, I catch the gleam of two little sprites of the air—Black-chinned Hummingbirds (*Archilochus alexandri*), chasing one another with miraculous speed. The combat ceases as abruptly as it commenced. The contestants separate. One retires to a grape-vine swing and sits there quietly, occasionally shaking his ridiculous tail feathers; the other descends to the pool. He dips his little breast into the shallow water; he rises into the air; he drops again by gentle stages, twirling around after each descent, and squeaking ominously; he dips again, and submerging his tiny body to the chin, he trails through the pool like a fiery ship of green and violet.

While he perches on a horizontal stem of dog-bane to dry his feathers, I gaze about me in quest of other birds. A male Black-headed Grosbeak (*Zamelodia melanocephala*) is softly singing on a willow bough which overhangs the pool, while his mate is surreptitiously collecting a bundle of fiber from a dried plant on the opposite bank. Dark shapes flit constantly about the latter, and, by the aid of my field-glasses, I can discern several pairs of Desert Sparrows (*Amphispiza bilineata deserticola*) apparently nesting in the cactus and other growth on the hillside. The Black-throats' song, strung upon three tones, is rather thin and wiry, but especially suited to their environment. Far above these little sparrows, almost at the foot of the massive wall of rock which towers beyond them, several wild burros, "escaped from cultivation", are leisurely grazing. Almost indistinguishable are they, in their coats of gray, from the boulders and brush amongst which they slowly move.

As I watch them, an insect-like trill floats to me from a ledge of rock, lower down the hill-side, and, by carefully focusing my glasses upon the spot. I can descry the Rock Wren (*Salpinctes obsoletus*), standing by a clump of cactus, and jerking her body up and down by what seems to be a well-managed system of wires. Very evidently, she is nesting in the fissure of rock, as she returns again and again to that particular spot, while her mate calls to her from some hidden point of vantage nearby. A rock squirrel runs along a ledge above her, sits up meditatively, drops again, and scampers into a crevice. And yet the sun has not risen behind me, over that austere barrier of rock. The air is still cold, and not a single lizard has stirred.

Suddenly, a big shape swings over the pool, and, directly before my eyes, a Cooper Hawk (*Accipiter cooperi*) perches on a willow bough. He twists his head in every direction, occasionally opening and snapping his beak; he suddenly wheels about, displaying his satiny back and the four dark bands of his tail feathers; then, he plunges into the tules.

But what is that long-continued song that never ceases—that song which has been so predominant that it has simply become a background for the intermittent calls of other birds? It is the jumble of the Long-tailed Chat (*Icteria virens longicauda*), whose yellow breast gleams through the willow thicket. For hours I have listened to this bird, in the mornings and evenings when I have lingered by this pool, and never have I detected a single strain the motif of which seemed to have been borrowed from the song of another bird. Mimic he may be at times, but in the early part of June, from dawn to dawn—for the voice of the chat continues throughout the night—he mimics none of his fellow birds: the rock wren, the desert sparrow, the grosbeak, and several other species, birds whose very characteristics are so dis-similar to his that their resultant musical expressions are in a category by themselves. Now the subject of my discussion flies to another willow, flies low, with a silent, hawk-like glide, which soon changes to a flapping, awkward motion, accompanied by a loud beating of wings. In the rare intervals which break his spun-out melody, I hear a cheerful little song behind me, which is so warbler-like in character, that without difficulty I can transport myself, by closing my eyes, to the cedar-spired hill slopes of New England, in the month of May. Rising, I skirt the pool, and enter an open area bordering the east side of the trail. A dense, luxuriant tangle of low willow and high dog-bane grows upon this mesa, which lies between the pool and the immense pale vermilion wall of granite over which scintillates the first faint glimmer of the sun. As well as I may, I advance through the thick, interwoven growth, the Chat following me, darting from willow to willow. Suddenly, I spy a tiny, dark gray bird, an atom of a bird, with miniature half-inch tail, clinging firmly to a slender dog-bane stalk, while near him hover the male and female Lazuli Bunting (*Passerina amoena*). I could pluck the little bird from the stem as easily as I could pick a plum, but instead, I quietly steal away, only too glad to discover that bird-nesting runs along as cozily and serenely in the Grand Canyon as in an old-fashioned garden.

I return to the pool just in time to see a pair of dainty little Arkansas Goldfinches (*Astragalinus psaltria*), drinking at the edge. These friendly birds do not object to my presence, but satisfy their thirst before flitting away. Scarcely have they flown, when I notice a female Black-chinned Hummingbird quivering before a loose flap of bark on a dead willow, and extricating from under the flap, threads of the inner fiber, a process which she repeats every three minutes, spinning away after each rapid task over a particular air-trail which probably leads to the recurved tip of a willow bough, on which a nest is in construction. Black-chins adapt themselves readily to their environment, and do not insist upon sycamore down for cradling their young, when sycamores are not available.

But now the sun has appeared over the red wall, the birds have retreated to cool coverts of willow and grape-vine, and only the irrepressible staccato ditty of the Chat permeates the silence of the glade.

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