

THE WESTERN MOCKINGBIRD IN THE SACRAMENTO VALLEY

WITH TWO ILLUSTRATIONS

By LLOYD G. INGLES

In his paper on the changing distribution of the Western Mockingbird (*Mimus polyglottos leucopterus*) in California, Arnold (Condor, vol. 37, 1935, pp. 193ff) states that its breeding range in the San Joaquin Valley extends from "north central San Joaquin County, on the north, to south of Bakersfield." In the Sacramento Valley the same author believes the area "about Sacramento seems to be an extension of the breeding territory at the north end of the San Joaquin Valley, while the area about Davis, Yolo County, in which the mockingbird was first reported nesting in 1928 (Storer MS, 1933), seems to constitute a distinct area of residence, without any connection, at the present time, at least, with any other areas." It is pointed out that Marysville, Yuba County, may be a breeding area but that no records of nests have been reported since 1890 (Belding, Land Birds Pac. Dist., Calif. Acad. Sci., Occ. Papers 2, 1890, p. 226).

The present writer first noted the presence of mockingbirds about his newly established residence near Durham, Butte County, during the winter months of 1932-33. On this ranch they have occurred every year since that time during the months of November, December, January, February and March. During this time they drive away nearly all other species of birds from shrubbery which has ripe fruit, particularly from the Oregon grape, Virginia creeper, pyracantha and varieties of climbing roses. The birds usually seem to leave the region about the first of March, although on another ranch about a mile away a singing bird was daily observed by the writer during most of the months of April and May, 1937. This bird sang almost hourly during the day and often on moonlight nights from the top of an old barn and from the cross-arm of a power pole. Hours were spent in searching, but no nest was ever discovered.

During the spring of 1937 a student in the writer's ornithology class insisted that mockingbirds had been nesting in Corning, Tehama County, for many years. A trip to Corning during the first week of June, 1937, resulted in numerous birds being observed about the residence district of that town and about the surrounding olive orchards, but no occupied nests were found. A citizen of Willows, Glenn County, reported mockingbirds nesting at his residence since 1934.

In May, 1938, the writer decided to investigate the mockingbird problem by visiting the areas where they had been reported by his students. Near Sutter, Sutter County, on the Meischke Ranch, he was shown a vacated nest which was occupied until the previous day by three young birds. The nest was collected. Another nest containing one mockingbird egg was located in a pyracantha shrub. The egg was collected. A mockingbird was singing at the time and another resented vociferously the intrusion and the taking of the egg. Mockingbirds have been reported by Mr. Meischke, the owner of the ranch, to have nested there since 1932, and the writer was shown the remains of several old nests still in their original places which were usually in thick pyracantha shrubs.

In the vicinities of Durham and Chico, Butte County, no mockingbirds were seen during this trip, although the places visited in these communities usually were occupied during the winter months. Between the Sacramento River and the town of Orland, Glenn County, two mockingbirds were observed singing from the tops of power poles about a mile apart. No stops were made to look for nests until the town of Corning, Tehama County, was reached, although three other roadside observation records of singing birds were made between Orland and Corning. In the last named town two

mockingbirds were seen in the garden on the grounds of the Maywood Hotel. One of these carried two green caterpillars and the other sang from the top of a cypress tree.



Fig. 5. Nest of Western Mockingbird in an olive tree at Corning, Tehama County, California, May 14, 1938.

A nest was soon located in the top of a rose trellis about eight feet from the ground. One of the birds protected the nest and on several occasions struck the writer on the head and shoulders as he investigated it. Later, it was learned that even the nocturnal promenading guests at the hotel had similar treatment administered by this same bird. The nest contained three half-grown young. A ladder was obtained and after tying back a few branches, the nest and young were photographed *in situ*. The protesting parent was then photographed at a distance of less than three feet. The manager of the hotel stated that when the garden was planted "fourteen years ago there were no mockingbirds present," but in "recent years they are everywhere about Corning." These statements were corroborated by other residents of the town and were found to be true as regards present conditions; for not only was another nest containing five eggs located a few blocks away, but seven other birds were observed singing from high places in the residence district. The nest containing the five eggs was photographed and the writer was given permission to collect one of them. It was situated about ten feet from the ground in the very bushy tips of an olive tree in the back yard of a residence on Yolo Street.

All of the nests observed are constructed on the same plan. The outer framework

consists of rather coarse sticks loosely arranged. Enclosed by this bulky material is a layer made up largely of grasses, string, rags, and wool. The innermost layer or lining in every case was made up of tiny rootlets. The nests were all placed in brushy protected places.



Fig. 6. Western Mockingbird defending its nest.
Photograph taken at Corning, Tehama County,
May 14, 1938.

Just why the Western Mockingbird has not yet extended its breeding range north of Yuba and Sutter counties on the east side of the Sacramento River, at least to the level of Corning on the west side, is not known. Arnold (1935) has pointed out that no single factor will account for the distribution or changing distribution of this species. The areas where the above-mentioned nests were located are to all appearances drier, and the vegetation grows less luxuriantly, than is found to be the case on the valley floor east of the river and north of Sutter and Yuba counties. The east side of the Sacramento River in this area has a very high water table and about thirty per cent more rainfall than the west side. It supports such vegetation as valley oak, almond, prune, and peach orchards, as well as thousands of acres of flooded rice fields. The mockingbird area west of the river is drier and supports such vegetation as olive and orange groves. Apparently the mockingbirds at present spread to the east side of the river only to feed on the winter fruits but leave it again when the breeding season approaches and build their nests on the less humid west side. This suggested difference in moisture in the air and the soil for these two areas may, of course, have no direct bearing on the distribution of this species in the Sacramento Valley, but may conceivably affect the ecological niche of the bird by affecting its food supply, by increasing or decreasing its enemies and competing species of other birds, and in the selection of nesting sites. The last-named factor, however, seems less important, because the pyracantha and rose bushes, the favorite nesting places of the Western Mockingbird in the Sacramento Valley, are not limited to its present breeding range. Indeed, these plants grow equally well on both sides of the Sacramento River.

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