

BREEDING BIRDS OF MONO COUNTY, CALIFORNIA

WITH FIVE ILLUSTRATIONS

By J. STUART ROWLEY

For some reason, little has been written on the birds of Mono County, California, in the heart of the high Sierra. It has been my good fortune to spend short periods of time at the height of the nesting season in this country in each of several years, as follows: May 14 to 23, 1926; July 2 to 9, 1927; July 4 to 9, 1930; June 15 to 18, 1938; July 2 to 6, 1939. Although this time was extremely limited, it afforded opportunity to observe at varying elevations from near 6000 to above 12,000 feet. The area offered a wide variety of material, often within a few hours of travel.

The habitats which my notes cover range from marshy meadowlands at about 6000 feet, up through the higher sage country, bordered by a few scattered pines, through the aspen thickets at 7500 to 8500 feet and through the heavy timber, to the rocky barren country well above timberline at approximately 13,500 feet. Thus, the nature of the country made it seem advisable to establish a permanent camp midway between the lower and higher areas for convenience. By deciding on a particular course for each day, a fair survey at the various altitudes was obtained. Generalizing, one might say that Mono County extends from the desert floor to the highest peaks in California, but our searches were only in the upper levels, with no field work lower than 6000 feet. In 1926 and 1927, I was accompanied by the late O. W. Howard and in 1930 by W. J. Sheffler.

Mallard. *Anas platyrhynchos*. On May 15, 1926, in the marshy country adjacent to Owens River and McGee Creek, two nests of this common breeder were found, containing 14 and 9 heavily incubated eggs. Young were evident throughout the area, the majority being not over two weeks old. Locating the nests was difficult and had it not been for Howard's pointer dog, we would undoubtedly have failed to flush the close-sitting females. Both nests were heavily lined with down and placed in grasses at the bases of scrub willows.

Western Goshawk. *Astur atricapillus striatulus*. Two nests were found by accident in the Virginia Lakes country, the first on July 3, 1927, about 9000 feet elevation. The female raised such an uproar of screams when I came into sight while fishing that my suspicions were aroused immediately. She came screaming over my head with fierce animosity, topping me by fifteen or twenty feet. After each swoop, she perched on some well-situated pine stub and watched my reaction to the attack. When I withdrew from the vicinity, she remained perched, but when I approached closer, a swift, fierce swoop was made, accompanied by continual screaming. Finally, the nest was sighted about forty feet up in a lodgepole pine. Howard ascended the tree, and when he was almost to the nest, the female became frenzied and made many close swoops at him. When he reached the side of the nest, the female swooped down and tore his shirt and undershirt, and made a long scratch across his back just below the shoulders. The nest contained three half-grown young on this date. This was the first instance either of us had witnessed of an actual "strike" by a bird of prey while inspecting nests. The strike may have been a misjudged flight, but the indications were that it was quite deliberate.

Another nest was found at about 8000 feet elevation on July 7, 1927, situated only fifteen feet up in an aspen in a thicket and well concealed by branches. It contained three half-grown young, also. In this case, however, neither parent was present during the time of inspection nor was either heard. Both nests were about the same in construction, being about the size of a small nest of a Western Red-tailed Hawk. One was made of pine sticks, the other mostly of aspen branches. The actions of the pairs seemed to indicate a rather wide range in temperament in this species.

In July 1930, both pairs apparently were established, for an immature youngster having downy feathers on the head was found resting near the ground, within a thousand yards of the old nest in the aspen thicket. A comparison of notes indicates that seasonal conditions and temperatures affect the nesting period of these hawks at this elevation, since half-grown young in 1927 and a flying youngster in 1930 were found on closely corresponding dates.

In 1939 the nest in the aspen was definitely abandoned, but the one in the lodgepole pine was occupied. The female was brooding young that were visible from the ground after she was flushed. Both parents were noisy and characteristically hostile to intruders, as they had been when the nest was found twelve years earlier. This tends to indicate that this pair has a limited foraging range during the breeding season and that this range is guarded from year to year. I have no proof that the pair breeding twelve years ago is the same which occupied the nest this year, but the longevity of birds of prey is well known and the conclusion is not at all improbable.

Sparrow Hawk. *Falco sparverius*. On May 19, 1926, a nest in a cavity of a dead pine was found on Convict Creek. No attempt was made to chop out the hole, so we did not determine whether it contained eggs or young.

Sage Hen. *Centrocercus urophasianus*. On July 7, 1927, we came upon a pair of these birds with four half-grown young on the road below Virginia Lakes. In the other years, no Sage Hens were seen in this section. In 1939, on the public highway near McGee Creek, four birds, flushed in strong flight, sailed out over the meadows. These appeared to be adult birds, for on July 6 birds of the year would not be of full size.

Virginia Rail. *Rallus limicola*. On May 15, 1926, in the marshes near McGee Creek, three nests of this rail were found, containing 7 and 9 fresh eggs, and 10 newly-hatched downy young. Here again the dog was helpful in flushing the females, as all three nests were exceedingly well concealed in grasses. This species was rather abundant, and no doubt many other pairs nested in the vicinity.

Wilson Snipe. *Capella delicata*. In the McGee Creek marsh this species was uncommon, but one nest found by Howard on May 15, 1926, contained the remains of eggshells, the young having left. Although this was the only nest found, eggs were undoubtedly present, for males were seen in courting flight.

Spotted Sandpiper. *Actitis macularia*. On July 5, 1927, at an elevation of 9000 feet, two pairs were quite concerned at our presence along the gravel bank of Virginia Creek. Search revealed two nests, each containing four heavily-incubated eggs. The four birds were excitable during the time of our search. No sandpipers were seen anywhere in the territory covered in other years.

Wilson Phalarope. *Steganopus tricolor*. Immediately adjacent to the rail nest with young we watched several pairs of phalaropes occupied in breeding activities. Two nests were found, both in the process of construction, as was evident by the actions of the birds. The birds were little concerned by our presence and we could approach within a few yards of them.

Long-eared Owl. *Asio wilsonianus*. On May 22, 1927, two nests of this bird were found in the willows along Convict Creek, one containing half-grown young and the other newly-hatched young. Both pairs chose old magpie nests situated in willows about twelve feet above the ground. A perfect specimen of pocket mouse (*Perognathus parvus olivaceus*) was found in the nest containing small young.

Short-eared Owl. *Asio flammeus*. On May 19, 1927, Howard, with the aid of his dog, located a nest of this species in the marsh grass in the meadow near McGee Creek. It held six fresh eggs, the nest being placed on the ground with no concealment; it was in the open sunlight exposed to the heat of midday.

Calliope Hummingbird. *Stellula calliope*. My records show this species to be well distributed throughout the country we traveled. On May 22, 1926, a nest was found in the process of construction at an elevation of about 7000 feet in an aspen thicket. On July 7, 1927, several nests were found containing young ranging from small ones to those nearly ready to leave the nest. No nests were more than ten feet from the ground, the average being about six feet. In the five years, fourteen nests were found, all on parallel, dead aspen twigs with the exception of two on dead twigs of pines. Also, all nests had a protecting branch a few inches directly overhead, presumably as a shelter from summer showers and heat. These birds were abundant around the scrub willows of the high meadows near Virginia Creek in July of 1939 when they were observed feeding extensively from the drillings of sapsuckers.

Red-shafted Flicker. *Colaptes cafer collaris*. At Convict Lake on May 21, 1927, a nest was found containing seven half-incubated eggs. This was the only nest we found, but calls were heard nearly every day.

Sierra Red-breasted Sapsucker. *Sphyrapicus varius daggetti*. On Mammoth Creek on July 16, 1938, young in a nest in a cavity in a live aspen could be heard "whistling" for food, and both parents were kept busy carrying food.

Williamson Sapsucker. *Sphyrapicus thyroideus*. On July 8, 1930, within one hundred yards of our camp near Virginia Lakes at 9000 feet, a nest with young was found in a dead lodgepole pine



Fig. 48. Nest and eggs of Western Wood Pewee; June 4, 1939, Virginia Creek, Mono County, California.

about twenty feet from the ground. Because the parents continually carried food to the cavity, no attempt was made to excavate the nesthole or to disturb the brood in any way.

Cabanis Woodpecker. *Dryobates villosus hyloscopus*. This bird was met with wherever a good stand of pine timber was available. At a nest near Virginia Lakes in a dead pine stub, on July 3, 1939, the parents were feeding noisy young.

Northern White-headed Woodpecker. *Dryobates albolarvatus albolarvatus*. This species was well represented at Virginia Lakes in 1939. Several nests were found within a mile of camp, but on July 4 all contained young of various ages.

Wright Flycatcher. *Empidonax wrightii*. Many nests near water, either in lodgepole pine or aspen, were found, all within eight feet of the ground. On Virginia Creek, at 10,000 feet, a nest containing four advanced eggs was found on July 5, 1930, and one ready for eggs on July 5, 1927.

Western Wood Pewee. *Myiochanes richardsonii richardsonii*. The first week of July at 9000 to 10,000 feet seemed to be the height of the nesting season for this bird. Two dozen or more nests were found in the five seasons, all on dead branches of lodgepole pine or aspen about twelve feet from the ground and close to running or standing water. No nests contained more than three eggs or young (some with two) except one with four fresh eggs (fig. 48) found July 4, 1939, near Virginia Creek.

Violet-green Swallow. *Tachycineta thalassina lepida*. These birds were breeding around Virginia Lakes, but seemed to prefer the holes near the tops of the tallest and rottenest old pine stubs in the vicinity. Consequently, no nests were examined to determine seasonal breeding activity.

Barn Swallow. *Hirundo erythrogaster*. One solitary pair was building a nest on May 22, 1926, in a colony of Cliff Swallows. The nest was barely started on this date.

Cliff Swallow. *Petrochelidon albifrons albifrons*. Incomplete sets of eggs only were noted in a large colony nesting under a bridge on May 22, 1926, at about 6000 feet on Convict Creek.

American Magpie. *Pica pica hudsonia*. This bird nested in the willows at about 6000 feet near Convict Creek and McGee Creek. Two nests were found on May 19, 1926, one containing nine advanced eggs and the other seven half-grown young. A nest of Long-eared Owl was situated some fifty yards from the nest containing eggs, occupying probably the previous year's nest of this pair of magpies.

Clark Nutcracker. *Nucifraga columbiana*. These birds were seen in family flocks. Several would perch near the top of a pine, and the youngsters of the year would commence a clamor for food. If no food was in the offing, the parents would fly to another tree where the performance started anew.

Near Virginia Creek on July 4, 1939, I tapped a dead pine stub and was surprised to see several nearly fledged young chickadees "explode" in my face and fly uncertainly down a ravine. Immediately, two nutcrackers swooped down, concentrating their attack on one individual. One nutcracker seized the fledgling, whereupon it flew to a pine and proceeded to pick off feathers from the tail and wings of the chickadee before tearing it to bits and devouring it.

Short-tailed Mountain Chickadee. *Penthestes gambeli abbreviatus*. In the Virginia Creek area on July 4, 1939, a dozen or more nests were found, all containing young nearly ready to leave. Apparently all the chickadees at a given elevation begin egg laying within a day or so, for the many cavities inspected near Virginia Lakes held young of practically the same size.

Western House Wren. *Troglodytes aedon parkmanii*. Five nests were found on July 7, 1927, all within a half-mile radius in an aspen thicket at 8500 feet along Virginia Creek. Two nests contained five and six eggs, one nest held two eggs, the fourth was incomplete and nearly ready for eggs, while the fifth held four newly-hatched young. At no other place did we observe House Wrens as commonly as here, where the five pairs formed a regular colony.

Sage Thrasher. *Oreoscoptes montanus*. On May 19, 1926, Howard found a nest about two feet off the ground in *Artemisia tridentata* near Whitmore's Tubs. It contained five nearly-hatched eggs. This was the only nest found.

Western Robin. *Turdus migratorius propinquus*. From May 14 to 23, 1926, many nests, all in aspen trees, were found around the 6000-foot mark near Convict Creek, ranging from nests being constructed to ones with half-grown young.

Sierra Hermit Thrush. *Hylocichla guttata sequoiensis*. On July 5, 1927, near Virginia Lakes, Howard found a nest containing four heavily-incubated eggs, and on the same day I saw young flying about and being fed by the parents. In 1930, on July 7, I found a nest with two fresh eggs, an incomplete set with the female still laying. Young were flying about camp at around 9000 feet elevation on July 6, while the incomplete set was found the next day at about 8000 feet in aspens.

Mountain Bluebird. *Sialia currucoides*. One nest, found by Howard on July 6, 1927, contained five fresh eggs. Another nest, found by Sheffler on July 7, 1930, contained four young, three-fourths grown. Both sites were approximately at 9000 feet elevation near Virginia Lakes. The third site was different, being in a niche in the side of a cliff at approximately 12,000 feet, and some miles from the nearest timber. The female was seen with the aid of field glasses and was taken to be a Rosy Finch leaving a nesting cranny. The nest held four newly-hatched young on July 8, 1927.

On July 3, 1939, near Virginia Creek, a cavity was chopped out and a set of five fresh eggs collected. While the female was starting to incubate these eggs, the male was occupied feeding nearly fully fledged and independent young flying about the nest stub.

Western Ruby-crowned Kinglet. *Corthylio calendula cineraceus*. Around Virginia Lakes, the breeding range of the Ruby-crowned Kinglet is limited to lodgepole pine stands, above 8500 feet elevation. Over the five seasons of search for nests, only three were found. The first was some sixty feet up in a lodgepole pine, well concealed in the needles. This nest, on July 7, 1927, contained only one fresh egg although the female was flushed from the nest in midday. A second nest was found the next day, containing six heavily-incubated eggs; it was placed not more than twenty feet from the ground. The third nest found on July 6, 1930, was about forty feet up in a lodgepole pine and contained seven heavily-incubated eggs (fig. 49).

Each was discovered by patiently watching and following females at feeding time early in the morning or late in the evening. At each location, the male kept a vigilant guard against intruding birds of other species, making furious darts at casual passing robins, warblers, and the like. By locating a singing male, one could assume that a nest was near, but to find it was another matter.

All three nests were made of lichens and pieces of bark, tied together with cobwebs. The linings were chiefly of feathers. The persistence of incubating females in remaining on the nest is quite remarkable for such a shy nester. In our experience, the females left the nest reluctantly, one remaining until I was a foot or so from the nest. None of the three females flew farther away from their nests than twenty feet when inspection was going on.



Fig. 49. Nest and eggs of Western Ruby-crowned Kinglet;
July 6, 1930, Virginia Lakes.

The actual climbing to two of the three nests was done by the use of ropes. The third and last nest found was simpler to reach, but the former two were reached only after a rope was tied to the main trunk of the tree above the nest location and in a similar way to an adjacent tree, necessitating going out on the rope to the nests, much in the same manner as one might hang to a clothesline forty to sixty feet above ground.

California Yellow Warbler. *Dendroica aestiva brewsteri*. Along the aspen- and willow-bordered sides of Mammoth Creek on July 17, 1938, this warbler was a common nester, several nests being found containing fresh eggs on this date.

Audubon Warbler. *Dendroica auduboni auduboni*. In the Virginia Lakes area this bird was well distributed. A lodgepole pine a few yards from camp was a nesting site for a pair which had nearly full-grown young on July 4, 1939.

Tolmie Warbler. *Oporornis tolmiei*. This warbler was met with rarely, no doubt because of its retiring habits. On July 16, 1938, in the aspen area along Mammoth Creek, two nests were found, each containing four fresh eggs. The nests were well concealed in weeds and were just a few inches from the ground. None was seen at higher elevations around Virginia Lakes.

Golden Pileolated Warbler. *Wilsonia pusilla chryseola*. On July 7, 1927, we found several nests close to creek beds and in thick foliage in aspens along Virginia Creek. Nests were found ranging in contents from one with one fresh egg to full sets and newly-hatched young, and young were seen flying about. The average elevation was 8500 feet.

A nest found here on July 3, 1939, contained three warbler eggs and two eggs of the Nevada Cowbird. Judging from the markings of the two cowbird eggs (fig. 50), I believe them to be from the same individual female. This nest was the only one seen in 1939 whereas in previous years they were well distributed. This fact I attribute to extensive, and in my opinion, excessive overgrazing by sheep throughout the area in 1939, which destroyed nest cover and food supply.

Nevada Red-wing. *Agelaius phoeniceus nevadensis*. Red-wings were nesting plentifully close to the Wilson Phalaropes near Whitmore's Tubs. On May 19, 1926, several nests containing fresh eggs were found a few inches above the wet marsh and securely fastened to upright grasses.

Brewer Blackbird. *Euphagus cyanocephalus*. Two nests, placed on the ground, each contained five fresh eggs, one being at the foot of an aspen in the grass near the shore of Mono Lake and the other in a few overhanging weeds at the foot of a clump of meadow grass on a bank of a meadow stream near June Lake. Both were found in May, 1926, at about the 7000-foot mark.

Nevada Cowbird. *Molothrus ater artemisiae*. I have not seen a single cowbird anywhere in the high country on any of the trips and the only instance of its presence was the discovery of the Pileolated Warbler nest containing the two cowbird eggs previously mentioned.

Cassin Purple Finch. *Carpodacus cassinii*. On July 7, 1930, near Virginia Lakes, Sheffler found a nest about fifty feet up in a lodgepole pine. The nest contained five heavily-incubated eggs (fig. 51), and I found one the next day with two fresh eggs about eight feet up in an aspen. In July, 1939,



Fig. 50. Nest of Golden Pileolated Warbler containing two eggs of Nevada Cowbird; July 3, 1939, Virginia Creek.

several nests in lodgepole pines near camp at Virginia Lakes contained young about half-grown, except for one that was being built; no eggs were found.

Sierra Nevada Rosy Finch. *Leucosticte tephrocotis dawsoni*. The locating of a nest of this bird was one of the main incentives for our field work. The canyon surrounding Virginia Lakes in which we were camped was walled on three sides by precipitous cliffs, well above 12,000 feet. Observations had disclosed that daily at about four o'clock numbers of these birds would descend from the cliffs to feed in the canyon at about 10,000 feet. On July 8, 1927, Howard and I made our way to the summit of the range in search for a nest. Our search was not without reward, as is often the case when hunting leucosticte nests, for the dog flushed a female from a rock slide. She acted differently than others which were flying about, and after a careful watch with binoculars, I saw her disappear under a rock in a sloping moraine to the westward. She was again flushed, the exact spot noted, and the nest was disclosed some sixteen inches under a loose slab of granite. The nest contained four eggs. The female was very uneasy while we set up our camera and in a few minutes became so anxious to return to the nest that she approached close to us. I judge that the nest site was at an altitude of about 11,500 feet, and since there was much snow there then, she stayed on the nest practically all of the time. This individual was the only female leucosticte observed on this trip. In the evening during the feeding flights to the bottom of the canyon, several specimens were collected. All proved to be breeding males, with crops filled with seeds and small insects including a small water bug from along the creek. This food was mostly taken from snowdrifts where the frozen insects covered the surface. Since no females were detected at this evening feed, we concluded that they were all on nests on the high crags, and that because of the cold atmosphere there and the long flight to the feeding grounds, the males were coming down to the creek-bed feeding grounds and carrying food to the nests on the ridges. No young birds were seen flying on this date.

Northern Pine Siskin. *Spinus pinus pinus*. On July 6, 1927, a nest was found some forty feet up in a pine near Virginia Lakes. It contained young ready to leave. This was the only nest of this species noted in the five seasons; it was found at about 9000 feet elevation.



Fig. 51. Nest and eggs of Cassin Purple Finch; July 7, 1930, Virginia Lakes.

Green-tailed Towhee. *Oberholseria chlorura*. One nest, ready for eggs, was found on May 22, 1926, in a sage bush two feet from the ground, about 6000 feet elevation, along Convict Creek. On June 17, 1938, on Mammoth Creek, a nest was found on the ground by a fallen log. It contained two eggs which hatched the next day.

Nevada Savannah Sparrow. *Passerculus sandwichensis nevadensis*. Howard took a set of eggs from a marshy place at about 6000 feet elevation near Convict Creek, and I found a nest containing four eggs and another with three fresh eggs at the same time. The birds were quite common on May 19, 1926, in this marsh, having nests on the ground in natural depressions well concealed by grasses.

Western Vesper Sparrow. *Poocetes gramineus confinis*. On July 8, 1930, a nest was found containing three eggs with incubation commenced. The nest was made of sage twigs and bark, placed at the foot of and under the protection of a scrubby sage bush growing close to the ground. The altitude at this point was about 8000 feet, and the nest location was on a sloping hillside of sagebrush about twelve miles northwest of Mono Lake. These birds were quite abundant when sought out, but the cold penetrating winds from the higher snow capped peaks caused them to seek shelter in the sage and unless one observed carefully, they could easily be passed by.

Thurber Junco. *Junco oreganus thurberi*. On July 6, 1930, Sheffler found a nest containing four young nearly ready to leave at about 9000 feet near Virginia Lakes. The next day I located another in the lower country in the aspen area containing four nearly fresh eggs. Juncos are common breeders in this country throughout the summer.

Western Chipping Sparrow. *Spizella passerina arizonae*. This is a common nester in the area, and while no eggs were collected, many nests were found, particularly in the Virginia Lakes area at around 9000 feet. On July 3, 1939, a nest was found near here placed on a low horizontal branch of a lodgepole pine; it contained two half-grown young.

Brewer Sparrow. *Spizella breweri*. One nest of this bird was found in a small *Artemisia tridentata* bordering the aspen thickets near Convict Creek at an elevation of about 6000 feet. It contained three eggs that were ready to hatch on May 17, 1926. Many individuals were seen in the higher sage belt above 8000 feet but no more nests were found.

White-crowned Sparrow. *Zonotrichia leucophrys leucophrys*. On July 9, 1927, a nest with four fresh eggs was found near Virginia Lakes. The nest was of typical zonotrichia make and was placed on a topped tree which had started sucker shoots about the cut. On July 6, 1930, a nest in the meadow grass a few hundred yards away also contained four fresh eggs (fig. 52). On this same date, Sheffler found young flying about and being fed by the parents. The species is a very common nester in the high wet meadowlands.



Fig. 52. Nest and eggs of White-crowned Sparrow; July 6, 1930, Virginia Lakes.

Mono Fox Sparrow. *Passerella iliaca monoensis*. Our observations showed this bird to be very seclusive in its breeding habits, inhabiting the thickly-covered creek beds and wet meadowland. On July 9, 1927, I stumbled across a well-concealed nest containing three fresh eggs. The female flushed without sound from my feet and only the dark movement of the "sneak" was noted. The nest was placed at the base of a small fallen aspen log in the center of a growth of wild delphinium. On July 6 of the same year adults were observed feeding young flying about. The nesting elevation was about 8500 feet along Virginia Creek.

A peculiar nest site was found on Mammoth Creek in June, 1938, the nest being about twelve feet from the ground behind a piece of bark of a leaning dead pine stub. It contained one egg nearly ready to hatch.

Lincoln Sparrow. *Melospiza lincolnii*. One nest was found in a marshy patch of grass at 10,000 feet close to timberline near Virginia Lakes. On July 6, 1930, the nest held four newly hatched young.

There seems to be a distinct "vacant zone" for song sparrows in Mono County. *M. m. fisherella* ranges to about 6000 or 6500 feet elevation, while *M. lincolnii* ranges from the 9000- to the 10,500-foot mark. According to my observations, there are no nesting song sparrows here between these elevations.

Modoc Song Sparrow. *Melospiza melodia fisherella*. At 6000 feet along Convict Creek several nests were found, ranging from nests with sets of eggs to those with young ready to fly on May 22, 1926. No song sparrows were found along the streams upward from this elevation, all apparently concentrating in favorable feeding and nesting grounds in the meadows of this lower zone.

Alhambra, California, August 31, 1939.