

**Lieutenant Bendire's Thrasher**

*John Farrand, Jr.*

*Bendire's Thrasher. Photographer/D.&M. Zimmerman/VIREO (z01/6/050).*

**K**ARL EMIL BENDER, BORN IN THE Duchy of Hesse-Darmstadt in 1836, was evidently a high-spirited youth. When he was 17 years old, he managed to get himself kicked out of a theological seminary. Rather than face an uncertain professional future at home, young Bender promptly did what many Germans were doing in the 1850s. He emigrated to the United States.

Within weeks after Bender's arrival in New York City in 1853, he enlisted in the United States Army and Americanized his name to Charles Bendire, dropping the "Emil." For the next several years he served with distinction at various posts in the American Southwest, and then saw action in Virginia during the Civil War. By the time General Robert E. Lee surrendered at Appomattox Court House in April of 1865, Bendire had attained the rank of First Lieutenant in the First Cavalry.

Although Bendire's interest in birds was kindled during these years before and during the Civil War, it was only in the late 1860s and early 1870s that he became a serious and systematic collector of birds' eggs—and of birds when they were needed to confirm the identification of a set of eggs. But always a

dedicated officer, he was known to pass up valuable specimens rather than delay the troops under his command.

In June of 1871, Bendire found himself stationed at Camp Lowell, a small outpost on a rise near the Santa Cruz River at Tucson in the Arizona Territory. A collection of tents and adobe

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buildings long since swallowed up by downtown Tucson, Camp Lowell was the ideal place for an ornithologist. Creosote flats spread away in all directions. Cholla, saguaros, ocotillo, and palo verde clothed the stony lower slopes of the Tucson Mountains to the west and the Santa Catalinas to the north and east. Far off to the south, over the hot flat roofs of Tucson, one could see the Santa Rita Mountains.

This beautiful landscape was full of birds.

This beautiful landscape was also largely controlled by the Chiricahua Apaches. Underfunded and understaffed, Camp Lowell was a vital supply depot during the protracted "Apache War." Bendire commanded units that escorted civilians and wagon trains along the dangerous trails between forts and led mounted columns in search of Apache encampments. He was an experienced Indian fighter of whom it was later said: "The Indians learned to fear, and at the same time, to respect him, for he was relentless in their pursuit when they were obviously in the wrong." Whether the Chiricahuas ever thought of themselves as "obviously in the wrong" is not recorded.

Despite of the heavy demands of his military duties, Lieutenant Bendire steadily gathered a collection of eggs and bird skins. On July 28, 1872, while exploring the desert near Camp Lowell, he collected a set of eggs of a thrasher, an unfamiliar bird with a short bill. Because he didn't recognize the bird, he collected it. The thrasher turned out to be a female. He compared the bird with specimens of the Crissal

Thrasher and with the local race of the Curve-billed, recognized as distinct from the birds in Texas that very year by Robert Ridgway and named by Elliott Coues. It wasn't a Crissal and it wasn't a Curve-billed, so Bendire sent the specimen to Elliott Coues.

Coues, who had served in the Army Medical Corps in the Southwest during the 1860s, knew the birds of the Arizona Territory better than anyone else. After puzzling over the bird himself, Coues passed it along to Ridgway. Ridgway replied that it must be the female of *Harporhynchus curvirostris* var. *palmeri*, the local race of the Curve-billed, likewise taken at Tucson.

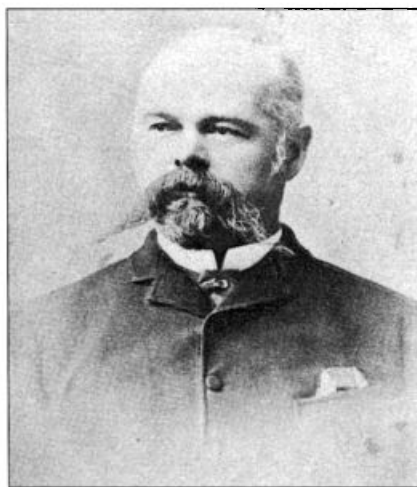
With some misgivings, Coues relayed Ridgway's opinion to Bendire. Bendire was quick to reply. This was not the female Curve-billed. The habits and eggs of the new bird were different.

While the Curve-billed usually nested in a dense cactus, the new bird often chose a catclaw or mesquite, and the nest itself was more delicate and built of finer materials. The eggs were pale greenish white, not blue, and were more coarsely speckled.

To prove his point, Bendire collected a male of the strange thrasher on November 9, 1872, and sent this bird, along with specimens of both sexes of *palmeri*, to Coues. Coues was convinced, and in the issue of *The American Naturalist* for June, 1873, he described the bird as a new species, *Harporhynchus Bendirei*, "Bendire's Mocking-thrush."

Charles Bendire's stay at Camp Lowell produced more than just the thrasher. Among other things, he discovered the Rufous-winged Sparrow, collected the second specimen of the Spotted Owl and the fourth specimen of the Elf Owl (both firsts for Arizona), and took the first eggs and nests of the Crissal Thrasher and Lucy's Warbler. He also established—with specimens—the first United States records of the Gray Hawk, Inca Dove, Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl, Tropical Kingbird, and Painted Redstart. In January of 1873, more than a year and a half after he arrived at Camp Lowell and just a few months before its garrison moved six miles northeast to what was to become the larger and grander Fort Lowell, Bendire was transferred to St. Louis.

After that he was stationed at Camp Harney in Oregon, at Fort Walla Walla in Washington Territory, and at Fort



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Klamath in Oregon, where he discovered the Pacific Water Shrew (*Sorex bendirii*) and restored his middle initial "E.," dropped 30 years before. There followed a year's leave of absence in Washington, D.C., and then he went to Fort Custer in the Montana Territory, from which he retired with the rank of Captain in the spring of 1886. Four years after his retirement, the U.S. Army conferred upon him the brevet of Major.

During his leave of absence in 1883 and 1884, Bendire had been made Honorary Curator of the Department of Oology at the United States National Museum. He quickly organized the neglected egg collection, donating his own specimens, which by now numbered more than 8,000. After his retirement, he moved permanently to Washington and began writing papers and books rather than letters. Having had the thrasher, three subspecies of birds, a shrew, a fish, and three fossil trees named after him, he himself described and named Attwater's Prairie-Chicken. He began writing his *Life Histories of North American Birds*, the forerunner of Bent's "Life Histories" and compared by his contemporaries with the works of Wilson, Audubon, and Nuttall. Along with Coues, William Brewster, and others, he was a founder of the American Ornithologists' Union.

When he died in 1897 at the age of 60, Major Charles E. Bendire was buried with full military honors at Arlington National Cemetery. Coues, who would join him at Arlington

within two years, claimed credit for having "discovered" Bendire, and called him a "bumptious and captious German soldier." But others spoke of his great contribution to American ornithology and of his vast knowledge of western birds. James Cushing Merrill, writing in *The Auk*, said: "Simple in habits, unselfish, and always ready to help others, Major Bendire is sincerely mourned, not only by members of this union, but by all those to whom he was known only by correspondence or by his secure title to scientific remembrance, his 'Life Histories of North American Birds.'" Frank Hall Knowlton wrote: "To those fortunate enough to know him intimately, he was a genial companion, full of reminiscences and anecdotes of his long life on the frontier, of its hardships and dangers, and its scientific successes."

Bendire's greatest scientific success on the frontier was probably the thrasher. Looking back, the confusion it caused is understandable. When Coues described it, the region around Tucson had been reasonably well studied, and no new thrasher had been discovered since 1858, when the Crissal Thrasher was obtained at Fort Thorn in what is now New Mexico. Just one species, the Cozumel Thrasher, found only on Cozumel Island off the coast of the Yucatan Peninsula, now remained unknown. One author, replying to Coues' description and apparently following some theory other than Darwin's, went so far as to declare that Bendire's Thrasher was not a good species because, in his words, "the maximum number of species in the genus *Harporhynchus* was undoubtedly reached some time ago." Curve-billed and Bendire's thrashers are indeed very similar. Even today, experienced birders are sometimes hard put to decide which species they are seeing. Bendire's Thrasher (now *Toxostoma bendirei*) is usually outnumbered by the Curve-billed and is often shy. It has always been the most difficult of the thrashers.

The next time you are studying a bird you think might be a Bendire's Thrasher, binoculars in one hand and Kenn Kaufman's new field guide in the other, take comfort from the fact that this bird has been a problem for almost 120 years. ■

—506 East 82nd Street  
New York, NY 10028