

— THE —

ORNITHOLOGISTS' * AND * OOLOGISTS'

SEMI-ANNUAL.

VOL. 2.

JANUARY, 1890.

NO. 1.

FLOATING FEATHERS FROM THE WEST.

BY CHAS. A. KEELER, BERKELEY, CAL.

To the eastern observer, one of the most striking features of western bird life is the resemblance existing between the species found here and those in the east. We have our Western Robin, two Thrushes, Western Golden-crowned Kinglet, California Song Sparrow, Audubon's Warbler, Western Meadowlark and a host of other birds more or less closely connected with corresponding eastern species. It is the purpose of the present article, however, to briefly consider a few birds found in California which have no eastern counterparts.

A few days since, I accosted a gunner returning home from a day's hunt, to know what he had shot. He told me the only bird he had killed was a kind of a "Yellow Hammer." On asking to examine it, he produced a Road Runner from one of his coat pockets. It had been too badly damaged to stuff; but I purchased it of him for the sake of the skeleton. This is the third time I have recorded this species near Berkeley, as the bird is quite rare as far north as this.

Although a cuckoo in general form and in habits, this species is strikingly different from the rest of the genus. Long and slender in form, with lengthened tail and legs, the Road Runner is peculiarly adapted for rapid and long-sustained running, and can easily outstrip a horse. Its actions are rather grotesque as it runs and hops, with its iridescent tail now elevated and now lowered; but it is necessary to look quickly or the bird will escape you in



THE GOLDEN EAGLE AND EYRIE.

Pages 17 and 21.

the thick chaparral in which it is generally found.

Perhaps there is no bird more interesting in this vicinity than the little California Bush Tit. I know of no species that approaches nearer to the size of the Hummingbird than the "Tom Tit," as the bird is generally called about here. Plain and unpretending as is its dress, its nest is a perfect marvel of bird architecture, and surprisingly large in proportion to the size of the bird. It is generally built in one of the clusters of lichens which festoon the live oaks, and is frequently over a foot in length. It is usually gourd-shaped, with a narrow neck, and greatly expanded within. The only opening is a small hole in the top, barely large enough to insert the finger. The nest is composed of bits of moss, lichens and similar material, and lined with soft feathers. I know of no bird that builds a more perfect or artistic nest, and think even the Baltimore Oriole must yield the palm to this pygmy of an architect.

The species, even in the breeding season, is generally gregarious, and small bands of from eight to twenty are usually seen in company. The parent birds are very solicitous when any intruder approaches their nest, and their anxiety often betrays the proximity of their home.

In voice and plumage, no bird could be more unpretending. Its note consists of a fine "zip-zip," which is uttered almost constantly, and its dress is of the plainest quaker drab. The back is of a dark ashy-grey color, with the head, wings and tail darker and inclining to brownish. The breast is dirty white, becoming darker on the flanks and belly. With all its unpretending plumage, it is still a merry little fellow, and makes up for its want of dress by the sprightliness of its actions.

Another very interesting little bird, which is characteristic of the California fauna, is the Wren Tit (*Chamaea fasciata*) or "Ground Wren" as it is frequently called. For some time after coming to California, I frequently heard a song that I was unable to place. It might be represented by the syllables "tit-tit-tit-tr-r-r-r-r," the "rs" being trilled. Frequently two birds would be heard singing at the same time, one uttering a note during the pause in the other's song, and both chiming in on the final trill. The effect of this was beautiful, as it was heard coming from the dry hillsides in a canon, and I was determined to find the musician.

At last a plain, brown bird was seen skulking among the chaparral, close to my feet, and soon he commenced his song. It was a Wren Tit.

This bird has little more to boast of in the way of fine feathers than the Bush Tit, for its back is a dull brown, becoming rather ashy on the head and decidedly ashy on the cheeks, and its breast a pale drab with a slight brownish tinge which becomes decidedly marked on the flanks. The tail is long and generally held erect or at a right angle to the body, after the fashion of the Wrens, while the plumage is very loose, as is the case with many of the Wrens. The bird is seldom seen at a great height from the ground, and is very tame, permitting a close approach; but its habit of skulking among the dense underbrush makes it rather difficult to detect.

There is probably no bird so abundant the year round in this vicinity as the California Brown Towhee (*Pipilo fuscus crissalis*). In plumage and habits it is very dissimilar to the other species of its genus, and reminds one of the Catbird more than a Towhee. Unlike most of the Towhees, it does not frequent dense underbrush and thickets; but comes into the towns and builds among the bushes and trees in the gardens.

Its nest is usually a bulky affair, composed of fine twigs, rootlets and straws; lined with horse-hair. The eggs are of a very pale blue color, spotted, scrawled and dotted with dark-brown and black, the markings generally forming more or less of a ring around the larger end. Many of the eggs also display faint shell markings of a lilac or purplish hue. This species has little more to boast of in plumage than the two preceding species. Its song is, at best, a rather poor attempt at music, but the bird is nevertheless attractive for its interesting ways and domestic habits.

I fear that some of my eastern readers will begin to imagine that California is devoid of bright plumaged birds, as those I have described as distinctly Californian are all plain in color. Still we have our Orioles, our Tanager, our Violet-green Swallow and our Bluebird, beside many others which can rival the gayest colors of the east. In song, too, our birds can hold their own with all competitors. The House Finch bubbles over with ecstatic notes from our house-tops, the Vireo warbles in the maples, the Meadow Lark carols in the fields, and when evening comes, the Russet-backed Thrush sings a hymn to the setting sun, the purest, sweetest and serenest of all bird music.