

YOSEMITE NATURE NOTES



The Diary of a Robin Family

CHILDREN'S NUMBER

Vol. XVI

October 1937

No. 10

Yosemite Nature Notes

THE PUBLICATION OF
THE YOSEMITE NATURALIST DEPARTMENT
AND THE YOSEMITE NATURAL HISTORY ASSOCIATION
Published Monthly

Volume XVI

October 1937

Number 10

The Diary of a Robin Family

By Elizabeth H. Godfrey

Over the week-end of April 24 and 25, a mother Robin commenced building her nest on the north-west drafting room window ledge of the Park Service Administration Building, facing the Girls' Club,— a wise bird keeping company with the engineers.

On Monday, April 26, when the nest was discovered by Francis Edward, a CCC enrollee assigned to the drafting room, construction was well underway. Engineering Draftsman E. C. Smith, realizing the marvelous opportunity for observing the nesting activities from start to finish, asked Francis to keep a diary, or daily progress report. This diary, which was continued by the writer when Francis was transferred to the Strawberry Canyon CCC camp at Berkeley, California on May 13 reveals some interesting facts about Robins, and is quoted verbatim.

Monday, April 26. - Nest is well

underway. All day mother Robin works ceaselessly, making round trips to the meadow grass lawn at the north end of the building for beak loads of snow-faded grass. In arranging it in the nest, she uses the touch system; viz., she doesn't seem to be looking at what she is doing. This afternoon, she's applying plaster, or mud . . . Hasn't returned for sometime now, and is apparently giving the mud a chance to dry out. She's very tame, and totally indifferent to "snoopers."

April 27. - She hasn't appeared all morning. Now, almost noon, she's back, continuing her plastering. The nest is gaining in size. As there is plenty of precipitation, she has only to drop to the ground below the window for loads of mud. Hence, her trips are very rapid. She just made a forced landing with a heavy load of straw and mud. On the second attempt, she reached the sill, dropped her build-

ing material into the nest, and is pushing it in place apparently with her breast, but possibly employing her feet also. From the size of her burdens, she might logically be in for a stiff neck. Occasionally she stops to eat raisins. We are keeping a constant supply of them strewn along the window ledge. Here's a Blue-fronted Jay, who has invited himself in for raisins. But no. He's not welcome. Our Robin is chasing him off in a most inhospitable fashion, and if he has any sense of delicacy, he won't come back.

April 28. - This morning she is lining her nest with grass, which is the finishing touch. The grass is of a finer quality than that used in the outer construction. It is a good-looking nest, about four inches wide by three inches in depth, with smooth, well rounded interior sides, and a clever exterior combination of mud and meadow grass. It has taken her approximately four and one-half Robin-days to complete her project.

E. C. Smith, who has chosen himself to be godfather to the Robin family, is taking up penny contributions from interested friends for a Robin Raisin Fund. In all he collected thirty cents—enough for three boxes of raisins.

April 29. - Our Robin returned to her nest only three times today to make sure that all is well, and to have some raisins.

April 30, May 1, May 2. - No Robin.

May 3. - She's back, and is ignoring the raisins. Spent some time sitting on the nest. Saw her hunting worms in lawn at north end of building.

May 4. - No bird this morning, nor as yet has a male bird shown up. Maybe he's hen-pecked, and doesn't live at home much.

Noon. - Have seen her from time to time hopping around on the lawn below the window. O-ho! The Father Robin and the Mother are both on the ledge eating heartily of raisins. They're a good-looking pair, slim, young, and well-groomed. There he is now on the Oak tree opposite and only several feet from the nest, singing in joyful, clear, sweet notes, as though to express his delight in the nest and in his mate. We're all glad he has appeared on the scene, and have pronounced him all right.

May 5, 6 and 7. - Mother Robin on the nest at intervals. She does a lot of scratching, making long beak-reaches under wings for "something" that is tormenting her. Relaxed, she's a study on the nest, with head, back and tail at a severe, swooping angle.

May 8. - 9:30 A. M. Excitement in the air. There is one blue egg in the nest. This is the tenth day since its completion. Father Robin sings often throughout the day. We raised the window about six inches for future photographic purposes so as to accustom the Robins to having it up. Park Photographer

Ralph Anderson has also partitioned off the nest from the drafting room by placing a curtain about a foot from the window. Observers may look over the top of the curtain, which conceals about half of the lower sash, and down on the nest.

May 9. - Second egg.

May 10. - Third egg.

May 11. - Fourth egg.

It has taken the Mother Robin four days to lay her four eggs. Meanwhile Father Robin has been keeping close to her, bringing her worms in his beak and feeding them to her. For entertainment he sings solos; When observers slip up to the nest too quietly, the Mother Robin flies off startled, but if audible steps announcing their presence are made, she sits tight and still in an alert attitude.

May 12, 13, 14, 15, 16. - Daily incubation. Mother Robin leaves the nest only occasionally for food and exercise, never going far away. Often she perches on the Oak opposite with a wary eye on the nest. When she returns, she snuggles down on the eggs gently with a faint chirp, as though talking to them.

May 17. - Mother Robin is photographed on the nest for the first time by Park Photographer Anderson. She poses as well as a Robin might, tilting her head from one side to the other in praiseworthy nonchalance.

May 18. - Continued incubation.

May 19. - Mother Robin is looking over her eggs wisely this morning, and making a queer chirping sound. She evidently knows that something exciting is about to happen.

Four Little Robins Are Hatched

May 20. - Robin No. 1.

May 21. - Robin No. 2.

May 23. - Robin No. 3.

May 24. - Robin No. 4.

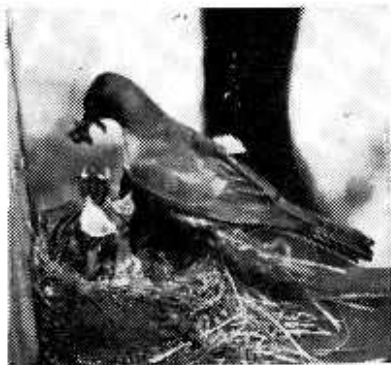
A comparison with the dates when the eggs were laid shows that the incubation period was twelve days. Godfather Smith is receiving congratulations, but doesn't think much of the suggestion that he might pass around some cigars.

The babies are pink, palpitating, featherless, fledglings with only suggestions of down on their bony frames, heads, and wings. Their eyes, of course, are tightly closed. When the parent birds approach the nest with a "tuck-tuck, half cluck" sound, the long, skinny necks of the fledglings fairly spring up out of the nest instantaneously. With mouths wide open, they wait perfectly poised for a ration of worms to be thrust far down their gullets. It is noticed that the baby Robins are fed almost exclusively on pre-masticated, pale green worms about an inch long for the first few days of life.

The parent birds keep the nest scrupulously clean, carrying away the excreta, which is a white, sticky substance, in their beaks, and sometimes devouring it. Neither is there

a particle of egg shell remaining in the nest.

May 25. - Valley bird lovers keep tripping in and out to watch the Robins. The feeding process goes on continuously all day. The parent bird stands on the edge of the nest and thrusts live, wiggling worms far down the throats of the babies. Often after having fed the worms to one hungry mouth, the parent Robin thrusts an empty beak down other empty throats, as a consolation gesture. The older birds are now having some light brown worms.



May 26. - Today the older birds are almost covered with soft, dark grayish down. A few feathers are outcropping on their wings. The father Robin is certainly doing his share in providing worms. We know him instantly, not only by his darker breast, but because there is an unruly feather out of place on his well-groomed back. We hear the young ones chirping for the first time, this afternoon. The oldest Robin is six days old.

May 27. - A few more feathers have appeared, and the nest is beginning to be just a bit crowded. One of the babies is determined to poke its head out from under the mother's breast, as though for a breath of air. The others don't seem to mind being smothered. When the mother is not on the nest, the birds cuddle up snugly together.

May 28. - Babies are very active today. Down is being replaced with gray and white feathers, especially on the wings. Park Photographer Ralph Anderson took some more pictures today.

May 29. - One Robin, undoubtedly No. 1, who is nine days old, has its eyes partly open.

May 30 and 31st - Sunday and a holiday.

June 1. - The fledglings are well covered now with feathers. Robin No. 1 is very restless, and is making a desperate effort to get out of the nest. After a bit, gives up, and slumps back into the nest. It's a picture to see four little Robins asleep with their throats resting on the edge of the nest for a pillow, while the Father sings to them nearby.

June 2. - All the Robin children have opened their eyes. Even No. 4 is well-feathered with only a patch of down on its little head. This sticks up through the feathers.

P. M. - Mr. Scott of the Interior Department Motion Picture Division took some movies of the Ro-

bin family. One of the babies posed with its mouth open, while the others scratched. The nest seems over-flowing with Robins. Godfather Smith deems it advisable to install a small tree limb from the window ledge to the Oak, just in case this very daring Robin No. 1 starts to fly before it should.

June 3. - The limb decided upon yesterday is installed, and the parents Robins are regarding it warily as though to say, "How did this grow over night?" In addition, a wire basket has been placed directly under the nest. It is an old desk basket found over in the warehouse, and still has an appropriate card with "out-going" printed on it.

June 4. - You would never recognize the young Robins as the homely fledglings they were. Their feathers have far more white in them than the mature Robins, their breasts are speckled with orange, black and white. Robins Nos. 1 and 2 have the courage to get out on the window ledge, and flap their wings in eager anticipation. We're glad that mailing basket is there.

P. M. - Flash - FILING BASKET SAVES ROBIN NO. 1 FROM FALLING. Alas! We hold our breath, and watch that fearless, young rascal only two weeks old make a second flight attempt. This time he misses the basket and falls smack on the ground. Hurrah! It's getting up. The parent birds are

near now, and, we hope, giving Robin No. 1 some necessary flying advice. We can't help but admire its pluck and courage anyway.

June 5. - Robin No. 2 wants to take flight, but he hesitates. It's out on the window ledge, flapping its wings. Robins 3 and 4 are much more comfortable in the nest and just fill it. Imagine how they like it when Robin No. 2 crowds back in. Godfather Smith is mighty disgusted, and says as he turns away, "You great big sissy."

June 6. - Sunday.

June 7. - Monday. The nest is empty.

From this diary we find that it takes a Robin four and one-half days to build her nest; the male doesn't help build the nest except to sing his encouragement; that ten days after completion of the nest the first egg is laid; that it takes four days for a Robin to lay her eggs; that the incubation period is twelve days; that Robins commence cheeping at six days' old; that their eyes open on the ninth day; that they take flight when two weeks' old; that female does all the incubating; that he sometimes feeds her on nest and that he helps feed young on the nest.

After the flight of the Robins the father often brought them to the Oak tree opposite the window. At three weeks' old they looked as large as he, with soft, fluffy feathers. He was still feeding them, and would fly from the ledge to

the Oak with raisins. Later he taught them to fly to the ledge and how to eat raisins. After the raisin supply gave out the latter part of June, we decided to stop this supplemental feeding, and bought no more. For several days, two of the young Robins sat for hours in the Oak tree waiting for the raisins.

Now they do not come near.

It was noticed that the Father Robin seemed to have almost total charge of feeding the young after they had taken flight, and the mother bird was seldom seen. As robins often nest twice in a season, it is presumed she was busy with new nesting activities elsewhere.

Bears Vocabulary

By Ranger Lon Garrison

Many old timers have told me that mother bears communicate with their cubs by clicking their teeth. How extensively this is done, I do not know, but it is definitely true of commands to the youngsters to go up trees, and with variations for them to reverse the process. At Glacier Point last summer there was very prominently in evidence a mother bear with three cubs. While feeding near Washburn Turn, she was disturbed by a bigger, ug'y, rusty, old fellow who chased her away from the area. Tagging the three cubs, she came across within 20 feet of me, and then finding that the other bear was pursuing her, she spanked the last cub, to get it to move ahead out of the way, and then very distinctly clicked her teeth twice—"Click, click." It was a clear open sound like it was made in the forward part of the mouth. The cubs climbed up a nearby tree but soon stopped. Another pair of clicks sent

them farther up.

About ten minutes later, the danger apparently being over, she called them back down by another sound that was more like, "Clungk, c'ungk, clungk!" It was a duller,



UNION PACIFIC PHOTO

more muffled syllable from farther back in the throat and sounded like it might be a combination of tooth champing and a grunt. Obedient'y, the three youngsters des-

cended and joined her at the foot of the tree. Suddenly the other bear stuck its head around the corner of a nearby rock.

"Click, cick!" With no hesita-

tion the cubs went back up the tree. Again a wait of about ten minutes, and "Clungk, Clungk, Clungk, Clungk!" The cubs were on their way down again as I left.

Distinctive Behavior of Many Yosemite Birds

HAWKS and **EAGLES** with long strong wings are most often seen in air circling and soaring.

OWLS more often heard than seen as most of them forage at night. Have large eyes, brownish coloration, flight noiseless.

SWIFTS are swiftest fliers which dart high in air about cliff walls capturing insects on wing.

HUMMINGBIRDS are the smallest of birds with iridescent plumage which buzz about flowers extracting nectar and tiny insects with their long needle-shaped bills.



Calliope Hummingbird

KINGFISHERS fly or perch above water to plunge beneath surface to capture small fish in their long bills.

WOODPECKERS with long, strong bills, climb up and down the trunks of trees bracing with their tails and tapping the bark vigorously.

FLYCATCHERS sit erect with drooping, teetering tails, watching alertly for insect prey upon which

they pounce in mid-air, afterwards returning to their perch.

SWALLOWS with long pointed wings, skim through the air in graceful and long sustained flights.



White-throated Swift



Violet-green Swallow

JAYS are good-sized blue birds, with raucous call and bold behavior, inhabiting open fields and wooded areas. Very common about camps.

CHICKADEES and **TITMICE** are small, noisy, active, restless birds feeding largely in foliage or on inner limbs. They have fluffy, grayish plumage and short straight bills, with which they often hammer seeds with woodpecker-like blows while holding them with their feet.

NUTHATCHES are smaller than woodpeckers and have much the same habit of climbing up and

down tree-trunks but with a freer wig-wagging motion, often descending head downward.

Red-breasted
Nuthatch



CREEPERS as the name implies, creep upward on the trunks of trees and the larger limbs, searching for insects in the crevices of the bark.

DIPPERS, (Water Ouzels), of dark slaty gray plumage are seen dipping into rushing streams for food or bobbing up and down on mid-stream rocks.

THRUSHES, with the exception of the **ROBIN** and **BLUEBIRD**, are very plainly dressed and have spotted breasts. They run about



on the ground stopping suddenly in listening attitudes.

KINGLETS, tiny, chubby birds with large eyes, move restlessly about in foliage, ever keeping on the move.

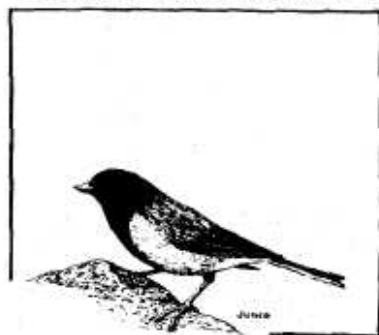
VIREOS are chubby, large-eyed birds, the color of foliage. They are at home in the boughs of trees and sing freely as they glide in and out among the leaves to feed.

WARBLERS are small, tireless, gaily-colored explorers of the twigs of trees and bushes. A few exhibit flycatcher-like habits.

BLACKBIRDS have bright plumage and usually inhabit open fields. The sexes differ in coloration. Winter flocking is the rule.

TANAGERS remarkable for the brilliant plumage of the males, are birds of the coniferous forests during the summer.

SPARROWS and **FINCHES** have stout seed-cracking bills, feed on or near the ground, seldom fly high or far at a time, and are for



the most part fine songsters. **Juncos** and **Grosbeaks** belong in this group.



Digitized by
Yosemite Online Library

<http://www.yosemite.ca.us/library>

Dan Anderson