

Yosemite Nature Notes



Arctic Three-toed Woodpeckers

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Woodpeckers

By Charles W. Michael

For three days mother Willow Woodpecker brought her son to the suet tree. Mother would peck away at the suet as though enjoying a good meal. Young son was close by but not getting much attention. Occasionally mother would snip off a tiny piece of suet and hand it over to young son, who always accepted eagerly. He was quite evidently hungry and yet he would make no effort to help himself to the food that was so abundantly handy. Mother would fly a few feet away, or perhaps hitch up the tree trunk, son would follow. Mother would then drop back to the suet and feed some more, son would drop back and look on hopefully.

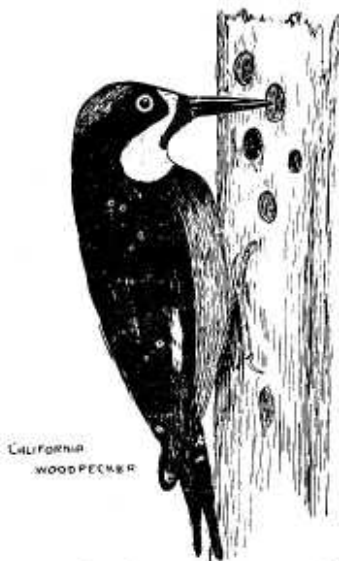
Finally on the fourth day son tried a few pecks at the suet. He liked the idea from the first peck. Soon he was pecking vigorously and successfully, so successfully that he thought that he did not need mother any more. Young Willow was all

puffed up with importance, he thought he owned the suet; he drove his mother away. Mother appeared reluctant to leave, but I am sure she was only pretending; surely she was glad to know that son was at last able to take care of himself. And now that young Willow was able to take care of himself he came alone to the suet tree, and he learned that he did not really own the suet for there were larger woodpeckers and larger birds of other kinds who also liked suet. Little Willow Woodpecker learned to await his turn. He came day after day, but for some reason he no longer appeared with his mother.

Most young birds are garbed rather drably, not so the woodpeckers. Young son was much more showily garbed than either of his parents. His feathers were so clean, his black feathers so glossy black and his white feathers so white. The white dots on the wings were clear

cut and much more conspicuous. The top of young son's head was completely capped with red, while daddy only wore a small patch of red at the back of the crown. There was a most attractive fluffiness about the young woodpeckers which was lacking in the old birds.

Of course there is a reason why parent woodpeckers do not look so neat and clean as their children. To begin with, when preparing to rear a family woodpeckers must drill a nesting cavity, and this is no small job. Some woodpeckers of certain species will use a nest hole for two or even three years, but most pairs



CALIFORNIA
WOODPECKER

insist on having a nice new nest hole for each years brood. The birds of the pair take turns drilling and they carve out a hole large enough to hold a half gallon of woodpeckers. In the case of the California Wood-

pecker the nest hole may be carved out large enough to hold a full gallon of woodpeckers. However, with the peculiar marriage customs of the California Woodpeckers there may be two, or three, or even four husbands to take part in the drilling and so it is easy for all birds. As a matter of fact I have seen male California Woodpeckers trying to shoulder one another aside to get a turn at the work.

The entrance to a woodpecker's nest hole is form fitting, that is to say that the larger bird, the male bird, can just manage to squeeze in and out. Squeezing in and out of a close fitting hole is bound to muss feathers more or less and besides there may be some pitch to soil feathers. And then, after awhile the young come along and both parent birds are kept busy stuffing sticky food into sticky babies. And proud parents are likely to know how it is to have honey or syrup rubbed into the hair. The task of keeping four or five babies satisfied and at the same time keeping the nest clean leaves little time for parent birds to devote to their personal toilet. As the parent woodpeckers daily become more disheveled in appearance the young grow more handsome. Again I say that it seems strange to me that young woodpeckers are more handsome when they leave the nest than they ever are again. Most birds that I know about do not reach the full glory of plumage until the second

or third year.

Even when the young do leave the nest the worries of the parent woodpeckers are not over, for the young must be taught to take care of themselves—they must be taught how to find food and how to eat when they find food. Of course there are many other things that the young must learn, but to find food is the most important.

The suet tree with plenty of food appealed to the woodpeckers. Woodpeckers of three different species came here and brought their young, considering it a good place to teach them to help themselves. White-headed, Willow and Hairy Woodpeckers all had the same system of teaching. Parent Woodpecker would coax the young bird to the suet, snip off a little piece and hand it over. Then the hunger squeals of the youngster would be ignored while the parent went on feeding. Time and again this procedure would be repeated and after three, or four, or five days the young bird would discover that he could peck off food for himself. It only took three days for the young male Willow to learn his lesson, then he was quite independent and came to the suet tree alone. On the other hand, after a week the young Hairy Woodpeckers were still following their mother about. In the Hairy Woodpecker family that came to the suet tree there was a mother and two female children; nothing was seen of daddy

or a male child. Perhaps daddy Hairy had taken his sons and had wandered away on different forage lanes. With the White-headed Woodpeckers it was about the same story, except that mother brought a lone female child and father Whitehead brought a male child.



About the time that we were beginning to feel sure that it was father Whitehead's job to take care of the sons in the family we found him bringing two young ladies to the suet tree. I think that the young males had learned their lesson and that mother had turned the females over to father.

While it has been demonstrated to me on numerous occasions that young woodpeckers are taught to forage there is no evidence among all my observations to indicate that young woodpeckers are taught to drill their nesting and sleeping holes. And although not taught to drill their rest holes it is yet the

marvelous fact that each species of woodpecker drills a nest hole after the manner of its kind. This being the case woodpeckers may be known by the holes that they drill. For instance, the Pileated Woodpeckers wear a crest and they are proud of the pompadour sweep to their head dress and in order not to muss their crests going in and out of the hole they cut a niche at the top of the nest hole, which niche gives the



Pileated Woodpecker's entrance an entirely different shape from the nest hole of any other woodpecker of the district. The Red-shafted Flicker has broad shoulders and the entrance to his nest hole is wider than high. The Hairy Woodpecker cuts a door-step at the bottom of the entrance. The door-step gives a toe-hold when Hairy is feeding young from the outside of the nest. The White-headed Woodpecker carves a perfectly round hole and it is likely to be closer to

the ground than the nest hole of any other species of woodpecker of the district.

As nesting trees dead willows or cottonwoods are likely to be the choice of Flicker, Hairy, or Willow Woodpecker. The wood is soft and there is likely to be no resin to soil the feathers.

The Williamson Sapsucker greatly favors the Lodgepole Pine as a nesting tree. He cuts the nest hole in the dead wood of a living tree and very often the hole is located a few inches below a branch, the branch giving some shelter against both rain and sunshine. Year after year the Williamson Sapsucker may use the same tree as a home tree, drilling a fresh hole each year. A tree with so many holes to spare is likely to have a nesting pair of Chickadees. Williamson Sapsuckers like a forest of Lodgepole Pine on the edge of a meadow, just the same sort of situation that the Mountain Chickadees dearly love and this is another reason why the Williamson and the Chickadee are so often neighbors.

The Williamson Sapsucker's nest may be known by the fact that the droppings from the nest are to be found at the base of the nesting tree. All other Woodpeckers of the district carry the excrement of the young far from the nest instead of dropping it directly from the doorway.

Young Williamson Sapsuckers are noisy birds, like all young wood-

peckers they have not sense enough to know when to keep their mouths shut. Such a fault, be it the fault of bird, beast, or man is likely sooner or later to get the noisy one into trouble. What occasionally happens to noisy young woodpeckers is that they are ripped from their snug nest hole by a hungry bear that had been attracted by their squeals.

It seems that young woodpeckers of all species are allowed to express their personalities in the noisy and modern manner of the day. Young woodpeckers would pay more dearly for this privilege if they talked in their sleep as many potential enemies are night prowlers. However, besides bears there are other daylight hunters such as weasels and chickarees that would quite willingly snatch a brood of young birds and one morning I saw an almost full grown Willow Woodpecker yanked from his nest hole by a Pigmy Owl.



Young woodpeckers are so snugly housed against wind and weather and so well cared for by their parents that it is probably necessary to introduce some hazard such as a loud mouth to keep them from over-running the country—one of those nicely adjusted balances of nature.

I should say that woodpeckers do not sing. The Willow Woodpecker utters a rather musical trill of notes. The Hairy Woodpeckers have a roll of notes, rather harsh and not unlike the call of the Belted Kingfisher. As a matter of fact all woodpeckers have utterances that might be considered as their sort of song were it not that these calls are uttered by male, female and young and apparently have no reference to the mating season. I have a notion that the drumming that is indulged in by woodpeckers is their sort of song. If this is the case I have known some really great lovers; there was



the Red-chafted Flicker that learned to drum on the garbage cans, empty ones preferred because they made a great noise. And there was the Hairy Woodpecker that used a stove-pipe for a sounding board.

Taken the year around the Wood-

pecker Tribe with its nine resident species and its three winter visitants is more strongly represented in Yosemite National Park than any other family of birds. It is their peculiar manner of foraging that makes it possible for woodpeckers to winter through in a snow-covered country—even in the most severe winter there are always forage lanes open on limb and tree trunk.

The California Woodpecker is the most nearly omnivorous of all our

woodpeckers which would seem to give him some advantage over other woodpeckers and yet so much is he dependent on his store of acorns that he will run out of the Yosemite Valley should there be a crop failure on the two species of oaks that grow in the Valley. Other fruit eating woodpeckers are White-headed and Pileated, but these species do not to any extent depend on fruit, nor do they store food for winter consumption.

MYSTERY

ENID MICHAEL
Ranger-Naturalist

The Robin strikes a pose on the ground or on a perch and with head raised and slightly tilted back he utters a thin, high pitched note, a subdued note, but penetrating and far reaching. All birds in the neighborhood freeze in their positions. No bird movement is noted anywhere, the feeding tray is deserted. The mysterious robin note continues to be sounded at spaced intervals about three seconds apart for a minute or so. Then if the Western Wood Pewee joins in with a similar note the Robin will become silent and let the Pewee carry on.

This drama should not be new to me for I have seen it enacted many times during my years in the open, and yet, always it does seem new to me, always it is mysterious.

What is the meaning of this strange behavior? Is the message taken up by other robins and carried to far places across the country?

One morning in July the thing happened again and by the watch the birds were silent for eleven full minutes. The White-headed Woodpecker that was feeding on a tree trunk, a few feet from where I sat, hardly moved his eyes during the period of silence. With the first thin note of the Robin a hush came over the wood and the trees appeared to listen. Such rapt attention, such concentration, it would seem that out of the universe came divine music that only birds and trees can hear. A far away wind moaned through the trees, the White-headed Woodpecker winked his eye and then suddenly came to life. The Blue-fronted Jay shouted, and the world once more went on its way.

Word Sketches of Yosemite

Ranger-Naturalist HAROLD E. PERRY

Yosemite is a valley of ever changing moods. The colorful interplay of light and shadow on the cliffs, the constantly shifting cloud patterns in the afternoon skies, the hourly procession of tree shadows on talus slopes and valley floor all contribute to an ever developing interest for one who is conscious of these varying effects. He never tires of looking at Yosemite scenes for his sensitive vision is able to recognize their variability.

Unfortunately, some of Yosemite's most interesting moods are enjoyed by the fewest people. This is attributable to the fact that not many persons are abroad in the meadows and on the trails when some of the rarest moments occur. All visitors, for example, are aware of the dazzling brilliance of mid-day Yosemite, but how few there are who have enjoyed the delicate beauty of the Valley in the early morning hours. Many people attend the evening campfire programs and participate in the social activities in the several campgrounds and hotel areas, but relatively few have experienced the release of spirit which comes from being on a Yosemite trail at night, alone with one's thoughts when day is done.

The two brief word sketches which follow are offered in hopes that they will strike harmonious

chords in the memories of readers to whom they are familiar and also in hopes that they will inspire others to become better acquainted with Yosemite in some of her little known moods.

Early Morning in Yosemite

Soft tints of approaching dawn descending to top of Valley walls . . . A thin veil of darkness spread over the Valley floor Crisp placidity pervading the atmosphere . . . Distant notes of waking birds . . . Liquid rippling of the nearby river . . . Deepening color on the granite walls . . . Light creeping down among the trees . . . Ever strengthening choruses of birds . . . A doe grazing in a meadow across the river . . . Shadows disappearing from the Valley floor . . . Rose-tinted sunlight painting the summit of Eagle Peak . . . Distant sounds of a camper chopping wood . . . Faint odor of campfire smoke invading the cool air . . . Top of Yosemite Fall glistening in brilliant sunshine . . . Cumulative noises of waking campers . . . Sunlight on Valley floor softened by film of blue smoke from breakfast fires . . . A new day in Yosemite has begun.

Evening at Mirror Lake

Last rays of setting sun tip Half Dome with Alpine glow . . . Gathering shadows forewarn of coming night . . . Ruffled mid-day waters

smooth themselves into a perfect mirror. . . . A scene of tranquility . . . Gray light diminishing on Mt. Watkins . . . Musical note of a disturbed robin . . . Black trees silhouetted against a darkening sky . . . The cover of night drawing over Tenaya Canyon . . . Stars of heaven duplicated in the depths of Mirror Lake . . . Squeaking bats floating by on wings of silence . . . A short walk along the shore . . . Lights from Glacier Point Hotel reflecting in the water . . . Eerie announcement of fire-fall . . . Cataract of fire reversed in the Lake reflection . . . All is quiet . . . Day is done.

Descriptions of Yosemite moods might continue unendingly, for moonlight, thunder-storms, summer showers, and seasonal changes all contribute to an ever changing panorama of splendor. As one experiences more and more of these varying moods, his appreciation of Yosemite becomes increasingly enriched.

GROUND SQUIRREL SWIMS RIVER

By C. A. Harwell, Park Naturalist

On October 8, 1936, while studying a problem of erosion control at the large river pool back of Yosemite Lodge with Mr. F. E. Matthes of the U. S. Geological Survey, we observed a California Ground Squir-

rel (*Citellus beecheyi*) swim across the Merced River. The squirrel ran rapidly out of the grass of the meadow, down the south bank and without making a pause continued across a flat gravel bar and into the water. Its course across the practically still stream was direct and rapid. It required about fifteen seconds to swim the forty feet. All four feet seemed to be used. The front two were alternately raised approximately to the surface of the water so that a considerable churning effect was produced, leaving a distinct path in the animal's wake, somewhat like that produced by a side-wheel ferry. The hair of the back and the tail were plainly visible above the water. *Citellus* was a good swimmer.

When shallow enough water was reached swimming gave way to running without the slightest pause and the squirrel ran across sands of the north bank just as directly and rapidly as it had approached the river from the south. It disappeared behind a clump of willows one hundred feet from water.

No foe was in evidence. The crossing seemed a routine affair.

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THE UNUSUAL IN YOSEMITE

Deer eating tinfoil icicles from a discarded Xmas tree. A bear still hanging around at the Bear Pits and stopping all cars for handouts.

Observed January 13th.

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Dan Anderson