Birds of the Mountain Parks and Mt. Evans Area

--from Municipal Facts, Vol. 2, No. 3, March 1919

The casual visitor touring Denver's Mountain Parks by auto sees little evidence of the wealth of bird life, which this beautiful region supports. A few of the more conspicuous and less timid species may be seen from time to time along the roadside, but in order to enjoy a wider acquaintance with the feathered inhabitants of the parks area, it is necessary to leave the noisy dusty highways and seek the seclusion of the more quiet places.

Birds depend largely upon vegetation for their food supply, hence the distribution of bird life is closely associated with and dependent upon the distribution of plant life. As we leave the cottonwoods of the plains and enter the pine-covered areas of the foothills, we also leave behind most of the common birds found in and around Denver. From the top of Lookout Mountain westward we encounter many species which rarely, if ever, find their way down to the plains, only a few miles distant.

There are some birds, however, which have a very wide vertical range. The handsome black and white magpie is almost as abundant at an elevation of 8,000 feet as it is on the plains at 5,500. The robins which nest in our city park and door-yards are scarcely less abundant than those found in the quaking aspen groves high up in the mountains. Several other familiar birds of the plains are common in the Mountain Parks. Brewer's blackbirds, western meadowlarks, mountain bluebirds, desert horned larks, red shafted flickers, mourning doves, western lark sparrows, western vesper sparrows and barn swallows are quite plentiful throughout this region. But the main charm of the bird life of the Mountain Park areas, lies in the many varieties of birds that are rare or entirely absent on the nearby plains.

Two of the most striking birds of this region are the Lewis' woodpecker and the Clarke's nutcracker named respectively in honor of the leaders of the famous Lewis and Clarke expedition, which laid the foundation for our present knowledge of western birds. The former is resplendent in bright waistcoat of old rose, with broad glossy wings and back of brilliant metallic greenish black, while the latter is garbed in a sedate costume of Quaker gray with striking black and white wings and tail.

One of the most beautiful colored birds as well as one of the most characteristic is the brilliant deep-blue long-crested jay, easily identified by the gracefully conspicuous crest, and loud harsh call-note. This handsome bird also exhibits some ability as a mimic of numbers of other birds and some animals. Occasionally we may see his more quietly colored cousins, the pinion jay and the woodhouse jay - both lacking the prominent top-knot, but sharing the same harsh call-notes.

Another brilliantly colored bird is the western tananger, clothed in bright yellow, with jet-black wings and flaming orange head. The lazuli bunting has a turquoise blue head, tawny yellow breast, bluish black and prominent white wing bars. In the brush covered ravines of the hillsides the spurred towhee is very common. It is easily identified by the dull buff breast and back, black head, and long black, white-tipped

tail, which is widely spread while in flight. It has a pleasing metallic song and a call-note closely resembling the mewing of a cat.

Nearly every cabin in the Mountain Parks has its nests of western house wrens and mountain blue birds, cosily ensconced in a nook under the eaves, or in a bird box. The beautiful clear song of the wrens and the bright azure blue plumage of the bluebirds are charming additions to these rustic homes.

During the winter, two of the commonest birds are the western tree sparrows and the juncos, of which five species occur in winter and one is rather abundant in summer. The tree sparrows are inconspicuous little brownish birds with a small black spot in the middle of the breast and a weak but pleasing song, while the different varieties of juncos are garbed in various shades of brown chestnut and slate color, but all are easily identified as juncos by the conspicuous little feather on both outer edges of the tail.

Along the mountain streams may frequently be seen the charming little American dipper or water ousel, a truly remarkable bird, clothed in uniform slate-gray, with a wild, clear, ringing song, and with a characteristic habit of continually bobbing up and down on its rather long legs. This little fellow lives its life amid the roar of rushing torrents. Equally at home in summer or winter, in or out of the swift water, it builds a wonderful warm covered nest of moss, close to the water's edge where the spray keeps it continually moist. The young possesses the surprising faculty of flying, swimming and diving immediately upon leaving the nest.

Among the most sociable of the birds are the chicadees and nuthatches. Everyone knows the confiding little chicadee and after seeing the nuthatch in action he will always be remembered for his characteristic habit is to dart at a vertical tree trunk pell-mell with the evident intention of dashing out his little brains, but just before the catastrophe occurs, he rights himself suddenly and alights on the trunk with a thump - sometimes right-side-up, more often up-side-down. There are two chicadees - the mountain and the long-tailed - and three nuthatches, the tiny pigmy, his larger cousin the Rocky Mountain, and a rarer species, the red breasted nuthatch. All are charming little fellows, as common in winter as in summer, easy to get acquainted with and all clothed in white and various shades of gray.

As the quiet twilight approaches, we may listen spellbound to the wonderful evening concert of Townsend's solitaire - a marvelously soft, liquid song, and one that is strangely impressive as the mountain twilight fades. Townsend's solitaire is well named, both as regards its habits, and its relationship to other species. The bird somewhat resembles a thrush, but with a much longer tail and shorter bill, and is dull dark, grayish-brown with subdued yellow wing bars. Hawks and owls are not particularly abundant in the Mountain Parks, but the familiar quarrelsome little western sparrow hawk is far from uncommon. The saw-whet owl is one of the rarer owls of Colorado, but one of the few records for the state comes from the slope of Lookout Mountain, where it has been found nesting.

In addition to the more conspicuous species mentioned above, there are many varieties of small birds, many of them unknown even by name to the casual observer. Rocky Mountain creepers, pine siskins, rock wrens and warblers, sparrows, swallows and fly catchers of several species, as well as many others.

A fine variety of woodpeckers and sapsuckers inhabit the Mountain Parks area. Beside the Lewis' woodpecker and the red shafted flicker mentioned above, the Rocky Mountain hairy woodpecker, Batchelder's woodpecker, the Alpine three-toed woodpecker (in the high elevations), Williamson's sapsucker and the red-naped sapsucker are quite common; all handsomely colored birds of interesting habits.

In spite of many years of persecution, the dusky grouse - the most splendid of Colorado game birds - is still not uncommon and every year a few broods of young are raised on Lookout and Genesee mountains. The antics performed by this bird during the mating season are extremely odd. The cock bird struts and dances back and forth before his demure lady-love with tail widely spread, drooping wings dragging the ground, head drawn in and back and body erect; all the while emitting an indefinite booming noise impossible to describe. The entire performance is ludicrous in the extreme.

The shady ravines offer an ideal summer home for a surprisingly large number of dainty little broadtailed hummingbirds, resplendent in a dazzling irridescent coat of metallic green, and a careful search may reward the observer with the sight of one of their tiny nests, no larger than a golf ball, containing two little eggs resembling in size and color an ordinary bean. The parent birds are very tame when nesting and may often be approached within arm's length.

Occasionally during the spring migration a busy flock of Bendire's crossbills may be found, eagerly extracting seeds from the pine cones. This grotesque bird is pleasingly clothed in brick red, but the bill entirely spoils its beauty, the mandibles being sharply curved and crossing one another after the fashion of a pair of ice tongs. Most of the birds mentioned so far are characteristic of the country where the yellow pine is the predominant tree. As we travel onward toward Squaw Pass and Mount Evans, we come to dense forests of Engelmann spruce. Here we find a strange scarcity of bird life, yet in these vast silent forests we find several species practically unknown elsewhere, whose timid retiring habits are evidence of their love of solitude.

Through the dim aisles of the forest we may catch a strain of the glorious songs of Audubon's hermit thrush, one of the finest melodies of the bird world, or the bright sprightly song of the ruby-crowned kinglet, or the loud rattling note of a three-toed woodpecker; but it is seldom indeed that these dwellers in this vast stillness permit themselves to be seen. If we stop to lunch we will probably be visited by a handsome gray and white Rocky Mountain jay or camp robber. Sedate and dignified, yet sociable, smart and inquisitive to a degree, he is the typical "confidence man" of the bird world, just as his relative the magpie is the "highway robber". After your bacon has been wafted away before your eyes, you will readily agree that his nickname fits exactly.

From a willow thicket comes the crystal-clear song of the white-crowned sparrow, one of the largest, most conspicuously marked and finest songsters among North American sparrows, with a rich brownish back and tail, ashy breast and striking black and white striped crown.

Finally we come to the timberline and the last gnarled, deformed forest hero is left behind. Before us stretches a vast expanse of desolate, barren, wind-swept country. Surely no bird would choose this inhospitable region for a home, you say. But strange as it may seem in this world of winds, storms and rocks, we find three of the most interesting of North American birds.

A hoarse cackle attracts our attention to a curious mottled brownish bird, looking somewhat like a domestic hen. We walk up to within a dozen feet, our bird retreating slowly before us. Finally off he goes with a loud cackle and rush of wings. The white-tailed ptarmigan--for that is the name of this new-found friend--spends his entire existence in these bleak surroundings. Even when the temperature is thirty degrees below zero and the snow ten feet deep, he seldom ever wanders far below timberline. He is rather a stupid, unsuspicious individual and needs something to protect him from hungry coyotes and hawks, so a wise Mother Nature clothes him in pure white during the winter which blends perfectly with the snow while in summer he is dressed in mottled brown,

making him remarkably inconspicuous among the rocks.

As we cross an Alpine meadow, a dainty little light brown bird flutters from a nest at our feet, cunningly concealed under a tuft of grass, revealing four little eggs closely resembling tiny chocolate drops. This is the American pipit, or titlark - the closest American relative to the celebrated skylark of Europe. Strange to say, this bird spends its winters in Mexico and Guatemala and comes back each spring to this bleak Alpine region to rear its young.

Flying about over the rock slides we see some plump brownish birds, with black, pink-tipped wings and tail - leucostictes, or rosy finch. Found in summer only above timberline and in winter seldom descending below 8,000 feet elevation. Four species occur in Colorado, one of which, the brown capped leucosticte, is not known outside of the state boundaries. The nest and eggs were unknown to science until a few years ago.

And so we might proceed at length to describe many more species of the birds of this wonderful mountain area, for no less than 108 species have been recorded for Lookout Mountain and vicinity, to say nothing of the many species to be found at higher elevations, yet this brief list may serve to impress upon the reader the fact that Denver's Mountain Parks and the Mount Evans region offer a wealth of material and unlimited opportunities for the study of a phase of bird life unknown upon the plains.

See also ***An Annotated List of the Birds of the Mountain Parks and Mount Evans region***.

Note: Be aware that many species names, both common and scientific, have changed since 1919. This article and the accompanying bird species list were taken from a copy transcribed in 1934; both are in the process of being checked against the originals to determine the historical spellings as originally published (e.g., "chicadee") and eliminate any errors introduced in transcription.