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Familiar birds of southern California.

Grimmell, C. and J.

HARVARD UNIVERSITY.



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FAMILIAR BIRDS OF SOUTHERN
CALIFORNIA.

BY ELIZABETH AND JOSEPH GRINNELL.

THE MOCKING BIRD.



THE cities of Southern California are set in "peaceful woods." Numerous varieties of trees and shrubs and vines cluster about the homes of rich and lowly, making ideal haunts for the singing birds. And yet it is common to hear strangers remark on the "scarcity of birds." There are plenty of them in plain sight if one has cultivated the art of seeing them. A noted humorist has "observed that two classes of individuals visit our Land of Paradise. One class looks at things, the other class *sees* things." One may be looking at birds and never see them, for lack of a trained eye, the same as he would miss seeing other features of a landscape. Our birds are not gaudy, many of them resembling the appearance of their haunts in color. King of them all, by birth and common consent, is the mocking bird. He is a born aristocrat from the crown of his graceful head to the tip of his dainty foot. He moreover acts in the capacity of policeman, giving the signal of approach of danger, whistling a shrill warning understood perfectly by his fellow citizens. One easily recognizes this note. He is seldom seen farther north than Santa Barbara county, and is at his best in and near our orange groves. And he is with us the whole year, flitting soul of the trees and shrubs, embodied voice of all Nature's profusion. But he does not sing the whole year. He "hangs his harp on the willows" or the eucalyptus trees, after nesting time, only to bring it forth at the height of the tourist season as if to ravish the heart of the stranger. "We stand and listen with delight to this grand concert of Nature's great musician, his voice ever changing, ever sweet," until suddenly, but for his form, we have before us a motherless young turkey, or a lost chicken. And the famous singer delights in abrupt changes "from grave to gay, from lively to severe," even the very severe, as many a victim can testify when he rushes out of his door to rescue what he supposes to be some wounded creature, only to be greeted by a saucy mocker from his perch on the house cresting. For more than half of the year the mocking bird spends his time in listening or studying his pieces. He is the best listener in the world. His whole attitude is an animated "hark!" He is literally "all ears." Then, when he does begin to sing, he never quits unless for his meals. He is not afraid of the "night air," nor does he pay the least respect to the desires of those who would sleep.

Once disturbed from his slumbers by this midnight carouser the tourist in his chamber may as well sit bolt upright in his bed and listen and laugh, for it is certain he will not doze off again until the reveler in the tree outside has worn his throat hoarse. Save for these singing months the mocker is heard little but for his short shrill screams as he makes-believe chase some other birds from his haunts.

When singing, he seeks a pinnacle, but when nesting or otherwise engaged, this free and easy bird chooses shrubs or low trees. He is not shy, but easily tamed, even coming at the call of those with whom he is familiar. One may be wishing for a glimpse of the famous songster and peering into the farthest trees or sky to make him out, when, lo! within a few feet, if one be alert to movement and color, the little fellow may be seen sitting or noiselessly dropping from his perch as fearless as a caged canary. In flight the mocker is as still as a falling leaf, merely flitting, with hardly a movement of the wings, hence the stranger thinks him difficult to find. If in one of his listening, dreamy moods, the bird challenges one to catch him, moving lazily and for a short distance. If a hungry spell is on him, he darts quickly to the ground, where he peeps longingly under the garden seats as if wishing you would take the trouble of moving them so he might help himself to the bugs. But he is a poor pedestrian. He never walks, like a blackbird, though, if there be some inducement ahead of him, he will hop quite a distance, listening as he goes, with head erect, and dainty tread as if he spurned the ground. It is when he is on the ground that the mocker is more easily identified. His feathers lie close, and he hops on tiptoe, careful that the point of his tail clears the grass. He makes himself taller than he really is in his anxiety to take in the whole of the situation. He is accused of domineering over other birds, with some reason, though his bark is worse than his bite, for he seldom actually attacks a fellow creature, contenting himself with scolding. Few birds really care for his noise. He doesn't mean anything by it.

It is difficult for even those most familiar with the birds to distinguish the male from the female mocking bird, when the former is not singing. He is a little smaller than his mate, a trifle clearer and purer of tint. The upper parts are ashy grey, the lower parts greyish-white. The wings are blackish-brown, with white stripes at the base, more conspicuous in flight. The outer tail feathers are white, the others being mixed brown and white. The bill and feet are black. The length of the bird from tip of beak to tip of tail is about ten inches.

By the first of April our musician has attained the object of his voluble courting, although he continues his melody far into the summer. His quiet mate does the nest-building, with

only an occasional "lift" from her loquacious lord. He would much rather mimic his fellows, including the postman's whistle, than turn mechanic. And the parent birds make no secret of their intentions or achievements. It is not difficult to locate their nest. They will show you exactly where it is, screaming all the way. The nest itself cannot be termed a work of fine art, for it is loosely built of coarse material—just whatever comes handy, grass and string and leaves. It is usually in a shrub or a low tree, the pepper or the peach or the Monterey cypress. They may build for successive years in the same locality, but not often in the same tree. The eggs are four in number, rarely five, a little smaller than a robin's egg, bluish-green with brown freckles. It is seldom that more than two of the young reach maturity. From many broods watched we have concluded that if a pair of mockers succeed in rearing one out of the four that usually hatch they do very well. But they do not despair, for two or three broods in a season make some amends for disappointment. There are several reasons for this shortage. Bird fanciers employ boys to watch and capture the young as soon as hatched, as the mocker is more easily raised by hand than most birds. Not half the birds stolen by the boys, however, reach the fancier. They are experimented with on the way, lost, abused, and confined in too narrow limits. We boast of a law in favor of the song birds, but, alas, it is little operative. Another enemy of these birds is the cat. She is very fond of mocking bird, and may often be seen creeping through the garden shrubs to locate a nest. Little heaps of feathers here and there tell the story.

As to food, the mocker, young or old, is not particular. He will relish almost anything—from pie and gingerbread to fruit and bugs (but not angle worms). If food is placed in a convenient spot, the parent birds will bring their young as soon as they are able to fly and teach them to pick up the morsels. It is slow and tedious work, the art of teaching young mockers how to eat. Their appetite is keen, but the ability to help themselves is tardy in development. One needs no more entertaining company in a Southern California garden than a brood of young mockers just out of the nest. Their voices are coaxing and shrill. They cry constantly for food from dawn until dark. Occasionally one has the pleasure of seeing four birdlings near together, each leaning forward with fluttering wings and open mouth. Next day there are two in place of four, and the observer grows anxious. Then only one squeaks its hungry plaint, while, more than likely, by the third or fourth day, the parent birds sit mournfully on the nearest loquat and look reproachfully at space.



C. M. Davis Eng. Co.

WINTER STAGING IN THE SIERRA.

Drawn by L. Maynard Dixon

gone out. Without a word we crawled into the tiny dog-tent, and drawing the blankets over us tried to court sleep.

Next day about noon a Cuban came down the rough road driving a sorry-looking horse attached to a rude cart. A blanket-covered object lay on the floor, and when I asked him if he had anything to sell he crossed himself and answered, "*No, señor, es un muerto*; a dead Spaniard. I found him near the arroyo. He was stabbed, señor, but I found this held to his lips," holding up the cross we had seen the night before.

Harry and I took charge of the remains, and together we buried him. The cross we replaced on his breast, and on a rough headboard we cut the words "Beltran Navarro, a Soldier of Spain."

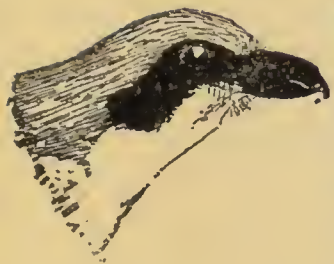
When we were permitted to go to Santiago we had a special mass said for him and for his dead in far-off Spain.

Jersey City, N. J.

FAMILIAR BIRDS OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA.

BY ELIZABETH AND JOSEPH GRINNELL.

THE BUTCHER BIRD.



TO THE novice there is sometimes some difficulty in distinguishing the shrike from the mocking bird. There is a little similarity in color and size, but in markings, and form of head and beak, the difference is great. Compared with the mocker, the California shrike, which is our "butcher bird," is more grey than brown, and the white of the wings and tail is more conspicuous. The tips of all the tail feathers are white, as is also the throat. A "black bridle" on either side of the forehead, which includes the eyes and meets at the base of the black beak, renders this bird easily distinguishable. The beak is hooked, larger and shorter than that of the mocker, but the whole bird from tip to tip is more than an inch shorter. The sexes differ but slightly or not at all. While the butcher bird has come honestly by his name, he does not persist in crime to the exclusion of turning an honest penny for the farmer. He dotes upon the Jerusalem cricket, that wicked little fellow that digs holes in the sides of our potatoes, and is as fond of mice as he is of small snakes. He has been seen to watch for and snatch a gopher throwing up its solitary mound on the mesa. True, he does eat an occasional small bird, and it cannot be denied that he impales his prey on orange thorns and barbed wire fences. What purposes he has in view is not perfectly understood. Possibly it is for reasons of taste. He may prefer his meat cured, or he may have learned from his fathers to lay by something for a rainy day. Or he may do it from pure mischief. In any event we have found small lizards, birds, even downy chickens, Jerusalem crickets, mice and beetles, impaled—always by the neck. There is method even in the seeming

cruelty of this tyrant, for he kills his prey before hanging; always by blows on the back of the neck and head. So he is not the heartless creature he is supposed to be. He is the agriculturist's friend, and very interesting as a study. Close acquaintance with him reveals him to be a bird with an occasional musical note, some charm of manner, and a graceful though solitary personality. It is probably on account of his preference for a meat diet that he is shunned by other birds. The butcher bird nests with us in March and April. The eggs are usually six in number, of a greyish-brown mottled appearance. The nests are large and compact. So heavy are they, intertwined with string and sticks in a general structure of wild sage, that one imagines them to be partly of mud like a robin's. Why this preference for sage, is a question. We have never found a butcher's nest built wholly of any other material. Possibly it is to keep away the mites, as these parasites are well known to infest the nests of most birds.

The butcher bird makes its nest in orange trees and hedges, or other low trees and shrubs, often within easy reach. Whether they succeed better than the mockers in rearing their young is not certain, for the birds are not too common. They may be seen in the uplands and mesas, but not so frequently in our house gardens. They are not noisy birds as we know them, except for a harsh scream once in a while, and, but for their hooked bills, might find a warm place in the hearts of all.

Pasadena, Cal.

THE PROFESSOR'S WEALTH.

BY T. S. VAN DYKE.

Author of Millionaires of a Day, etc.

"YOU look tired tonight, John," said the wife of Professor Dumpkin as he came in.

"Yes, there are several other tired folks in town. Prices haven't risen any for a day or two."

"Why not sell as they are? You say your lots are worth a hundred thousand dollars, and that is thirty times what you began with a year ago."

"I have been trying all day to sell," he was about to say, but the words died upon his tongue. For it was in the height of the great real estate boom of 1886-1887 that raged so violently over Southern California—a bubble that swelled and rolled never so brightly as the very day before it broke—and no one could admit that there was any defect in the tissue. He had resigned a good position as principal of the school because "time is too valuable to waste in the school room at a hundred and fifty a month." In spite of the entreaties of his wife to sell and put the money in something safe, he kept selling only to buy more on a margin that every day was becoming thinner. He could almost any day have sold all he had for \$100,000; but to him, as to the majority, it seemed throwing property away to sell for any purpose except to re-invest in a still larger draft on the golden future.

* * *

"Did you sell anything today, Dumpy, dear?"

