



The Redstart

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SOME BIRDS OF THE GAUDINEER KNOB REGION IN RANDOLPH COUNTY, WEST VIRGINIA

by

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Near Durbin, Randolph County, West Virginia, is one of the highest mountain peaks in the Monongehela National Forest - Gaudineer Knob, which reaches an elevation of 4,445 feet above sea level.

Extending from this peak to about 4,200 feet elevation is a very dense growth of Rhododendron and second growth Red Spruce, through which it is virtually impossible to make one's way. The U. S. Forest Service has cut several paths in this growth, reaching out from the base of the Gaudineer Knob fire tower and branching over the top of the mountain for short distances. From these paths an inspection shows that the Spruce trees are from ten to fifteen feet in height and are so closely interwoven as to form walls on either side of the paths. A number of huge boulders project close to the paths and, if one can force his way to them, he is afforded a view over the tops of most of the trees.

At 4,200 feet as one moves down the mountain, this thick growth ends rather abruptly and is replaced by a virgin Spruce forest, with little undergrowth, and through which it is easy to travel. A few deciduous trees occur in this forest but for the most part it remains a fine, mature forest of Spruce which lowers to the 3,900-foot elevation and, irregularly, to as low as 3,400 feet. From this point to the valleys which lie at about 2,500 feet, the deciduous forest predominates with scattered Spruces only.

The few trails which wind through the Spruce forest have been used by hunters for years and, we were told, extend from 30 to 40 miles through the forest. The Black Bear, the Bay Lynx and the Virginia deer occur here, together with smaller mammals usually to be found in such a habitat.

Mr. Karl Haller, of Wheeling, and I arrived at Gaudineer Knob in the early afternoon of July 18, after an automobile drive of about seven hours through a cool, steady rain. As we neared the Knob, the rain grew heavier and fog cut our range of vision to less than 200 feet. We temporarily abandoned the idea of bird study and drove to Durbin, about five miles from the Knob where we secured a room for the night. We were carrying luggage into the house when the rain stopped and the sky cleared somewhat. We dashed for the car and hurried to the mountain, but just as we arrived the rain began again and clouds blew into the mountain side. We returned to Durbin and twice more during that afternoon we dashed for the mountain only to be balked by new rains and fogs on each occasion. It was rapidly growing dark as we made our last trip back to Durbin and Nighthawks were flying very low beneath the lowering clouds. Numbers of them swooped through the beams of light from the headlights of the car, almost dashing themselves into the car itself.

Next morning the rain had stopped, but the sky was overcast and fog closely hugged the ground. Seldom during that morning could we see farther than 200 feet. Birds were singing in great number, however. The day following, we remained on the mountain until 10 a.m., only, as rain fell heavily and clouds and fog again hampered our observations.

Following is a partial, annotated list of some of the birds which we recorded during our stay in despite of very poor conditions for observation. The figures for elevation included are approximate.

Green Heron:- One observed flying over the Greenbrier River at Durbin, at 2,300 elevation.

Red-shouldered Hawk:-and Broad-winged Hawk:- One of each species noted just below Spruce forest at 3,400 elevation.

Black-billed Cuckoo:- Birds of this species called on several occasions.

Nighthawks:-

Many were flying low above the Knob at 4 a.m. the second morning of our stay in the vicinity. Haller collected a male and a bird which may have been its mate remained in the vicinity for several minutes, swooping, swerving and diving toward us in the air. Throughout this performance it uttered cries which we noted in our records for the day as "very distressing." There seemed something very human in what appeared to be distress at the loss of a mate.

Flickers and Pileated, Downy and Hairy Woodpeckers were fairly common in the Spruce forest.

Olive-sided Flycatcher:- This species we found to be fairly common and we had ample opportunity to study its song and call and alarm notes.

Red-breasted Nuthatch:- The calls of this species we heard "from all directions" from the lower part of the deciduous forest to the top of the Knob. One evening we saw two go to roost in the top of a tall Spruce, from which they called frequently. We attempted to persuade them to choose a lower roost by tossing stones into the tree top, but they declined to move. Some stones struck branches very near their perch and others passed the birds within six or seven inches without driving them from their chosen perch.

Winter Wren:- These wrens were very common in the mature Spruce and in the second-growth atop the Knob. They were in full song. Haller collected specimens in Juvenile plumage.

Wood Thrush, Hermit Thrush, Olive-backed Thrush and Veery:- We heard all four of these species singing at one time and in considerable numbers. It was an unforgettable experience to stand at the mountain top and hear this magnificent chorus of Thrushes. Common as they were, individuals of the four species proved equally wild and difficult to approach.

Golden-crowned Kinglet:- These little birds were so numerous and vocal as to constitute a nuisance as we searched for more wary species.

Blue-headed Vireo:- Birds of this species were common in the Spruce forest. Presumably they belong to the southern mountain race Monticola of Vireo solitarius.

Wood Warblers of the Spruce forest included the Magnolia, Black-throated Blue (Cairns' Warbler ?) Black-throated Green, Yellow-throat, Blackburnian, Chestnut-sided, Mourning and Canada Warblers. All of these we found fairly common.

Purple Finch and Carolina Junco:- These birds were particularly common in the area.

One of the real purposes of our visit to the Gaudineer Knob section was to locate Red Crossbills, which had been reported there just five days previous to our visit by Maurice Brooks of Morgantown, W. Va. We failed to see or hear these birds, nor did we find traces of their feeding upon Spruce cones.

Despite our brief stay and the difficult weather conditions under which we worked we both voted the expedition eminently worthwhile and worth repeating at an early opportunity. The occurrence of typically Northern species in the high altitudes of West Virginia and their curious mixture with Carolinian zone birds always is of much interest and we had some unforgettable experiences which we are anxious to repeat.

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GENERAL NOTES

Reprints from Edward C. Paney:- The Editor has received from Mr. Edward C. Paney a number of reprints of papers published by him in various scientific and semi-scientific journals -- all dealing with ichthyology. Dr. Paney, it will be recalled by many members of The Brooks Bird Club has been both student and instructor at various sessions of the West Virginia Nature Training School. In one of the papers "Observations on the Life History of the Spotted Darter," (rev. Copeia, 1939, No. 3, Sept. 9) the junior author is Ernest A. Lechner, also known to many of those closely associated with the Nature Training Schools. Other papers represented include: "The Breeding Habits of the Silvery Minnow," (American Midland Naturalist, No. 3, May, 1939); "The Distribution of the Fishes of the Ohio Drainage Basin of Western Pennsylvania," (abs. of theses, Cornell University, 1939); and two shorter notes from Copeia (1939, No. 2, July 12).

He Talks for Some of You!:- Donald Culross Peattie, whose admirable "The Nature of Things" department in Bird-Lore always is interesting has this to say in a recent

issue (XLI, 4, July-August, 1939):

"Everybody knows that ornithologists are high-souled people who lean over backwards and raise their eyes to heaven in the effort to see the birds. And that botanists are meek, earth-grubbing folk, stoop-shouldered with much searching on the ground; that they go through life with downcast eyes. To try to be both at once results in conflict and a split personality against which psychiatrists warn us. The split in me, however, occurred years ago when half of a professional botanist tried to become an amateur ornithologist, and I am used to it now. Admittedly I must have missed half in each field when I ran across simultaneous avian and phytological transects across California....."

Pennsylvania Eliminates Bounty on Great-horned Owl:-- The State of Pennsylvania no longer will pay bounties on the Great-horned Owl -- a species long on the bounty list in the Keystone State. It is a source of concern that West Virginia's county-wide "vermin control contests" still regard the Great-horned Owl as a desirable creature -- to kill!

FIELD NOTES

A Late Summer Day at Terra Alta:-- A dozen of us spent the week-end of August 12-13 at the site of the Nature Training School camp at Lake Terra Alta. Primarily we were there to exult in sheer, male idleness for the week-end, to make plans for the future and, incidentally, to do some chores necessary at the camp site. In the second place we were there to make such ornithological observations as could be made in the limited time at our disposal.

As we washed dishes and relaxed after Chef Bert Cromes' hot supper, we heard an astonishing chorus of the Veery, despite the lateness of the season. Even the Whip-poor-will refused to believe the calendar for one song close at hand just before dawn and, indeed, helped arouse a few of us who were determined to explore for birds in the cool of the morning.

Messrs. William Lunk, Ted Frankenberg, Harold Bergner and the writer made up the early morning delegation of bird hunters and made our way first to the road intersection between the camp and the town of Terra Alta. Here the telephone wires were crowded by Cliff Swallows, with some few Barn Swallows in isolated groups among the others. The Swallows, adults and young, swung out from their perches from time to time as they hawked for insects, but always on the wires remained a number of softly chattering birds. We watched their aerial evolutions for some time before we were aware that, a little farther along, other birds were competing for the food we were unable to see in the air.

These last were Kingbirds -- six of them, perhaps a family. Awkward and slow-winged as they seemed to be in comparison with the swallows, they seemed thoroughly "up to their jobs" as they flung themselves from the wires in short aerial dashes in quest of food. Goldfinches, Field Sparrows and Song Sparrows foraged the harvested pasture fields beneath the wires and large flocks of Grackles, usually with a sprinkling of Red-wings and Cowbirds included "rolled" over the fields in noisy concert. Moved to take flight, either by our approach or for reasons we could not discern, they offered their usual interesting spectacle of concerted flight, each bird seeming impelled to the same action at the same time.

One of these blackbird flocks invited trouble for itself. As we moved along the road at the head of Lake Terra Alta, we noted a flock which must have contained at least 200 individuals, moving parallel to our course about a quarter-mile distant. From the proverbial "nowhere" a gray-blue Cooper's Hawk darted into the very center of the flock which opened as if to facilitate his unobstructed plunge through the compact mass of flying birds. One Grackle dropped below the main body of the flock, the Hawk in hot pursuit and darted to the wooded mountain side nearby. Whether or not the hawk secured his prey we could not see from where we stood. In the meantime the flock of birds had closed compactly again and resumed its noisy flight as if nothing had occurred.

In the swampy area at the head of the Lake we waded about in the wet going and chiefly occupied ourselves in observing the Ruby-throated Hummingbirds which were feeding in the heavy growth of Jewelweed. We saw perhaps a dozen individuals.

---J. W. Handlan
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