



The Redstart

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NOTES FROM NEW MEXICO AND FLORIDA

by

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As everyone knows, a member of the armed forces usually gets transferred from one post to another to fulfill various duties. For anyone interested in bird-life, or any phase of natural history, the moving from one section of the United States to another is of great advantage and gives the person concerned at least a glimpse of the birds and animals of the area where he is located.

In the case of the writer, after graduating from radio school at Scott Field, Illinois, I was sent to the replacement center of the Air Transport Command at Camp Luna, Las Vegas, New Mexico. Camp Luna is located at approximately 7200 feet in the foot hills of the mountains. The country is semi-arid and irrigation is used extensively in the broad valleys. The hills are wooded with pinon pine, cedar, and a scrub pine, although never very thickly covered. The four weeks, during February and March, spent at Camp Luna were not the best times for bird study although I did get a glimpse of bird life in the northeastern section of New Mexico.

Here follows a list of birds:

1. Red-tailed Hawk, Buteo borealis - Occasionally seen on field trips west of camp.
2. Killdeer, Oxyechus vociferus - Several were seen flying over camp and a flock was seen near a waterhole east of camp.
3. Red-shafted Flicker, Colaptes cafer - In the east, the yellow-winged Flicker is the familiar bird but the western representative has the under side of the wings and tail salmon-red and also possesses a "red moustache". The bird was common.
4. Hairy Woodpecker, Dryobates villosus - This bird was seen only once and this species plus the Flicker were the only two woodpeckers observed.

5. Horned Lark, Otocoris alpestris - These birds were very common about camp, especially on the drill field. The birds were of very pale coloration but the subspecies which they represent was not known.
6. Long-crested Jay, Cyanocitta stelleri diademata - This representative of the Steller's Jay is found in the pine-clad hills, usually in flocks. They are quite noisy and make a variety of calls. The body is dark blue while the throat and long crest is black.
7. Woodhouse's Jay, Aphelocoma californica - This blue-colored jay can be distinguished from the long-crested by the absence of a crest and black throat. This species is found in the same locality as the long-crest although only one bird was seen during my stay in New Mexico.
8. Magpie, Pica pica - The large white areas on the wings and long tapering tail make this bird easy to identify. Like their cousins, the jays, these birds have a variety of calls and are very noisy.
9. Raven, Corvus corax - Everyone in the Brooks Bird Club is familiar with the raven with his bell-like and guttural calls, from field trips in the West Virginia mountains. Upon arriving at Luna, the raven was the first bird seen.
10. Crow, Corvus brachyrhynchos - Fairly common in the area. I had expected to see the white-necked raven although none were observed. The white-neck call is more hoarse and guttural than that of the crow.
11. Mountain Chickadee, Penthestes gambeli - A plump little chickadee like our own black-cap but possessing a white line above the eye. Its song is somewhat the same but weaker and not so musical. It is found in the pine areas.
12. Plain Titmouse, Baeolophus inornatus - The name of this bird describes it very well for the plain titmouse is a crested, and all gray-colored bird the size of the tufted titmouse of the east. Only a few were seen. They were feeding on the ground beneath low pinon pines in company with juncos. The only notes heard were a few grating or rasping sounds.
13. Lead-colored Bush-tit, Psaltriparus minimus - Large flocks of the small lead-colored birds were seen feeding in the pines. Their nervous manner, lead-color, and brownish anviculars will identify them. Their calls are very weak and remind one of a flock of kinglets. At times they were very tame and could be approached to within a few feet.
14. Red-breasted Nuthatch, Sitta canadensis - Occasionally seen in flocks of chickadees. Exactly the same as the bird in the east.
15. Brown Creeper, Certhia familiaris - A few were observed on hikes west of camp.
16. Canyon Wren, Catherpes mexicanus - My first acquaintance with this wren was in late May of 1937 in the extreme western end of the Oklahoma panhandle. I found this bird again in several localities near Camp Luna along rocky ledges and canyons. The rufous-red coloring plus a white throat and flecked underparts are quite distinctive. In manner, it is somewhat like a Carolina Wren although not so musical.

17. Water Ouzel, Cinclus mexicanus - One of the most interesting birds I have ever seen or heard is the "Dipper". One day while walking along an alder (?) bordered mountain stream at 8300 feet, I was attracted by a mocking bird-like song which seemed to come from the bushes. I scanned the branches thoroughly with my binoculars but was unable to locate the song. Finally, looking toward the stream, a small plump bird was seen sitting on an ice-covered rock. I watched the bird carefully and could see its beak move slightly as it sang. The first idea which struck me was that the bird was like a cowbird as it had a brownish head but a gray body and long bill. I was racking my brain to identify the bird when it plunged into the fast-moving water, remained below for several seconds, came to the surface, floated for perhaps six feet and then climbed to another rock. Of course, after that exhibition it was all too clear that I was observing my first water ouzel. One peculiarity which I noticed was while the bird was under water, the swift water moved around the bird's body so as to form an air pocket and the bird appeared as a "silver streak" under water. I watched the bird for an hour until it was time to leave.

18. Robin, Turdus migratorius - The total number seen was not more than eight during the four weeks in New Mexico.

19. Mountain Bluebird, Sialia currucoides - A very common bird found in the more open lands much in the same situations as our own eastern bluebird, is the all "blue" mountain bluebird. These birds are larger than their eastern cousins and probably exceed them in beauty. Large flocks were seen on the rifle range on the low grass.

20. Western Bluebird, Sialia mexicana - This bird or Mexican bluebird as it is sometimes called is much like our bluebird although it has a russet back which is a good field mark. I saw this species only once, fortunately in good light, and it was an extremely shy bird.

21. Townsend's Solitaire, Myadestes townsendi - The all gray-coloring plus white eye ring and white outer tail feathers distinguish this bird. Not many solitaires were seen although they winter in the foothills in the Las Vegas region. The few birds which I saw did not sing.

22. Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Corthylio calendula - Occasionally seen in flocks of bush-tits and mountain chickadees.

23. Western Meadowlark, Sturnella neglecta - On the first bird hike at Camp Luna, I saw and heard a western meadowlark. Toward the end of my stay in New Mexico, they were beginning to appear in increasing numbers. Their song is quite different from that of the eastern bird and in my estimation, more musical and pleasing.

24. Red-winged Blackbird, Agelaius phoeniceus - A small flock was seen at an irrigation dam a few miles from camp.

25. House Finch, Carpodacus mexicanus - Similar to the purple finch is this western bird. Its rosy color and streaking below are good marks. Fairly common in the thin pine areas.

26. Spotted Towhee, Pipilo maculatus - Sometimes called the Arctic towhee, it is typically towhee in manner and habitat and practically so in its singing. The best field marks are the numerous "spots" of white on the back from which it gets its name. A common species.

27. Slate-colored Junco, Junco hyemalis - A few of the birds in the large junco flocks were identified as this eastern species as no other adult junco resembles it.

28. Shufeldt's Junco, Junco oreganus shufeldti - This is probably the subspecies which was seen in northeastern New Mexico. The adults are easily identified by their blackish heads and dark, red-brown backs. They were found in the mixed flocks of juncos in both open and pine land.

29. Pink-sided Junco, Junco mearnsi - This and the next species were by far the most abundant of all the juncos observed. This junco is not a dark bird like J. oreganus but gray with a dull-colored back. It gets its name from the rather extensive pinkish sides and flanks. The under parts are whitish.

30. Gray-headed Junco, Junco caniceps - An all gray bird with slightly darker head with a very bright and distinct rufous back is the gray-head. It can easily be identified from the preceding species by its all gray coloration and bright back. It was equally as common as J. mearnsi.

There was one bird in a large flock of juncos which I identified as the red-backed junco, Junco phaeonotus, as the bird had a rufous back, the upper mandible was black while the lower was flesh-colored. The red-backed might be confused with the gray-headed junco but for the dark, upper mandible.

31. Song Sparrow, Melospiza melodia - I saw only one song sparrow in the four weeks at Camp Luna. It was feeding with a flock of gray-headed and pink-sided juncos.

The greatest difficulty I experienced in seeing birds was the transportation problem. Only once did I get far from camp and that was a visit to the mountains where the Water ouzel was observed.

When I received orders to report to Boca Raton, Florida for more training, I was quite eager to travel south to visit a state I had never seen. I was, of course, particularly interested in the bird-life I would be able to see.

After arriving there in late March and being assigned a room (with five other cadets) in the luxurious Boca Raton Club, I began taking short hikes around the club in search of Florida birds. Unfortunately, the area surrounding the club is not the best bird territory as it is quite open with clusters of palmettos and small patches of scrub oak. However, some interesting and new birds were seen.

On my way to Boca Raton, south of Jacksonville, the train stopped very close to a mud flat and there I could plainly see Oyster Catchers, Haematopus palliatus and the interesting Black Skimmer, Rynchops nigra in large numbers. Nearby, at a small pond, were the American and Snowy Egrets, Casmerodius albus, and Egretta thula, while overhead were Least Terns, Sterna antillarum. One White Pelican, Pelecanus erythrorhynchos was seen with a flight of Brown Pelicans, Pelecanus occidentalis.

Most of the common eastern birds in migration were observed around the club, including many warblers. One bird too common to write much about was the Mockingbird, Mimus polyglottos, which sang from practically every tree. The Painted

Bunting, Passerina ciris, was a common species although most of the singing birds observed were first year males. I noticed only a few brightly colored adult males.

Along the beach not far from the club, I saw many Sanderlings, Crocethia alba, Black-bellied Plover, Squatarola squatarola, a few Ruddy Turnstones, Arenaria interpres and Semipalmated Plover, Charadrius semipalmatus. One Cabot's Tern, Thalasseus sandvicensis, was also observed. Occasionally the Florida Cormorant, Phalacrocorax auritus is seen and only a few days ago a full adult Bald Eagle, Haliaeetus leucocephalus, flew along the beach following several Ospreys, Pandion haliaetus.

An interesting bird inhabiting the beaches was the heavy black-billed Wilson's Plover, Pagolla wilsonia, of which there were many. I found a shell lined nest in the sand containing three eggs on April 18, 1943; three weeks later, the eggs were not yet hatched.

In the scrub area, I saw many Ground Doves, Columbigallina passerina. They were quite small but plump and had many characteristics of the Mourning dove, Zenaidura macroura. In flight, the Ground Doves show a spot of rufous-red on the wings (a good field mark) and black tail feathers. At close range the bright red bill, tipped with black and the vermiculation on the chest and belly are plainly seen. Another bird commonly found in the scrub area was the White-eyed Towhee, Pipilo erythrophthalmus alleni, which is identical to the Red-eyed Towhee, P. e. erythrophthalmus except that the former possesses a whitish iris from which the bird derives its name and is also an excellent identification character.

Along the Inland Waterways Canal which passes Boca Raton Club, I saw White Ibises, Guara alba, on several occasions, several Louisiana Herons, Hydranassa tricolor and a few Pigeon Hawks, Falco columbarius.

Chuck-will's widow, Antrostomus carolinensis, was a common species about Boca Raton. Many were heard to give their call (from which they are named) about dusk and again shortly before day break.

The Gray Kingbird, Tyrannus dominicensis, was observed only once during my military stay in Florida. It was perched on a telephone wire but remained only a few seconds and then flew to some distant tree top. While I observed it, no notes were uttered.

The territory surrounding Boca Raton seemed very good Florida Jay, Aphelocoma caerulescens, territory but I saw only one bird. It was very tame and hopped to the ground in front of me to pick at some orange peelings. The bird was decidedly in the moult as there were patches of bright feathers among the shabby ones.

As usual transportation was a problem and so I couldn't go very far on what little time I had.

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