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RED-WINGS

by
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Photographs by William L. Finley

It was spring and we were on our way home from the southern deserts. How many sights, sounds, and colors there are on the good earth of an early April morning. To be sliding along in the big outdoors and gulp a breath of fresh northern air, to be under a crisp blue sky that looks as if it had just been washed and hung up, to open your eyes and take in a whole world full of the young green of the hills and valleys spreading away and away, and the bird songs rippling and rollicking - all of it loosens a tension of muscles and mind, and one relaxes with the peace of it. I do not like to think of those "over there" who cannot know it.

We left the feverish highways and jogged off on narrow dirt roads to the lake region of eastern Oregon, to Lower Klamath, that once dried-up and desolate sink with white alkali blowing over it in clouds, the sounds of bird voices gone. Climbing a rutty road between low, barren hills, we looked down on the lake. It had been partially restored and was a real lake again, blue, clean water rimmed with a fresh green growth. Little tule islands dotted it here and there with secluded waterways threading between them, and a babel of bird voices wafted on the wind. Wedges of snowy pelicans again winged back and forth, avocets lifted into the air and we heard their clear, plaintive calls. Ducks sneaked along under the grassy banks, casting up suspicious eyes, and myriads of small birds filled the air with music.

Crawling ^{along} the narrow, built-up dyke that meandered across the lake, we stopped here and there. There was hardly room to stand beside the car, let alone for another one to pass, the steep edges and deep water were so close. But no care came. I glanced down and there almost under a wheel was an avocet's nest among the scant weeds. It was merely a hollow in the gravel with eight eggs in it. Wonder of wonders! No avocet laid that many plump eggs. A sister or other helpful member of the family had shared quarters with her in these times of crowded housing. By the number of excited, crying

avocets swinging overhead, the region may have been congested a little. They looked like streamlined flying boats, their long necks and bills stretched out in front. their long legs straight out behind, their cinnamon heads and shoulders gleaming in the sun. Walking along the road, we found seven nests within a space of fifty feet, a regular Vanport city, especially if most of the road averaged that many. Marriages must have been on a war time basis.

As we dragged along across the dype, we found ducks' nests in clumps of coarse grass on the rim of the road, mostly gadwalls. Just below in the open water, little rusty ruddy ducks wafted along, their stubby tails tilted straight up, their heads bobbing as if they had St. Vitus's dance. Nearing the far side of the lake, the road ran down into a sloping, broad shoreline with a thick, tall growth of nettles at the edge of the water. And above them a seething mass of red-winged blackbirds shuttled back and forth, the combined uproar of hundreds, perhaps thousands, making a fearful din. Our intrusion wasn't the cause of the commotion. It was nesting time, and the air force was protecting their homes and families below. I didn't envy myself the invasion of that prickly, stinging stronghold of nettles.

The red-wing is gregarious at all times and protects his boundaries by combined forces even when foraging for food. A band of the first arrivals numbering up in the hundreds may come swooping in and select a protected home site in the center of the encampment. Little bands may be seen winging about, resting and feeding after their journey north. Other flocks are coming in and choosing their particular spots, each separated by a small space from others. Suddenly nest building starts with a great excitement and bustle. It may commence around the first of May and last till late June, with the height of egg-laying season about June 1.

We waded into the green mass up to our shoulders, the poisoned nettle needles beginning to sting like fire. Nests were about as thick as fleas on a dog's back, and we had to go slowly and carefully so as not to damage them. These nettle barracks had their feet in a slimy ooze which soaked through our shoes and impeded our progress.

Half way down the tough stems of the thick mass, the dried grass nests were lashed firmly between their supports. The walls of the nests seemed to be woven and coiled with fine grasses, and sometimes a dead stem was coiled around the bottom. They had a substantial architecture of their own, the mother birds being the master builders. There were from one to four pale bluish-green eggs splotted heavily with black, brown, and purple, and the same number of young of varying ages. They were so close together that the sitting mothers could gossip in whispers, or pull each other's hair, which they sometimes did. We counted a half dozen nests within a space of two square yards. Over it all the barrage of the screaming patrol seethed back and forth, their scarlet epaulets flashing in the sun. Nothing could scare them. We were out-done and out-stung.

According to Gabrielson and Jewett, three counties, Klamath, Lake, and Harney contain most of the breeding population of red-wings in eastern Oregon, where the birds are present in the large swamps and borders in uncounted thousands, and in the fall the gathering swarms look like black clouds on the horizon.