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THE LUTESCENT WARBLER

by

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Photographs by the Author

The first nest of this warbler I ever found was tucked up under some dry ferns in the bank of a little hollow where a tree had been uprooted. When I was twenty feet distant, the mother flushed and flew straight over the tree-tops. I watched carefully to get a good look at the owner, but she was very shy and kept out of sight. Not till the following season, when I found two more nests of the same species, did I place this warbler on my list of bird acquaintances.

The second nest was on a hillside under a fir tree, placed on the ground in a tangle of grass and briar. It contained five eggs, pinkish-white in color, dotted with brown. This mother was not so shy as the first one and remained in the tree overhead. Then I found a third nest with four eggs on a sloping bank just beside a woodland path. A fourth nest was tucked in under the over-hanging grasses and leaves in an old railroad cut. It contained five fresh eggs on the 8th of June.

Last summer I found a nest placed in a somewhat different position. While watching a white-crowned sparrow, my attention was attracted to a lutescent warbler in a willow. Twice she carried food into the thick foliage of an arrowwood bush. A cluster of twigs often sprouts out near the upper end of the branch and here in the fall the leaves collect in a thick bunch. In one of these bunches three feet from the ground the warbler had tunneled out the dry leaves and snugly fitted in her nest, making a dark and well protected home. For some reason the nest did not contain the full complement of eggs. On June 2nd, the day I found the nest, it held one half-grown bird and an addled egg.

I have found this warbler quite abundant throughout the western part of Oregon, where they begin nesting in the latter part of May and the first of June. Over on the Oregon coast the nesting season is always a

little later. There amid the continued roar of the breakers, within a few yards of the ocean beach, I found a lutescent warbler sitting on five eggs, the first of last July. This nest was placed above the ground two feet up in a bush. So it is not rare to find the lutescent warbler nesting above ground.

This warbler is not showy like some of its cousins, but in harmony with its shy disposition it carries its brighter colors beneath the outer surface. The distinguishing feature that ornithologists have selected in identifying this feathered mite is the patch of pale orange hidden by the grayish tips of the cap feathers. But it is seldom that this hidden crown of gold is seen in the live bird. If you want to see it you will have to take the time and patience to cultivate the owner's acquaintance.

One generally has to force his friendship upon a bird by lying around the nesting site for hours at a time. That is the way I had to do with "Lutie." Sometimes you are accepted without much hesitation, but more often you are regarded with continued suspicion. It all depends upon the bird. The first day I found the warbler's nest, I sat down fifteen feet away and it was almost an hour before the mother would return to feed her young. Fifty yards down the hillside a <sup>44</sup>bird had hung her nest. I was examining it when the parents came with food. I sat down not five feet away, and in exactly three minutes by the watch one of the parents entered and fed the young.

"Lutie" became quite tame after I had visited her for two or three days. And she lost her fear of the camera. Film after film was snapped, but her movements were always very rapid, and weather conditions are not always of the best in Oregon.

As I sat in the bushes by the nest with the camera by my side, I had almost as good a chance to study the markings of her dress as if I held her in my hand. She would alight on a twig three feet away and I often saw her orange crown when she ruffled up her feathers in inquiry or alarm. It seems

strange that such a delicate tinge of orange should be hidden as if it would fade away in the sunshine. Perhaps in time when this fidgety little fellow has reached a higher stage in the evolution of its existence, he will flit about the trees in a real cap of gold.

An even shyer cousin of "Lutie's" is the western yellow-throat. He loves a secluded spot where a little stream seeps down through the grass and forms a wet, sedgy space. What a deceiver this hooded-faced sprite is. Looking for his nest is something like searching for the bags of gold at the rainbow's tip. You may hear him and his mate almost any time of the day, but seldom see him. If you plod through the grass looking for his straw basket of eggs, he will peek at you from a tussock as if inviting you to come on, and then repeat the offense from another spot some distance away. His wife is a timid creature, yet she goes about without the sign of a veil.

I never know just when yellow-throat is going to depart in the fall, or when he will return in the spring. I have never seen him going away or coming back. You may hear him one day and find your garden tenantless the following. Then after a long silence, you wake up some morning and find he is there again, as if he had grown out of the ground during the night, like a toad-stool. After his return in the spring, it is never long before he is scratching out a hollow in a dry grass bunch to line with bark strips and shreds, and he worked side by side with his mate and never feared or faltered for an instant.