

The air was crisp. The snow crunched under foot. The waters of Fulton Creek slid noiselessly through the lush grasses that hung along the bank. The clump of tall firs up the hillside was roughly inked against the gray clouds. The dead hush of winter had crept up the canon. Suddenly a sound like the tinkling of tiny bell-voices broke the stillness. Across the long white vista between the pointed firs, scurried a whole ~~troop~~ of black and white fairies.

I stood in the same place a little over three months later. The young firs rose in serried ranks from the creek-side, each topped with the brighter green of the new spring growth. The alders and dog-woods had suddenly split their bugs as if shame had shaken their naked limbs. The open glade shimmered with the diamond drops on the tender shoots of new grass. The air quivered with each sound and motion. Everything throbbed with expectancy. Where I had seen a dozen fairies, now I saw only two. Where the rest of the troupe had gone, I do not know. This newly wedded pair seemed happy and contented.

I stood there and watched as one of the midgets whirled over to a nearer bush. What was I doing there? He fidgeted about as if he had put something away and couldn't remember just where he laid it. I looked around but saw nothing but the wreck of an old alder; dead, rotten, useless, broken off five feet from the ground; not even good for fire-wood; worm-eaten at the bottom, almost ready to return as earth

to the ground from which it sprung. Rotten, but not entirely useless,--it gave me a suggestion.

The little Black-capped Titmouse or Chickadee is the most constant feathered friend I have, for there is hardly a day in the year that I cannot find him, whether it be hot or cold. On some of my tramps in the rain and snow, the chickadee has been the only bit of bird life that has cheered my way. I have never found the chickadee moody. I've seen him when it was so cold I couldn't understand just how he kept his tiny body warm; when it looked like all hunting for him and no game. If he was hungry, he didn't show it. The wren goes south and lives in sunshine and plenty all winter. He goes wild with delight when he returns home in the spring. The chickadee winters in the North. He endures the cold and hunger of the dreary months. In the spring his cheer seems just the same. He doesn't bubble over. He takes his abundance in quiet and contentment.

Chickadee never seems to have the blues, but for all his cheer and happiness, the lonliest, saddest bird I ever saw was a chickadee who had lost his mate. It was cold and darkening. I heard the sad, drawn-out "Phee-bee" note up the ravine. As he came nearer, it sounded like a funeral dirge. The bewildered little fellow was all a-flutter and uneasy, flitting from tree to tree and calling, calling. I can hear the echo yet calling for his love.

The glade up Fulton Creek just suited the chickadees.
It was

It was rarely invaded by troublesome people. Chickadee likes human society when the snow comes and food grows scarce in the woods, but just as soon as he falls in love and his mind turns to house-keeping, he looks for a quiet nook.

The next time I strolled up the creek, one of the newly wedded pair suddenly met me just where the path branched a few yards below the alder stump. I didn't see him come, but he appeared right on the limbs of the maple over the trail that led away from the nest. He didn't see me at all! The little trickster! He was very industriously pecking at nothing I could see with my field glass. As soon as I stopped, he began turning and twisting, stretching his neck to look under a leaf. He hung by his toes, head down, and swung back up like a trapeze performer. Then he swung head down again, dropped and lit right side up on the branch below. He made a high jump of over a foot, but grabbed nothing. And such unconcern! He never looked at me. I thought of the lad across the street, who, by his stunts, used to entice me out of the yard against orders. The little black-cap was as alluring now as the boy was then. "You're entertaining, but not so public-spirited as you seem," I said, as I followed him off down the wrong path, away from his nest.

I'll never forget the day we trudged up with the camera to get a picture of the eggs. When we reached the chickadee villa, the mother was at home. I knocked at the base so she

would leave.

would leave. Then I shook the stub, but she did not take the hint. I took a little twig and poked in, trying to lift her up. She met my advance with a peculiar little explosion, that sounded like a mad cat in a box. Drive her out of her own house? Well I guess not. Finally I cut a piece right out of the back part of her house, where the wall was thin. There she sat immovable, while I focused my camera. The little black eyes showed a brave determination that I've seldom seen in a bird. I carefully slid the piece back again and locked it with a string.

I knew she had performed an heroic act. I sat down under the tree to watch. The instant all was quiet, she shot from the door like a winged bullet and struck right on the limb beside her mate, who had been dee-dee-ing to her all the while. Of course, birds do not feel as we feel, but I don't believe a sweet-heart ever met her lover returning from a field of battle with a greater show of joy. They simply threw themselves into each others arms. It wasn't a silent meeting either; there were real cracks of kisses and twitters of praise. Chickadees are not human by any means, but had she not defended her home all alone against the invasion of a giant?

A day or so later, I really did catch both the owners away from the nest and I counted one-two-three-four-five-six-seven dotted eggs on a cottony couch. When the mother returned she seemed so flustered and worried that I closed the door and

started to leave in a hurry. But I hadn't stepped away more than ten feet before she was clinging at the doorway, and a moment later she popped into the hole and continued her brooding.

What if every egg should hatch, I thought? What could any mother and father do with seven children, all the same age? Think of it! Two pair of twins and a set of triplets, and not one of the youngsters able to assist in caring for brother or sister.

I have often watched old birds feeding young, but I never had a good idea of just the amount of insect food they did consume, till I watched the chickadees for a few days after the eggs hatched. Both birds fed in turn, and the turns were anywhere from three to ten minutes apart. From the time the callow chicks were born, the parents were busy from daylight to dark. They searched every leaf and twig, along the limbs and trunk to the roots of every tree, under bark and moss, in ferns, bushes and vines, and they hunted thoroughly. Such numbers of spiders, they ate, and green caterpillars, brown worms, grass-hoppers, daddy-long-legs, moths, millers and flies, beside untold numbers of eggs and larvae. Everything was grist that went to the chickadee mill. The way they could turn insects into feathers, distributing black and white pigments just where they belonged, was simply marvelous. A baby chickadee

changes about as much in a day as a human baby does in a year.

One can readily estimate the amount of insect life that is destroyed each day, when the parents return every few minutes with food. Think of how closely each bush and tree is gone over everywhere about the nest. One chickadee nest in an orchard means the destruction of hundreds and maybe thousands of harmful insects and worms every day. It more than pays for all the fruit the birds can destroy in half a dozen seasons. But there are generally other birds nesting about. Think of the time when seven young chickadees are turned loose to search among the trees day after day during the entire year.

I spent two whole days at the nest before the young chicks were ready to leave home. The owners of the stump seemed to think we had placed the camera there for their convenience, for they generally used the tripod for a perch. Then they always paused a moment at the threshold before entering. The seven eggs had pretty well filled the nest. Now, it looked like an overflow. It seemed to me if the little chicks continued to grow, they would either have to be stacked up in tiers or lodged in an upper story.

Once the mother came with a white miller. She had pulled the wings off, but even then, it looked entirely too big for a baby's mouth. Not a single nestling but wanted to try it. When the mother left, I looked in and one little fellow sat with the miller bulging out of his mouth. It wouldn't go

down any further, but he lay back in apparent satisfaction. Digestion was working at a high speed below; I saw the miller gradually slipping down until finally, the last leg disappeared as he gave a strenuous gulp.

The day was warm. We built a little promenade from the front door, and set one of the youngsters, blinking, in the sunshine. He soon got his bearings. He liked it and looked so perked up and proud. Then, we set out another and another--seven in all. It looked like a public dressing-room. Think of being crowded in the tiny hole of a hollowed, punky stump with six brothers and sisters; jammed together with your clothes all wrinkled, not even room to stretch out, let alone comb and dress and clean yourself properly. Above all, sounded a real chickadee concert, each vying to out-do the other. "Here-we-are! We-are-seven! Seven-are-we-dee-dee-dee!" Even the mother and father sounded a "Tsic-a-dee-dee" of satisfaction as they fed from the perch instead of diving down into the little dungeon.

I believe there's more family love in the chickadee household than any bird home I've visited. I've seen a young flicker jab at his brother in real devilish madness, but I never saw two chickadees come to blows. Of course, when young chickadees are hungry, they will cry for food just as any child. Not one of the seven was the least backward in asserting his

rights when a morsel of food was in sight. Each honestly believed his turn was next. Once or twice I saw what really looked like a family jar. Each one of the seven was clamoring for food as the mother hovered over. She herself, must have forgotten whose turn it was, for she hung beneath the perch a moment to think. How she ever told one from the other so as to divide the meals evenly, I don't know. There was only one chick I could recognize, and that was pigeon-toed, tousled-headed Johnnie. He was the runt of the family, and spoiled if ever a bird was spoiled.

We trudged up the canon early the next morning. Four of the flock had left the nest and taken to the bushes. Three staid at the stump while we focused the camera. It is rare, indeed, when one catches a real clear photograph of bird home-life, such as the mother placing a green cut-worm in the mouth of a hungry chick; an unusual look of satisfaction on the face of the second bantling, who had just gotten a morsel; and a hopeful expression on the countenance of the third, who is sure to get the next mouthful: the present, the past and the future in one scene.

There are perhaps many other families of chickadees that live and hunt through the trees along Fulton Creek. I rarely visit the place that I do not hear them. But ever since the seven left the old alder stump, that had now fallen to

pieces, I never see a flock about this haunt that they do not greet me with the same song I heard three years ago, "Tsic-a-dee-dee! Seven-are-we!"