

April 1-1944 - for Journal
6 negatives
returned

PLAYING WITH THE BIRDS IN NEW MEXICO

by

William L. Finley
Photographs by the Author

While we were in the south during the winter, we had a lot of fun watching robins, jays, flickers, bluebirds, towhees, Townsend solitaires, woodpeckers, juncos, and also hawks and owls that one Mexican naturalist said were behaving like Japs and Germans. The juncos were most abundant and were good American citizens, and we had a better chance to picture and study these than any of the others. They were always in flocks and there were six species that made up our immediate winter groups. They get plenty of food here during the winter among the chamise bushes whose tall, dry stems and bushy tops still full of seeds, cluster thickly about the yards and fields. In summer they are a bower of yellow blooms. Here, too, the birds roost at night, cosy in their shelters even in a snow storm. The largest number of migrants in this region were the juncos, four of which were definitely identified. This is not an easy matter with birds in winter plumage. Eight species of juncos are recorded for the state of New Mexico.

The juncos were thick around the door yards, leaving their bushes for bird seed and bread crumbs that we put out daily on our porch. With our coming and going from the cottage, they became used to us and fairly tame. The Fish and Wildlife Service and the bird banding clubs trace the movements, history, and length of life of birds by aluminum bands placed on their legs. In 1941 we banded some fifty juncos at the ranch, and many of these returned in the next few years. One of these previously banded juncos came back this winter and committed suicide by flying against a window. We saw two other banded birds that were tame, fluttering about the kitchen door picking up scraps.

It wasn't easy to get near enough with the camera to picture

these birds. One of the boys had a couple of Teddy bears and wanted to see if the juncos would be afraid of them. We set the Teddies out on the ground where we had been putting out feed, and scattered bird seed around their feet and on their heads. The juncos took a quizzical look at the squatted toys, and then advanced boldly upon them as if they had found the joker in our little trick. They knew these were stuffed dummies and harmless. Day after day they cavorted all over the red and white Teddy and the wooly brown one, picking seeds out of their coats and even their ears. We then set up the camera quite near them and they took it for granted that this was another one of our dummies. Attaching a string to the shutter, we stood partly shielded in the window and snapped picture after picture. When the camera clicked, one or two birds would lift involuntarily at the sound, but most of them got used to it and paid no attention.

While there was a large number of Red-backed, Shufeldt, and Montana juncos, there were only a few other birds. A couple of canon towhees broke into the junco group and took the center of the feeding ground for a few minutes at a time. The towhees from the start ignored the stuffed-shirt Teddies and paid strict attention to their eating. They came and went at intervals, while the juncos staid around all during the day. Working through the sunny part of the day, we obtained a goodly number of kodachromes of the different species, and also black and white negatives.

One chilly day when the juncos were thicker than usual and squabbling among themselves for preferred places at the table, we saw a small, dark colored hawk that appeared from the sky and alighted on a tree not far away. This was the alert signal for all small birds to scam and freeze. The juncos burst up like a small explosion, clinging petrified wherever they struck like bunches of feathers pasted on a wall, in a corner, or under porch chairs. For several minutes they sat with frozen faces and staring eyes.

This had happened once before as the slim, fierce little falcon had frequented the region, sitting in plain sight, even flaring down to the bushes that harbored the juncos and other birds. There was something unusual in the hawk's actions, as if he was a bird in a strange garret, or that he had come a long way and was very hungry, really on the war path for food of any kind. His bold, predacious behavior, though interesting, brought upon him the enmity of the ranch folks, especially sixteen-year old Henry who vowed to go gunning for him. The hawk was persistent in his hunting, but alert and elusive. One morning he was putting on some fast dive bombing among the ground birds, spiraling up, then tilting his pointed wings and dropping like an arrow straight for his target.

Henry was on the job, too, but couldn't get a shot at the wary bird. The hawk sailed off up the canyon and disappeared somewhere on a cliff. One morning he was back and had perched on a look-out tree in the orchard, half concealed and watching for a chance at the juncos. Henry sneaked cautiously behind the cottage and finally fired, and brought the bird down.

This hawk was blackish-brown with some slaty on the wings, a black tail with three grayish bars and tip marked with whitish, throat white streaked with black, under parts blackish-brown with tawny and white markings. Consulting Gabrielson and Jewett in their "Birds of Oregon," it appeared that Henry's bird conformed to their description of the black pigeon hawk. But how come? They say the black pigeon hawk "breeds in western British Columbia and perhaps on Vancouver Island, and winters south along the coast to southern California."

I skinned the bird and sent the specimen to Jewett, who verified our identification. He said there was no record of this bird ever having been seen in New Mexico and that it established a new record for the state.

Again there was peace for the birds of the ranch. Even the shy Townsend solitaire ventured in, but never down among the groups of feeding birds. He staid high up in the tall cottonwood trees or perched guardedly on the tip of a juniper, frequently uttering his clear, flute-like note

that resounded across the pastures. He was a solitary singer for never did we see but one at a time. Then along the snowy ridges among the stunted pines we often came upon a wandering flock of pinon jays . They are definitely clannish, always a welded flock wavering across the valley, their brilliant blue glinting in the sun, their clarion calls mingling in a medley. The gentle chestnut-backed bluebirds flitted in one morning to sit in a group in an apricot tree and look the ranch over. They fluttered down, took a taste of the juncos' crumbs, but disdained them and dropped into the grass to hunt for insects. The two other birds that we saw in the orchard were the gray titmouse and the Rocky Mountain nuthatch.