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THE AERY OF THE RED-TAIL.

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"That chicken-hawk's got a nest somewhere down in them cottonwoods: He's been 'round there every year nigh as long as I can remember. He's never pestered any of my chickens so I don't pester him," replied the old farmer, who had taken us out behind the barn to a little knoll where we could see the grove of cottonwood trees and the old hawk circling above them.

OUT

This was in the summer of 1898 while we were (passing up the south bank of the Columbia River) on a hunting trip. We searched the woods at the time but were unable to find the aery. A year later we happened to be in that vicinity early in the springtime before the trees had leaved out and made a careful search for the Red-tail's nest. It was near the top of one of the tallest trees, and one look sufficed to give us both the same opinion: the nest was beyond human reach.

The red-tailed hawk is perhaps the best known of the larger raptores throughout the United States. It may be found in almost every state where the woods still remain thick enough for it to find a good nesting place. The Pacific Coast is a more typical place for hawks and eagles than many of the eastern states. The tall trees, the sheer cliffs along the waterways and the steep hillsides overlooking the valleys beneath, furnish ideal homes for these birds of prey. Their chosen sites are inaccessible positions where they are safe from human interference. The red-tail is perhaps commonest about the hills and in the valleys of California, where it builds in

the scattered oaks. Almost every little canon along the central coast region is occupied by a pair of these birds. Their nests are easily found in the early spring by scanning the trees for a mile up the hillside with a field glass. The abundance of these hawks is due to the large supply of natural food they find about these regions. Squirrels, moles and other rodents are very plentiful and these hawks help to keep in check these pests that exert such an evil upon agricultural interests. If it were not for the birds of prey, the balance of nature would surely swing very much against those who cultivate the soil.

A red-tail likes a high, commanding site for a nest just as a mallard searches the sedge grass about a pond for a home, and the pair of hawks in the cottonwood surely found it. We schemed for three different summers after we found this aery of the red-tail before we finally succeeded in leveling our camera at the eggs. The nest tree measured over fourteen feet around at the bottom. There was not a limb for forty feet. The nest itself was lodged just one hundred and twenty feet up. It was out of the question to clamber up such a tree with climbers, ropes or anything else, but we had another plan.

We had spotted a young cottonwood just fifteen feet away. This might serve as a ladder, so we chopped at the base till it began to totter. With ropes we pulled it over. The crown lodged in the branches of the first large limb of the

nest tree, full forty feet up. This formed a shaky, aerial bridge, up which we clambered a third of the way to the nest. The anticipation led us on. We lassoed upper branches, dug our climbing-irons into the bark and worked slowly up.

We found a stack of sticks the size of a small haystack. They were not pitched together helter-skelter. A big nest like a hawk's or heron's always gives me the impression that it is easily thrown together. I examined this one and found it as carefully woven as a wicker basket. It was strong at every point. Sticks over a yard in length and some as big as your wrist were all worked into a compact mass. In the hollowed top on some bark and leaves lay the two eggs.

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I never saw a more commanding stronghold. It overlooked the country for miles in every direction. From where the hawk mother brooded her eggs, I looked out far up the Columbia, and I could see the cavern-cut slopes of Mt. Hood. Extending to the westward, was the long line of ponds and lakes, the red-tail's favorite hunting ground, while to the north lay the broad expanse of water, and in the distance loomed up the dome-like peak of St. Helens, covered with perpetual snow.

How could we ever secure a good series of pictures at such a distance from the ground? It looked impossible at first, but a careful examination revealed a rare arrangement of nest and surroundings. If we could but hoist our equipment there was no question as to photographs. Eight feet below the

aery the trunk of the tree branched and spread in such a way that we could climb to a point just above the nest on the opposite limb. We strapped the camera in a crotch that seemed built for the purpose, with the sun coming from the right direction. The rub came in focusing the instrument. One hundred and twenty feet is not such a dizzy height when you stand on the ground and look up, but strap yourself to the limb of a tree and dangle out backward over the brink. No matter how strong the rope, there's a feeling of death creeping up and down every nerve in your body the first time you try it.

The eggs of some hawks differ widely in marking, but the two we found in the cottonwood year after year were always of a bluish-white tint, with pale lavender shell markings. In her period of housekeeping, the mother seemed to estimate well the change of the season. She cradled her eggs about the last week of March before the trees had leaved out, and all during the time of incubation, she had a clear view of the surrounding country. When the hawklets were hatched and she had to go back and forth carrying them food, and when the young began to move about in the nest and peek over the edge, they were well protected from a view below as well as from the sun and rain above by the thick surrounding foliage.

The red-tail is often called "chicken-hawk", but he does not deserve the name. Many of the hawks carry reputations that they do not deserve. Often people who live in the country

are enemies of the hawks and owls and shoot them at every opportunity, because they think the hawk is the persistent foe of poultry, whereas this is a very small part of his diet. In regions and in seasons when animal and insect food is scarce, this hawk will catch chickens and game birds, but it lives mostly on mice and shrews as well as frogs, snakes, lizards and insects of various kinds. In a prairie and hilly country, almost its entire food is squirrels, gophers, meadow-mice and rabbits.

It has been demonstrated by careful examinations of hundreds of stomachs of these hawks, carried on under the direction of the Department of Agriculture at Washington, that poultry and game birds do not constitute more than ten percent of the food of this hawk. All the other beneficial animals preyed upon, including snakes, will not increase the proportion to fifteen percent, so there is a balance of eighty-five percent in favor of the red-tail. This is a fact that every gunner should remember, since the hawks destroy so many injurious rodents they should never be shot unless in the act of stealing chickens.

There is a charm in the life of a wild bird of prey. Like the Indian that once hunted his daily food through forest and over plain, these creatures have every sense developed to a high point for their own protection and existence. They maintain themselves by preying upon birds, fish and mammals

almost as crafty as themselves.

Off to the west of the hawk's nest and spreading for two or three miles to the north and south, is a net-work of low-lying ponds and lakes. Here the red-tails fished and hunted. Skirting one of these lakes early one morning, we came to the top of a low rise between this and the next pond. A hundred and fifty yards below and at the edge of the timber, we saw one of the red-tails sitting on a dead stump. We crouch in the bushes and studied him for several minutes with the field glass. He had not seen us or at least, he paid no attention to our presence. Suddenly he lifted his wings and set out straight across the lake, but at the further side he seemed to change his mind, for he swerved and sailed back a short way to the left, and suddenly dropped to the water like an osprey. With heavy flapping of wings, he struggled to regain the air with the weight of a large <sup>fish</sup> carp that was wriggling in his talons. As soon as the hawk reached the bank, he dropped the fish evidently to let it die or to get a better grip on the load. A few intervening bushes cut off our view of the fisher and his catch, but we lay quiet till the old hawk took wing again with his fish. He could hardly scrape over the tops of the low willows as he labored slowly toward his aery in the cottonwood.

That afternoon we were again at the nest tree with our cameras. The two parents, as usual, discovered our approach while we were some distance from their home, and during

the ascent they circled about overhead with an occasional loud scream. When we looked into the nest, the fish feast was over, for only the tail-end of the carp remained. The fish was originally over a foot in length and I should have judged it too heavy for the hawk to carry such a distance, had we not seen him do it. But these birds of prey are powerful on the wing; they will sometimes attack and kill animals as large as themselves.

Occasionally a hawk will make a mistake. I have the record of one of these hawks that was seen sitting on a perch watching the ground below. Suddenly he poised and dove straight for the prey. He seemed to strike squarely and began to rise with a small animal in his talons. The bird rose for thirty or forty feet and then with a scream, he began to flutter higher and higher, circling around, and all the time feathers were dropping from the hawk's body. He reached a height of several hundred feet when he began to descend rapidly and soon dropped to the ground. The hawk had pounced upon a weasel and had clutched it through the hips but had not killed the little animal. Both the bird and his prey were dead when found. The weasel, in its death-struggle, had literally disembowled the big bird.

Our young chieftains in the tall cottonwood, for so we called them, were now almost full grown. They were as large

as their parents but their heads were still covered with downy feathers. Instead of crouching timidly in the nest, they stood up and walked about or perched in the crotch over the aery. Their home, which was once nest-shaped, was worn down about the edges until it was a mere platform of sticks. While at first they assumed a fighting attitude when we reached the nest, in all our visits, they never once tried to tear our hands with their sharp beaks. How they watched us with those large eyes of gray, such sharp, serious eyes! No movement of ours escaped their gaze. After several visits to the aery, we learned to regard the hawklets with a sort of love. The long trip, the ascent of the tree, difficult and dangerous as it was, well repaid us for a glimpse of those wild creatures in their home. We longed to take them with to study their habits, for in a few days they would be forever beyond our reach. But what satisfaction could we have had in watching these birds behind prison bars? I should much rather have had their dried bones. Anything but a hawk or an eagle in a cage.

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Conditions had changed somewhat in the vicinity of the hawk's nest by the first of June when we made our last visit. The river had risen and covered the low land. The water had come up to the base of the tree and we reached it only by wading through the woods for half a mile with the cameras strapped to our backs. The warning screams of the parents gave assurance that the home was not yet deserted. Peering up



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through the foliage with our field glass, we saw the two young  
braves straining their necks and watching us over the edge.  
When we reached the large fork below the nest, one of the par-  
ents swooped downward and swerved above the nest with a loud  
scream. If it was a command, it was instantly obeyed, for the  
young hawks spread their wings and skimmed out over the trees  
and on up the bank of the Columbia.

We made a close study of the red-tail's home in the  
tall cottonwood. He was always a successful hunter. In all  
our visits, we never saw the time when his larder was empty.  
Nor did we find that he had to resort to the chicken yard for  
food. There was plenty of wild game. On the first visits, we  
found the remains of quail and pheasants in the aery. One  
morning we saw the mangled body of a screech-owl; almost a case  
of hawk eat hawk. The old red-tail had evidently found the  
victim returning home too late in the morning, and there were  
no restrictions as to race and color in the hawk household.

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Later in the season when the banks of the Columbia overflowed  
and covered most of the surrounding country, the old hawk did  
not abandon his own preserve. He turned his attention entirely  
to fishing. Where the carp and catfish fed about the edges of  
the ponds, he had no trouble in catching plenty to eat. Twice  
we found carp over a foot in length in the aery. After that  
we saw no indication of food other than fish, and on our last  
visit we picked up the head bones of seven catfish.

The wild life of the red-tail has a fascination for me. He has an individuality that is as interesting as a person. He has a character as clearly marked as in any feathered creature I ever saw. (The bleak winter winds that sweep the valley of the Columbia and drive the other birds to the south-land, never bother him.) This is his permanent home. He is not a vagabond. He is local in attachments and habits. This is his hunting ground. He won it by years of defense. (He beats over the field and along the edge of the woods as regularly as the fisherman casts his net.) He has his favorite perch. He watches the pond as closely (for carp) as the farmer watches his orchard. His routine of life is as marked as any inhabitant along the river. Nor can I believe he is lacking in sentiment of the home. He adds sticks to his house and enlarges it year by year. Who can say that the old aery is not fraught with many hawk memories of the past?