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THE BUSH-TIT, A BIRD ARCHITECT

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by

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Photographs by the Author

If children are interested in bird life, one of their best friends is the little Tit that is not much larger than a hummingbird. While it is about four inches in length, the body is only half that size as the tail is as long as the body. As a nest builder, this bird is a real architect, and it lays from six to eight little pure white eggs. Except during nesting season, a flock of these tiny birds of from twelve to twenty always keep hopping and dodging about the trees. Children should always know that they are some of the best friends of our orchards and forests.

The bush-tit that nests in the Willamette Valley and along the Coast is very much like the California tit, although the top of its head is sooty-brown, its back brownish-gray, while the southern bird is lighter brown and paler gray.

When we were in California in April, we found a bush-tit's nest tied to the lower limbs of an acacia tree about four feet from the ground. This was on the campus of the University of California where the birds are quite tame and supposed to be well protected. Both of the birds were carrying food to the nest, so we knew they had a family inside. In order to get pictures, we tied back two obstructing limbs that hid the nest, set up the camera at a distance of about three feet, using a string to release the shutter. We sat on the ground some fifteen feet away. Neither of the birds seemed to have any fear of us or the camera.

All of a sudden, a California jay spied us, flew into the tree, as he apparently had seen the nest. He had all the sneaking air of thief, and since he wasn't afraid of us or the camera, he dodged right in behind the nest and with one move cut a gash in its side with his bill. I was disgusted at his boldness and vicious intentions. I jumped up and scared him away. The problem now was how we were to protect these innocent little bush-tits.

For quite a while we waited to see if the jay was hanging around, as I wanted to take a crack at him with a rock. In order to save the young tits, we untied the limbs and also pulled around some others to hide the nest in the hope that the jay wouldn't see it and rob it. The next morning we found that all our efforts had been in vain and that the wily jay had returned and devoured all the baby tits. I should like to have shot him. I felt that some of our best birds are in a bloody war.

I have read in one of the bird books that the California bush-tit builds the same kind of a nest as that of our Oregon bird. However, in examining nests of the two species, I noticed this California nest had some individual features. It was only seven inches long, made of dull green moss, down from sycamore leaves, bound together with fine twigs, and decorated in a unique fashion. Dead yellow catkins of the acacia were woven in here and there, and as a surprise, the whole lower part of the gourd flaunted long strips of filmy white paper, apparently from a paper napkin thrown down. The interior was padded thick with feathers for a warm bed.

Studying bush-tits in Oregon, we found they build a real bird mansion, a gourd-shaped home from ten to twelve inches long with a round entrance at the top end. I once watched a pair of these birds lay the foundation, but really the bush-tit does not follow our ideas of architecture, for he builds from the top down. This pair began making the roof of the home, then a round doorway, and next they began weaving the walls of moss, fibers, and lichens. From the doorway, there was a sort of hall down to the main living-room. This was lined with feathers.

To make a soft feather lining required a good deal of hunting. This was not completed till after the eggs were laid. Whenever one of the birds came upon a feather, he picked it up and brought it home. The bush-tits reminded me of some people building a house, but are not able to furnish it throughout, so they pick up the furnishings from time to time.

In some parts of Oregon where moss hangs in long bunches from limbs of trees, the bush-tit uses this natural beginning for a nest. I saw one

of these birds build its home by getting inside of a long piece of moss and weave this into the walls of a nest. At another time, I saw a bush-tit's nest twenty inches long. They had started their home on a limb and it was evidently not low enough to suit them, for they made a fiber strap ten more inches long and swung their nest to that, letting it hang in a bunch of willow leaves.

I never had a good idea of the amount of insect food a bush-tit consumed until I watched a pair a few days after the eggs were hatched. Both birds fed in turn and the turns averaged from five to ten minutes apart. The parents were busy from dawn till dark. They brought caterpillars, moths, daddy-long-legs, spiders, plant lice, and many other insects. If we could but estimate the amount of insects destroyed by all the birds about a locality, we should find it enormous. Without the help of these assistant gardeners, the bushes and trees might soon be leafless.

Millions of destructive insects lay their eggs, live and multiply in the buds and bark of trees, and it seems to be the bush-tit's life work to keep this horde in check. After the little family left the home, I never found them quiet for a minute. When they took possession of a tree, they took it by storm. It looked as if it had suddenly grown wings and every limb was alive. They turned every leaf, looked into every cranny, and scratched up the moss and lichens. They hung by their toes to peek into every bud; they swung around the branches to pry into every crack; then in a few minutes they tilted off to the next tree to continue the hunt.

One day when we were out in the woods, I heard a bush-tit in a tree begin a shrill, quavering whistle, and instantly it was taken up by everyone of a band. Two tiny birds near me, as well as every one of the others, froze to their perches. Had I not known, I couldn't have told just where the whistle was coming from, it sounded so scattering, like the elusive, grating call of the cicada. Then I saw a hawk sweeping slowly overhead, and the confusing chorus lasted as long as the hawk was in sight. Nor did one of the bush-tits seem to move a feather, but just sit and trill in perfect unison. It served as

a unique method of protection. The whole flock had learned to act as a unit. It would have been hard for an enemy to tell where a single bird was, the alarm note was so deceiving. They were so motionless and their clothing harmonized so perfectly with the shadows of the foliage.