

Bush-Tit Is Busy Beaver Of Birds



Along The Trail
by
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"Top of head light brown; upper parts ashy gray; under parts dull brownish gray" one bird book describes the bush-tit. Maybe so, but when you see a loose flock of seemingly all gray tiny birds trouping, follow-the-leader style, through the bushes or across a clearing, they are bush-tits.

These feathered mites are barely larger than a man's thumb, and aside from the hummers, are the smallest birds in coastal California.

Size has no bearing upon industry in this instance; the smallest bird builds one of the largest nests. They are remarkable structures for so small a bird.

The bush-tit builds a pendant type nest best described as a pocket, or in my eyes, resembling an old gray sock. Unlike most birds which, of necessity, begin at the bottom and build upward, these deft architects start at the top and work downward. There is nothing strange in this, of course, for one cannot hang a sock in thin air.

Both members of the pair share the task of construction. Early in spring, around March, if we watch the pepper trees, garden shrubs, or wild plants we may see a pair of bush-tits at house building.

The tiny fellows "chip and tweet" constantly to keep in touch with one another as they scour the ground for bits of leaves, fine grass stems, and other material, or the standing

plants for cotton-like downy matter. Discarded paper often comes into play in completing the structure.

The top is woven and anchored to small branches, then a skeleton of nest sides and bottom is attached. Gradually the sides are padded until no longer can daylight be seen through the walls. Then the birds go inside through a round opening near the top, and work from inside out.

Once the pouch is securely tied at the top to a group of twigs and well reinforced to support the prospective family, the diminutive pair begin hauling in fur and feathers with which to line the nest.

After several days and many trips, a quart or more of feathers have been compacted in the bottom. Seeing these birds bringing in this soft lining material one wonders where in the world they find all the stuff!

Large families are the rule with bush-tits, from five to nine eggs being laid. The one, at, round "door step" is sufficient to accomodate the parents as they come and go with food, but once saw a nest where impatient young had torn a second door. The young were nearly large enough to leave the nest, they were clamoring for food loudly that dual feedings were underway, one parent at each door.

In our photo we see only top and opening hole of the bush-tit's nest which is hidden in baccharis bush.

Apparently the birds attempt to camouflage the nest. Those eucalyptus and willow are usually hidden by leaves. One nest which I found in a dead lily heavily draped with western lichen, appeared as just another strand of lichen. Another, in an area where a reddish algae green was decorated with bits of the plant thus indicating to me that an attempt is made to match the nest with its surroundings.

My California residence has extended from Santa Barbara county where I saw bush-tits nestling in the olive trees, to Humboldt county where one old bird book says bush-tits are not found, but where I have already seen two flocks.

We may look upon the bush-tit as an assistant gardener. At the time his young are growing up, the industrious pair makes hundreds of trips daily to the nest, each trip with an insect.

Not all insects, of course, are harmful to plants; some are beneficial. There is a natural balance which should exist between the so-called beneficial and harmful insect species.

Into this natural picture come birds and other animals, working their part into the great overall scheme of wildlife existence.