

Along The Trail

by
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My neighbors near Lompoc in Santa Barbara county knew I had a deep interest in birds, so when they saw a large gray and white bird hanging to a drippy water faucet in their garden they hurried over to get me. From their description the bird seemed to be something not commonly seen in the area so I, too, hurried to see what manner of thing it was that caused so much excitement.

The object of our interest was perched in top of the pipe and was leaning over and catching the drops of water as they fell, this being his way of getting a drink. When I glimpse a strange bird I strain all my senses trying to absorb all the details I can, for fear it will depart hastily and never be seen again. It is best not to take any chances of scaring the bird away, but in this case there was no danger, for it just continued catching water and paid no attention to his human observers.

I had never seen this species before in person but my many hours of literature perusal told me that this was one of the jays although his shape was quite a bit different. Actually it was not a real jay but a Clark's Nutcracker. The bird is in the crow family and is also commonly referred to as Clark's Crow.

This event occurred in the fall of 1950 and was a rather unusual thing in that the normal home of the Nutcracker is in the high Sierra. Ornithologists, however, have known for years that in cer-

tain winters numbers of Nutcrackers desert their mountain homes and visit the coastal areas. Investigation indicates strongly that this movement to the lowlands is the result of a poor crop of conifer seeds, and recent evaluation and publication of certain data correlates the bird's westward migration with a poor seed year.

My Lompoc Nutcracker remained in the area for about a week. We were much interested as we watched it hang to the large cones of the Torrey Pines and laboriously but efficiently extract the big seeds which it proceeded to crack in its long and sturdy bill.

This, and one other, are the only two Nutcrackers that I have ever seen. In the winter of 1955-56 one appeared at Prairie Creek Park in Humboldt county and remained for two days. But, in this same year they were recorded in fairly large numbers in other areas. Thirty were seen in Marin county; Santa Cruz, Watsonville, Mount Hermon, the Monterey Peninsula and various other locations along the coast were visited by Nutcrackers.

In its mountain habitat the Clark's Nutcracker is known to campers, fishermen, hikers, and other outdoorsmen who travel at the higher altitudes. Although it has been said that they are not as bold as their relatives, the jays, they will come to the camp for food and can be studied at leisure. Nutcrackers are largely gray, but have black and white wings, and a black tail bordered with white.

Probably the nut of the various pines is the major food item, although Nutcrackers are omnivorous. At times they walk upon the ground in the manner of the common crow, and are sometimes seen chasing insects. They consume large numbers of grasshoppers and crickets which they catch near the ground, but they also take to the air to chase butterflies.

The higher elevations, around 8000 feet, are the homes of breeding Nutcrackers. This nesting range extends from Alaska to Mexico. Most of the birds winter in the nesting range, or near it, but an occasional one (or a small group), moves down the mountain slope and pays coastal naturalists a visit. It is these unusual things which help make Nature study so fascinating.

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