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REARING A WREN FAMILY.

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"Why shouldn't a little wren have an enormous appetite?" I mused as I lay hidden in the tall grass watching the father as he fed the eldest of the family of five, that had flown for the first time from the nest in the hollow stump to the alder branches below. "Of course we must admit that the diminutive bob-tailed youngster must possess the most rapid double-action digestive apparatus when we remember that he grows to maturity within two weeks from the day he is hatched. Therefore the chief object of his life must be to eat and sleep."

Wrens are interesting little chaps anyhow--droll, fidgety little individuals, each with great self-esteem. My interest in a certain brown family had increased with every visit for a whole month. One picks up many acquaintances rambling about the hills, but, like people, some are more interesting than others, and acquaintanceship often warms into friendship as the days pass by.

While out-birding in the latter part of June, I was trudging along up one of the <sup>canyon paths</sup> shaded paths of the fir-covered Oregon hillsides, when a little bird whizzed headlong down in its tippling flight, barely dodging my head. Both were rather flustered at this sudden and unexpected meeting. The moment's pause on an overhanging branch was sufficient for me to recognize the hurrying stranger as a Vigor's Wren. But I hardly had time to see just what the small white ~~bird~~ was she car-

ried in her mouth. It might have been a white miller, which I imagined would soon be thrust unceremoniously down a gaping throat. For all my strategy, this little brown bird was too shrewd to show me her home.

The next day, however, I stole a march, and was well hidden in the bushes near where I thought the nest must be, when the wren appeared. I hardly expected to escape that sharp round eye, and was prepared for the scolding that followed; in fact, I submitted rather joyously to it, without a word in reply. In her bill she held a strip of snake-skin. Rather an uncanny mouthful, to be sure. She fidgeted about with her tail over her back, and then whirled away to a large upturned root covered with vines. Here she hopped about in the tangle of brier and fern, apparently forgetful of my presence; but those sharp brown eyes, behind which are generations of care and cunning gained in contact with nature, are never heedless. Her action would have deceived any other creature, but I knew her too well; at the likeliest moment and in an eye's twinkling, she suddenly popped up into the dead body of an alder-tree and disappeared into a tiny round hole.

Wrens have traditions, and, like some people, are perhaps slightly superstitious. I was not sure that a Wigor's wren considered a bit of snake-skin a necessity in her home, but I do not remember ever examining the nest of its cousin, the Parkman's Wren, and not finding this traditional bit of

treasure. Maybe it is a matter of protection, for it is said that a snake will not venture where the vestige of its own skin is found. Generations ago the ancestral wrens must have fought for protection among the tribes of reptiles, until now the descendants never think of starting upon household duties without searching up the hillsides, through the meadows, or back in the deep woods until the cast-off scaly coat of some snake is found and borne home in triumph as a hearthstone deity.

*oak* But almost every feathered creature has some interesting trait of protection. I have always found that the red-breasted nuthatch, after he has excavated his wooden home in some dead stump, never fails to collect a good supply of soft pitch and plaster it religiously about the circled doorway of the log house.

Ever since I first discovered the wren building its home in the alder stub, my interest had grown, and I was anxious to win its friendship, principally because most birds had finished nesting for the season. Why had the nest not been placed nearer the ground instead of at a distance of twelve feet, and why did they select such a dark, narrow home that I could hardly get a glimpse of the interior?

Experience had taught me not to try to win the affections of a bird too rapidly, especially at that season when household affairs were so engrossing. When I thought I could safely do so, I approached the nest rather cautiously and timidly and sat down in the tall ferns. It surprised me somewhat that neither parent

idly and sat down in the tall ferns. It surprised me somewhat that neither parent scolded at my approach. After watching and waiting for almost half an hour and seeing neither wren, I became impatient and knocked gently on the tree-trunk to pay my respects to the brown head that might be thrust from the round door above. Again I knocked, and then a little harder. It's queer a wren cannot feel such an earthquake against the pillar of her home. I shook the tree vigorously. Could it be possible the home was deserted? Visions of all sorts of bird accidents flashed through my mind as I swung up into the branches and rapped at the round door. All was dark within; not even the white eggs could be seen. This was bad luck indeed, I thought. Then, with the aid of a little mirror that is always handy to examine dark crevices, I reflected a ray of light through the door to the innermost depths. There sat the mother, her brown back almost indistinguishable from the dry sides of the house, but those round dark eyes gleamed out from the gloom. Nor did she have any idea of deserting her post for all the knocking without.

When I visited the little wooden home the first week in July, there was a decided turn in the tide of wren affairs. The news was heralded from the tree-tops. The energy that was used in keeping the secret of the little home a week previous was doubled in the eagerness to spread it among feathered neighbors far and wide. For two long weeks the mother and

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father had covered and caressed their five eggs of speckled white, until they suddenly teemed with inward life and five tiny bodies burst forth from the prison walls.

The father wren--it is often the case--was rather timid while we were around. He had a particular fear and dislike for the great three-legged, one-eyed creature--my camera--that was hidden dragon-like so near his home. Birds have many enemies, and a nest is seldom left without its guard. We soon discovered that this was the father's duty. His harsh, scolding note, sounded from the surrounding boughs, always reminded us that we were trespassing.

It was the mother's duty to forage. Returning from the hunt with food, she whisked about with a "what-are-you-doing-here" look of inquiry. Although flustered somewhat at first by our presence, she soon came to regard us with an air of indifference. A moment's pause on her threshold, and into the round opening she would pop; then, as if amazed, at the increasing appetites she had to appease, she would dart out and away for a new supply.

About the hillside and down along the little stream the mother searched continually the entire day for grubs. Each time returning, she would pause on the top of one of the trees near by and pipe her merry little trill. This note of home-coming the father never failed to hear, and it was he that always gave the response of "all's well!" I was amused *over*

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to hear how readily the wrenlets learned to recognize the voice of their mother. Her song of arrival came to be answered by such a chorus of tiny cries from the round door that she could not resist hurrying headlong to the nest. Several times from my "rabbit's hole" in the bushes, I saw a song-sparrow stop on swaying limb and sing a song somewhat resembling that of the wren, but the children in the wooden home knew not the song, and, true to their parents' teachings, remained quiet while the doughty father darted out and drove the intruder from the premises.

On July 23, I wrote in my note-book: "This morning I was surprised to see two little brown heads as I gazed through my field-glass at the round nest-hole." But how could I ever get pictures of the wren nestlings if they were to remain continually within those protected wooden walls?

For some reason, the father stormed and scolded more than usual at my next visit. He seemed out of sorts about everything. The rating I got was not very much more severe than the little wretch gave his wife when she returned each time with morsels of food. Something was radically wrong. It could not be that his mate did not search hard enough for food or bring enough back. With all his fault-finding, he never once offered to relieve his faithful wife.

Hidden in the grass, I tried to solve the secret of the father's petulant actions. Each time the patient mother

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returned, he grew more restless and violent in his language. Soon I saw his wife whirl joyously by with an unusually large white grub--surely a prize for any bird. But alas! For all her prowess, her spouse darted at her as if in madness, while she, trembling in terror, retreated down the limb, and through the bushes. For a few moments it seemed as if the wren household was to be wrecked. I was tempted to take the mother's part against such cruel treatment, as she quivered through the fern on fluttering wing toward me, but at that moment, as if thoroughly subdued, she yielded up the bug to the father. This was the bone of contention. A domestic battle had been fought and he had won. The scolding ceased. Both seemed satisfied. Mounting to the tree-top, the little mother poured forth such a flood of sweet song as rarely strikes human ear. From that moment, she seemed a different wren, released from all care and worry. Her entire time was spent in search for bugs. Each return was heralded by the high-sounding trill from the tree-top, and her husband whirled out of the tangled vines to take the morsel she carried.

But what of his actions? He had either gone crazy or he was a most selfish little tyrant, for he flew about the alder stump, calling now in a softer tone to his children within, and finally swallowed the grub himself. Two or three times he did this, until I was so disgusted I could hardly endure him. If he were hungry, why could he not skirmish for

his own bugs?

While I was chiding him for his infamous action, the mother appeared with a large moth, which he readily took. Among the alder limbs he flew and finally up to the nest-hole, out of which was issuing such a series of hungry screams as no parent with the least bit of devotion could resist. Hardly could I believe my eyes, for the little knave just went to the door, where each hungry nestling could get a good view of the morsel, then, as if scolding the little ones for being so noisy and hungry, he hopped back down the tree into the bushes.

This was indeed cause for a family revolt. The brown nestling nearest the door, grew so bold with hunger that he forgot his fear and plunged headlong down, catching in the branches below where the father perched. And the precocious youngster got the large moth as a reward for his bravery.

Not till then did it dawn upon me that there was a reason for the father's queer actions. The wrenlets were old enough to leave the nest. Outside in the warm sunshine they could be fed more easily and would grow more rapidly, and they could be taught the ways of woodcraft. In half an hour, one after another, the little wrens had been persuaded, even compelled, to leave the narrow confines of the nest and launch out into the big world.

What a task the father had brought upon himself!

*out* Surely the old woman in the shoe never had a more trying time.

The fretful father darted away to punish one of the wrenlets for not remaining quiet; he scurried here to scold another for wandering too far, or whirled away to whip a third for not keeping low in the underbrush, away from the hawk's watchful eyes.

My attention was directed in particular to one little feathered subject who, each time the brown father came back, insisted vociferously that his turn was next. Once in particular, when the camera did not fail to record, papa wren was approaching with a large grub. The wrenlet was all in ecstasy. He was calling, "Papa, papa, the bug is mine! The bug is mine!" fluttering his wings in such delight as he hopped to the next limb near the hesitating parent. But the youngster's emphatic appeal failed to persuade the father, for the next instant he deposited the morsel in the mouth of the less boisterous child. What a change in my enthusiastic little friend, who at one moment fairly tasted the dainty delicacy and the next saw it disappear down the throat of a less noisy brother. He stood looking in amazement, as his feathers ruffled up in anger and an astonished peep of disgust escaped his throat.

Another day in the warm sunshine and the wrenlets began to act more like their parents and to gain rapidly in worldly knowledge. The third morning, all was quiet and I thought the family had departed for other hunting-grounds.

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Soon however, the father appeared, and then the mother, scolding as usual. I crawled down under the tall ferns to wait. The parents had taught their children the act of keeping still very well, for not a peep was heard. But those ever-growing appetites soon mastered caution, and regardless of continual warnings, there was a soft little "Wink! Wink!" in the direction of the vine-covered stump. 'Twas hardly an exclamation of delight, but just a gentle reminder lest the ~~pasyparentgefor-~~ get. Gradually, these little notes of admonition increased in number and volume till the full chorus of five impatient voices arose from among the tangle of vines and ferns.

My continued visits had made fast friends of the little fellows. Two of them took their position on the top of the little stub where the father was accustomed to light. ~~Here they sat~~ here they sat in sleepy attitude, each awaiting his turn to be fed. Not the least accommodating were they from the photographer's point of view, for generally when the camera was focused for the picture, they would nod lower and lower, as children do at bedtime, till both were sound asleep in the warm sunshine. It was remarkable, however, to witness the effect of the mother's trill as she heralded the approach of something edible. In a flash both wrenlets on the wooden watch-tower were wide awake and on the tiptoe of expectancy.

Often do I remember trying to play foster-parent to young birds, and yet, with all my care and patience, I seldom

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succeeded. A week before when I held a large spider temptingly near the nestlings, they had crouched back in terror; but by this time they had certainly gained in worldly wisdom. I, also had not been watching the wrens for the past two weeks without learning. I had seen the mother hop up and down an old stump, like a dog after a squirrel, till she would soon haul out a big grub. Digging into this birdstorehouse with my knife, in a trice I collected half a dozen fine fat worms --a stock of provisions that would take the mother two hours to gather. Why are young birds so particular, anyhow? What difference does it make whether their dinner comes from the mother's mouth or from some kindly disposed neighbor?

"I'll just test the little wrens once more," I said to myself, as I impaled two of the choicest grubs on a sharpened stick. It was impossible for me to announce the approach of this delicious dinner with the soft little "Wink! Wink!" of the mother, but I patted both the sleepy birdies on the back and, rather hesitatingly, held up my offering. There was hardly room to doubt its acceptance. Mercy! Such a reaching and stretching! I could not divide up fast enough. Nor was one grub apiece sufficient. Quiet was not restored till each wrenlet had stored away two of the largest and fattest.

For the first time the parent wrens seemed to realize that I was actually of some use. The trying task of satisfying five growing appetites was lessened to some degree,

and the busy parents took household affairs somewhat more easily the rest of the day.

The next time I saw the wren family, all the young were scampering about in the bushes, following their parents hither and thither, earning their own livelihood and rapidly learning for themselves the arts of woodcraft.