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BIRDS OF THE CACTUS COUNTRY

(This story is sent by Mrs. William L. Finley who is spending the winter in Arizona.)

The desert is harsh with her children. Life is spent on the march or in the firing-line. Nearly every plant is fortified with thorns. The cactus has a panoply of points to protect its soft, spongy interior; the mesquite, the palo verde, and the delicate white poppy clothe themselves in thorns. The pudgy toad in our Oregon garden grows fat and lazy, but he wouldn't last long in Arizona. Out in the desert Nature arms her toads and lizards in spines and scales. The toad grows flat and thin, can run like a streak, and digs a hiding place in the sand. He wears a crown of thorns, and is really a lizard instead of a toad.

Of all desert plants, the cholla cactus is the most treacherous, yet it is the favorite nesting place of the Cactus Wren. The first of these nests that we saw was a gourd-shaped bundle of fine fibres and grasses, with a round entrance hole and hallway running in from the side. I couldn't look in, so I tried to feel. I ran my hand in as far as I could till the thorns about the entrance pricked into the flesh. I began to pull my hand back. The more I pulled, the tighter the thorns clung and the deeper they pricked. I was in a trap, and didn't know just what to do. Finally I decided to give a quick wrench, the way you treat a mustard plaster. My hand came out, and I held it up and looked at it. It was stuck full of bristling spear points. I wasn't through with the plaster yet. So I took my insect tweezers and began to extract the needles. They hung back with a will, as if some one was pulling on the other end. Afterward, when I examined them under the glass, I found the <sup>tips</sup> formed so they worked like tiny barbs.

Several times we saw where birds had hung themselves, the largest an Inca dove. Further on we discovered a male House Finch firmly impaled on a thorn. The most cruel incident had occurred at the nest of a Plumbeous Gnatcatcher in a cholla cactus. The young birds had just departed. One of the baby birds had hopped a few inches from its home and, making a mis-step, had caught one wing on a prickly cholla thorn. Struggling to get away, he had entangled the other wing, and soon hooked himself in the body and legs. He was helpless. He had been dead only a short time, and the mother bird was fluttering about with food for the unfortunate fledgling.

These accidents led us to think the cholla was the worst danger to bird life. But after we watched at numerous bird homes we came to the conclusion that there was a reason for so many nests in the prickly forts. They were forts that furnished nesting and sleeping places safe from owls and other night prowlers.

The end of bird, beast, or reptile in the desert is usually tragic. There is no peaceful old age. A moment's lack of alertness is fatal. The lizard watches to get some unsuspecting insect or rob an unguarded nest. But he must always have his eyes open to dart for cover, or he will be snapped up by a swift Road-runner. The Verdin, the Linnet, and the Gnatcatcher must be on the look-out for hawks, and if pursued, dart for the shelter of a cholla. But there also, the least error in judgment may pin him to a death of torture.