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PYRRHULOXIA, OR WHISTLING CARDINAL

by

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We were bird hunting in the desert, and it was a hot day. From the glaring ground came the continuous humming of little and big insects from tiny, singing mites to big noisy grasshoppers. The sky was a clear, blue bowl empty of clouds, but not empty of other things. From up there came the droning of army planes, high, high, in and out of sight, now heard, now gone, according to position and wind currents. I peered straight up trying to locate the somber-sounding bombers until I could hardly unkind my neck when I looked down for a rest. But it was a fascination that would not let my eyes stay down. A glint, and a silvery speck of a bird flashed into the sun. It was some three or four^{miles}--or more--high, and to me looked like a little sailing seagull that faded into the lofty mists. Once lost it could not be found again as the sound became fainter and fainter. Sometimes there were twin birds up there, swinging along arm to arm. And sometimes there was only sound until I caught a silver streak as slim as a pencil. Once I saw another bird behind a bomber, floating, soaring, serene--a black buzzard, he, too, a master of the air. Did he feel a brother bond, or was he merely competing with the mechanical craft? Soon all were swallowed in the eternity behind the blue.

I came down to earth and became interested in a smaller but more real bird close at hand. He sat on a green limb of a palo verde (green tree) above his nest and two children. You know that Arizona tree which is a fluffy bower of yellow blossoms above slender green limbs, and no leaves at all. I called him a "red-bird" when I glimpsed him through the branches. When I got a closer look I saw that he was a soft pinkish-mauve with a brilliant rose breast and throat, and rose all around a heavy orange bill. His pointed crest was a mingling of mauve and rose, and as he flared his long fan-tail he showed soft rosy underneath. He was the Pyrrhuloxia, in common language the gray cardinal.

His glory was not all in his dress, for he was also a liquid whistler with many variations of evident meanings. He saw us coming and was ready to meet us

for he was certain that we had bad intentions concerning his nest and family. I say his nest, because we learned that he prized and guarded it more than his paler mate did.

We knew that many people in this region had a different name for this bird from bullfinch, gray grosbeak, parrott-bill, to gray cardinal. He really belongs to the cardinal group of finches. His habits are like those of the more brilliant red cardinal, but his range is restricted, being the hot uplands of northern Mexico and the adjacent areas of Arizona, New Mexico and Texas. The two cardinals are found nesting in the Southwest in identical regions, in thickets of brambles, mesquites, palo verdes, or wild grapevines. The nests are much alike, made of bark strips, twigs, and grass, lined with small roots. But the red cardinal's nest is a carelessly constructed affair.

The two birds are so commonly seen in the same regions that a flash of red in the brush is likely to deceive one as to which bird he is looking at. But a close view will un-deceive him. The red cardinal fairly burns a hole in the greenery if clearly seen. The characters of the birds are very different, the gray cardinal being alert and trusting; that of the "red-bird" being strong, wary, and suspicious. The latter bird has been known to desert his nest after eyes and fingers have touched it. The other one came and went after his nest was removed to a lower position in the tree.

The pyrrhuloxia is more fond of caterpillars and grasshoppers than other insects. Weevils are next in order of preference. He ranges over the cotton belt of Texas and feeds upon two important pests, one of which, the boll weevil, is one of our most destructive insects. Cotton worms are highly prized also. In August and September seven-tenths of this bird's food is weed seed, the other five-tenths consisting almost entirely of foxtail and burr-grass seeds.

Parking the car under a scanty and thin mesquite, we heard his sweet, clear whistle. There is no other word for it but whistle. When we began to unload the cameras and set up the tripods under the noses of his children, he came flying straight for the nest tree, crawled through the tough green tangle as close as he could, and kept warning the intruders with, "Quit! Quit! Quit!" he spouted

it out, leaning forward belligerently with his shoulders and big bill poked out. Every time that big bully put out his hand to change a bunch of flowers so the camera's eye could see clearly, the crested chief berated him roundly. He was near enough to have grabbed a finger, but his bravado didn't quite come up to that.

This happened time after time as the cameraman tried to lure the brilliant father to step over onto the nest edge for a picture of the family scene. No, he wouldn't do it.

The minutes ticked into hours. Not a picture so far. I had been standing in the boiling sun, holding a string attached to the camera ready to click. In the meantime, the cameraman roamed around with the six-inch lens on the Ektra camera in his hands, trying to get shots of the foxy father as he perched on different mesquite tops.

Finally as he had given up in disgust, he came back. He kicked at one of the clatter-winged grasshoppers and was surprised when he found that he had hit it. These big fellows were usually as cagey as the birds. He laid the grasshopper on the edge of the nest, and as usual the father bird dashed down to see what he was doing. He stood looking a minute, then picked up the offering gingerly and looked it over. Then he flew away and perched and began to pull off the wings. Back he came and sat on the edge of the nest in just the right position. He poked the grasshopper into a yellow mouth. It was too big and long, and as it was not quite dead it objected to being swallowed. Gently the father took it and made another try at poking it down. Three times he persisted, and on the last one the mauled insect succumbed. Even so, the father was doubtful that it wouldn't walk out on him again and he sat on the rim of the nest, cocking his eye in concern. He was busy now and had forgotten us.

It may have been in his mind that all this fumbling needn't have happened if he had had a mate that was a mother, too. But she decidedly wasn't. From the time that we arrived, she had been around in the bushes, but sat half hidden in the bushes. She was supposed to be hunting food, and so she did, but her children seldom got it. After waiting for a few minutes, she swallowed it herself. Once when she came in with a billful, she sat stolidly holding the food.

Finally the male flew over to her, took the bite and hurried back to feed the children himself. He would do it if he had to.

After an hour's wait and no more food brought in, the father knew the kids were hot and hungry. Then all at once she came again. The male made a dash over to her perch, but she was too quick for him. With one gulp she swallowed the bug. He scolded and danced around a little, but there was no help for it.

In the meantime, the cameraman and the father bird had organized the grasshopper game satisfactorily to both. With glee the perspiring photographer rushed about pouncing upon grasshoppers, most of whom slid from under his cudgel just as struck. However, he managed to get enough to keep both himself and his partner busy. As fast as he laid a juicy hopper on the nest, the father grabbed it, dismantled it, and sent it down the right throat. And just as often another picture was shot. But at last the old bird thought enough was enough. He perched complacently on the nest edge and swallowed a hopper himself. The cameraman was too surprised to click the shutter. At that, he agreed with his co-worker and called it a day.