

Bulletin No. 30
December 23, 1931.

SEQUOIA NATURE GUIDE SERVICE

Nature Guide Service
Sequoia National Park

Stencil No. 63

THE PILEATED WOODPECKER - COCK-OF-THE-WOODS

A Bird of Sequoia National Park

by

Walter Fry,
U. S. Commissioner.

The Northern Pileated Woodpecker (*Phloeotomus pileatus abieticola*) is a picturesque bird of Sequoia National Park. Its comparatively large size and blazing red topknot are its striking features.

Many years ago people aptly applied to this bird the name "Cock-of-the-Woods". This is appropriate, for it is by far the largest of the woodpecker family in this region. It is a gracefully built bird; 17 inches or more in length, with a long, slender neck; stout, rigid bill some 2 inches long; head crested with a brilliant red tuft about 2 inches high; and black body plumage with a white stripe extending downward from either side of the bill along the neck to middle of the body. It has short, heavy legs, and the feet are equipped with long hooked claws which enable the bird to scale a tree rapidly, or hang head down. Both male and female look alike, but the female has a blackish forehead, while in the male the whole top of the head is red. In flight the birds show intermittently white spots under wings and body.

The bird has a powerful voice of low, deep pitch that can be heard for a mile or more. The call is not melodious like that of a song bird, just a "kuk, kuk, kuk" uttered at irregular intervals when feeding or in flight. While about their nests during the nesting season, there is a lowering of the voice so that it can scarcely be heard as close as ten feet away.

The Northern Pileated Woodpecker ranges in the cooler climate of North America from the northern parts of the United States northward, but is not abundant anywhere. In Sequoia National Park the bird is confined to the mountainous areas between the altitudes of 5,000 to 8,000 feet. It breeds throughout its range in the heavily timbered districts, but in California restricts itself principally to the fir timber belt. The nest is built in dead trees and stumps 10 to 40 feet above ground. In preparing the home, the bird excavates with its heavy bill a round hole on the surface of the tree a few inches in depth and 7 or 8 inches across; then, chiselling downward constructs a cavity 12 to 30 inches in depth, and 8 to 10 inches in diameter. In the bottom of this cavity 3 to 6 white eggs are laid, which are about $1\frac{1}{4}$ inches long and one inch thick.

For rapid cutting of wood, I know no bird equal to the Pileated Woodpecker. On one occasion I saw a male bird at Crescent Meadow, Sequoia National Park, chisel out a hole in the side of a dead sugar pine tree large enough to hide himself within, in less than 30 minutes. Of course, the tree was dead, but the wood removed was quite solid, as was shown by the cuttings. I never have been able to reason out just why this bird worked so diligently, unless it was with the intent to use the cavity as a shelter thereafter, for just as soon as the cavity was large enough to hide the bird's body the bird left the vicinity; neither did the wood cuttings show signs of containing insect life as food. In excavating, the bird's whole being was brought into action. He obtained a firm foothold on the side of the tree, then tilting himself backward with hindmost part against the

tree made the woods ring with his loud and hard pounding. While performing, he would draw far back so as to throw his heavy head and long, sharp beak through an arc space of some 10 inches, thus rendering a blow nearly equal to that of a person with an ordinary nail hammer. He would strike several blows, then pause, look, and listen for enemies. Finding all well, he would again resume his task with such vigor as to throw chips, splinters, and slivers of wood in all directions.

No bird of the mountains attracts so much attention in the tourist camps of Sequoia National Park as the Pileated Woodpecker. Whenever these old crusaders come trooping through the camps, all people sit up and take notice. Their loud peculiar notes, and heavy pounding on dead trees, attract people pell-mell from far and near. Old timers know just what to expect before they arrive upon the scene, but to the new comers there is a rare treat in store; for the sight of a woodpecker the size of a domestic pigeon, with a long, slim neck and big red topknot is something new. The climax of the exhibition is in watching the birds, in their quest for grubs and insects, use their heavy beaks to knock and pry long flakes of bark from the side of dead trees.

Pileated Woodpeckers have lived in the vicinity of the Giant Forest tourist camp on many occasions during recent years. They nested at Crescent Meadow during the seasons of 1905 to 1909, inclusive; then at the Parker Group 1911 to 1919 inclusive; again at Crescent Meadow 1928 and 1929. Giant Forest seems to be a favorable breeding ground for the species.

During the season of 1911, in company with a troop of soldiers, we were camped at the Parker Group of Big Trees in Sequoia National Park. Early in May a pair of the woodpeckers was observed foraging near the camp, and seemed attached to the locality. At first the birds were very wary of our presence, but in a few days they became quite tame and allowed us to approach them. Near the troop kitchen, the birds chiseled out a chamber in the side of a large fir stump. The nest was 24 feet above ground, thus making it easy for our inspection by the use of a lineman's climbing outfit. The compartment consisted of a round door opening $7\frac{1}{2}$ inches across, with a downward tunnel 14 inches in depth expanding to 10 inches in diameter at the base. The bottom was covered with a layer of fine bits of wood. Four eggs were laid in the nest - one each day as follows: May 7, 8, 9 and 10.

The troop boys became greatly attached to the birds, and soon applied the names of "Cap" and "Phoebe" to the pair. Each bird took its turn in occupying the nest during the period of incubation, while the other was off feeding; but at night Phoebe always occupied the nest, while Cap roosted in the doorway with his head outward. After the eggs were hatched, both birds went far afield during the daytime in quest of food for their young; but after nightfall each bird took its regular station at the nest.

A happier pair of birds I never saw than these as they went forth each day in the performance of their household duties. All went well with the family until the evening of June 16th, when a sad disaster befell them which resulted in the death of Phoebe and distracted poor old Cap beyond comprehension. On this fatal day, as Phoebe was in flight near her nest, a savage Cooper Hawk darted, struck, and killed her, then alighted in a nearby tree. The hawk never enjoyed a feast of his prey, for one of the troop boys grabbed a rifle and shot it.

Cap, having witnessed the killing of his mate, seemed terror stricken and knew not what to do, and for two nights and a day following the disaster he sat sadly in the door of his nest, until we became alarmed lest the young birds should starve. But early on the morning of the 18th, he seemed to fully realize

that he now had a double duty to perform in caring for his beloved offspring, as by this time the young birds were so hungry that they kept up a continual chirping in their begging for food. So, soon after daylight, Cap sallied forth into the forest and, like a dutiful father, gathered and carried food to his young with frantic effort. So successful were his labors that by noon the young birds became quiet, their appetites having been satisfied.

While Cap was away on one of his trips, I climbed the stump in order to take a good look at the young birds by using a flash-light. When I flashed my light on the nest, to my great satisfaction I espied four fuzzy heads swaying about on long, slender necks, with their four mouths gaped wide open ready to receive food. The fledglings were about one-fourth grown, and covered over with a fluffy down of light grayish-brown, which blended to a somewhat darker color about the head and neck. It is difficult to realize that these homely little creatures develop into such handsome birds.

Cap worked diligently day after day gathering food for his brood, and during the nights he hovered them on the nest. As time went on his labors became more strenuous, for the young were growing larger and required more food. Finally they became so large that they would climb into the nest door and await Cap's return with morsels for them. On the morning of July 19, the young could endure their housing no longer, and as Cap flew out from the nest they all sailed out after him, but not yet having become versed in the art of flying they soon hit the ground with a thud. When Cap saw his young scattered about over the forest floor, he was filled with fear and anxiety and tried to induce them to return to the nest. Failing in this, he led out through the trees, collecting food from nearby stumps and logs, with his brood flapping and scrambling along after him. For several days the birds remained about the camp, with the proud father always leading the procession; but they finally drifted away. For 8 years thereafter Pileated Woodpeckers nested at the Parker Group of Big Trees, and now every time I see one of these beautiful birds I wonder if it is one of the lineal descendants of dear old Cap and Phoebe.

Pileated Woodpeckers are beneficial woodland birds, as their principal diet consists of a great variety of insects, many of which are detrimental to forest growths. I have never known one of the birds injuring a live tree.

Whether or not Pileated Woodpeckers will be able to hold their own against the advance of agriculture and settlement, is difficult to say, as their range is rapidly being reduced on account of cutting away the forests. Their worst natural enemies are hawks and owls. Their protective coloration is not of the best, and the gorgeous red head flashed defiance to every passing enemy.

Although the Pileated Woodpecker has been called "Cock-of-the-woods", to me he seems more than this. Because of his dignified bearing, he is nature's true aristocrat of the forest. He has a standard of living that may be easier to envy than emulate. He is the cavalier of the forest, first in fidelity, courage, reserve and dignity. His gorgeous flash of color is a joy in the snowdrifts of winter, as it is in the green of summer. He is a bird of fastidious diet, but relishing the grubs from dead trees, he will honor and delight the place which provides these for him. He is not a gregarious fellow, hence does not flock together with other feathered species, nor even with his own kind. Being a dutiful father and affectionate husband, he and his mate are sufficient to themselves and their companionship does not end when the young are on the wing. His flaming head-dress symbolizes courage. He is a bird of manners, dignity, loyalty, fortitude and self respect.