

THE SIERRA CROSSBILL IN SEQUOIA NATIONAL PARK

By
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Perhaps the most peculiar bird of the Sequoia National Park is the Sierra Crossbill (*Lexia curvirestra bendirei*) with its crossed and crooked bill and interesting habits.

The Sierra Crossbill is found from about 6,000 feet to the upper border of timber line at about 11,000 feet. They nest in May and June in trees and bushes at any height, but usually well up from the ground in pines or firs. The nests are made of coarse twigs and turf, well matted in thick walls and lined with soft grass fibers. The three or four eggs are a greenish white, spotted with brown and lavender, size a little over 1/2 by 3/4 of an inch. The birds are of a roving disposition and may be found nesting anywhere in their range, but usually near some meadow or forest opening.

The Sierra Crossbill is about the size of an English sparrow. The adult males are of striking color, the body dark gray irregularly blending from greenish yellow through orange to brilliant red. The bright colors are more pronounced over the under surface of the body, and on the rump and head. The female is gray, slightly tinged with green blending to yellow. The birds have heavy bills three-quarters of an inch in length with mandibles much curved and crossed near the end. The lower mandible curves to one side then bends upward, while the upper mandible curves the opposite way then hooks downward, thus permitting the outer portion of the bill to work like scissors.

The Sierra Crossbills do most of their foraging for pine seeds in the tops of tall trees. Occasionally they come to the ground and eat seeds or berries. No other bird is so expert in extracting pine seeds from cones, and it is always an interesting sight. They start by bending each separate cone scale backward with the hook of the upper mandible, then pull it down over the lower mandible, so that either mandible cuts the scale off or bends it sufficiently to expose the seed without permitting it to fall to the ground.

For years I longed to find a Sierra Crossbill nest with either eggs or young, but did not gratify my wish until June 14, 1916, when I found a nest with four eggs in a small lodgepole pine near Wolverton Dam, elevation 7200 feet. The nest was about twelve feet above ground, built back against the tree trunk and supported on two small limbs that grew close together. I was passing near the tree on horseback when the male flitted off the nest into the brush. Climbing the tree I counted the eggs, which appeared to be in an advanced stage of incubation. Ten days later I visited the nest and found in it four baby Crossbills all covered over with a grayish fluffy down. Their eyes were not open and their bills were not yet crossed. While I was examining the nest, the parents, horrified at my presence, fluttered hysterically about snapping the heavy bills near my head, and all the while uttering shrill chip-chip, scolding notes of anger and fear. Nine days later I again visited the nest and this time found the young birds with their eyes open and their bills partly crossed. A strange feature to be noted was that the bills of all the young birds crossed the same way - that is, the upper mandible of each bird's bill crossed to the left.

Ever since the above experience I have been on the lookout for a Crossbill with the upper mandible of its bill crossed to the right, but I have never again been able to approach one of the birds to obtain the information. Here is an interesting study for bird lovers. Is the Crossbill's bill always crossed in the same direction - upper mandible to the left?

I have never yet heard one of the Sierra Crossbills attempt to sing; just chip-chip, or a chup-chup, is all that I have heard from them.

Whether the Sierra Crossbill had his bill crossed when first he appeared on earth, or whether it has become crooked because of long use in opening up pine cones, may never be known. It is certain, however, that the brilliant color of the male and the crossed beak make it one of the most peculiar birds of the park and the Sierra. In Europe, tradition has it that the bird is sacred because it acquired its crossed bills while attempting to extract the nails from the palms of Jesus on the cross.