

# The Pileated Woodpecker

BY SAMUEL SCOVILLE, JR.

For every bird student there is always some bird just beyond the horizon which he hopes to meet. This statement of course applies only to the common or garden variety of ornithologists to which I belong. There are some masters who have met everything that sings or flies. Probably the only thing that the future has for Dr. Witmer Stone is the Roc and the Phoenix, and undoubtedly Mr. Samuel Rhoads could describe even those gifted fowls if called upon.

For a long time the Prothonotary Warbler was the ideal of the writer. After acting as a galley slave for Stuart in a Maryland marsh my life was at last gladdened by a sight of that vivid bird of gold. Then the Northern Raven took first place in my hopes. A forty-two mile walk and harrying adventures by field and flood with Harlow made that bird a reality (see Atlantic Monthly, July, 1920). This last year I longed exceedingly for a sight of the Pileated Woodpecker, that magnificent woodpecker surpassed only by the lost Ivory-bill and which I find, in Juniata County, rejoices in the names of the cluck-cock and Indian hen. I always remember the thrill that came over me when on May 20, 1916, at Pocono Lake, Stuart showed me a hemlock tree with twenty-two great square holes like those in bar-ways cut deep in the live wood. He assured me that they were made by the Pileated Woodpecker. Afterwards when he showed me a large woolen nest made by a deer-mouse and told me that it belonged to a Golden-crowned Kinglet, I began to have my doubts about the woodpecker. Later, however, I was to learn that he was right and that the holes were feeding-holes of the Pileated.

My next experience with this bird was on March 9, 1918. I



*From photograph by A. D. McGrew*

1. NEST AND EGGS OF THE WILD TURKEY
2. PILEATED WOODPECKER AT NEST HOLE

was tramping over the mountains in a driving snow-storm with Harlow on the back way from a Raven's nest when he showed me scores of holes made by Pileated Woodpeckers in rather small trees near the top of a mountain. We saw no traces of any of the birds and I was so nearly frozen that probably I would not have recognized one if I had seen it.

My chance finally came in May, 1919. Harlow of State College is probably the best field-man in the United States and the only one who has ever found the nests of over one hundred different species of birds in a single season, his record being one hundred and one species in 1915. Accordingly when he promised to show me not only a Pileated Woodpecker but a Pileated Woodpecker's nest and eggs I was delighted. On the night of May 10, 1919, I met him in the smoking-room of a sleeper and the trip was on.

The next morning the intelligent porter informed us that we had three-quarters of an hour before reaching our station in Center County, Pa. I was shaving with nothing on but a shirt and a pair of shoes when the train stopped and the conductor told us we had just two minutes to get dressed and off the train. I put on one minute's worth of clothes, crammed the rest into my bag and covered with lather jumped off as the train started. As I ran the porter tried to explain that the train had made up time, evidently forty-five minutes in less than five.

We took a stage to the beginning of the mountains and crossed them to the lonely valley where the Pileated Woodpeckers live. This was on May 11, 1919. On the way over we discussed literature. Harlow felt strongly that all poets should be compelled by law to take a course in ornithology, having recently read a bit of verse in which the Bluebird and the Goldfinch were described as nesting at the same time.

On the way over we heard the Alder Flycatcher, the mating-notes of the Field Sparrow and the Hairy Woodpecker, while halfway up the mountain a Hummingbird came whirring through the rain like a great moth. Everywhere were the green and white of the flowering dogwood and the pure pink and white flowers of the azalea with their dark red stems, curved red stamens with golden ends and faint elusive odor of sandalwood.

Throughout the wet, cold woods the ground was covered with flights of the purple-pink butterfly-blossoms of the fringed polygala, each flower set in the middle of a cluster of irregular green leaves and flaring out into a pair of wide purple wings on either side of a hollow-fringed tongue. The color seemed to me to be almost identical with that of the calopogon. In one place I found a late spray of pure white trailing arbutus and farther along saw a fire-red salamander wreathed around a purple-pink polygala, the exact color-combination that I once saw on a friend's lawn where a Japanese quince blossomed next to a Judas bush.

Finally we reached the valley ringed around on every side by mountains and followed a fire line through the dripping spring woods. As we neared a live chestnut-oak tree with a dead heart where the ground was covered with large chips for a space of some thirty feet, out from a hole about thirty-five feet from the ground flapped a bird which seemed about the size of a crow with black, white-lined wings. Ordinarily a female Pileated Woodpecker will not leave her nest when she has eggs until the tree is tapped. Before she has eggs she will leave the nest when one is fifty yards away no matter how carefully the tree is approached. This nest went down nineteen inches, twenty inches being the average depth. All around in the neighboring trees were the square feeding-holes and numberless little testing holes made by the birds in live trees and dead ones alike, where they had explored to find if there was any trace of the larva of the long-horned white-pine borer on which they feed extensively. The nesting-hole was round and seemed about twice the size of that of a Flicker, being about three and one-half inches in diameter. Harlow told me that the bird often makes a number of trial nests before it finally carves out one to suit. May 10 is the standard date for a full clutch of eggs although the nest is frequently begun as early as March.

The second nest was on another hillside in a dead pitch pine some twenty-five feet up. The bird hardly ever uses the same nest twice. Harlow states that this has never happened to his knowledge but once. As we started toward the second nest we could hear the dull, heavy thudding through the wet air of the

Ruffed Grouse drumming. As we climbed toward the second tree a big male Pileated Woodpecker flew down the mountain-side with a long, gliding flight. As it flew it gave its unmistakable call "Kek, kek, kek, kek, kek-o," something like a Flicker with a little quirk at the end. It did not seem to be so large as the first Pileated that we saw. It alighted on a tree fifty yards away and I could distinctly see its great red head and crest. The throat and a line from the bill on each side of the neck and breast together with the lining of the wings and the base of the larger wing feathers were white slightly tinged with yellow. The upper part of the head of the male, including its heavy pointed crest and mustaches, were a bright red. The female had only the rear of the head red with the rest of the head, including the mustaches, black. As we came near the female bird flew out, giving a different call—"Kek, kek, kek, kek, kek-e-ku". She looked as if she wore a red hat with a feather and when she preened herself with her great bill on the tree where she alighted, it was like watching a man shave himself with a sword.

The third nest we found in the depths of a swamp in a pignut hickory fifty-five feet high. The bird stuck her head out and flew away before the tree was reached. The nest was first located on March 30 at which time the bird had evidently been working on it for some time. The chips were widely scattered. The bird lit against the sky and I had a fine view of it. Neither the second nor the third birds seemed to be as large or impressive as the first. The third bird gave another note unlike the nesting-call, a kind of screeching call—"Shrr, shrr, shrr". She flew all around us three times, coming nearer and nearer. Finally she lit on the tree over our heads and went into a hole, something which Harlow said he had never seen before. She had the fringed black wings of a crow and hopped up toward the nest awkwardly. When we tapped the tree out came a great head with a black-striped throat. Then the male gave a fiercer and louder call; and as he came near the female answered him with a note like the "whick, whick" of a Flicker, only louder. Harlow had hunted in that particular ravine for four years but had never even seen a Pileated there

until in March of that year. As we watched the female came back and gave a loud rolling call perhaps forty or fifty times while the call of the male was repeated louder and fiercer and shriller than the female. The alarm note of the female was "Yuk, yuk". Once she flew over our heads and struck the tree with a smack that shook the stub and went up to the nest and flew away again repeating her "Yuk, yuk" call, always answered by the male. Harlow once brought the male close to us by imitating its call and another time the female by pounding on the tree. The head looked something like that of a Horned Grebe and the bird something like a Crow when it flies. Four times she came back, alighted on the tree and stood at the hole for nearly five minutes, sticking her head in, wagging it first from one side and then the other, but not seeming to dare go in after the first time. She showed so much anxiety that Harlow decided to climb the tree and take his chances on finding the set complete. The female flew away with a perfect volley of angry "yuks" while we stood below and called up various useful suggestions and warnings. Arrived at the nesting-hole he first stuffed a handkerchief down the hole to shield the eggs from flying chips and then locating the nest's direction, chopped into the tree. As the nest ran within two inches of the outer bark he uncovered the eggs almost instantly. There were four of them, glossy, white, sharp-pointed, each one about half again as large as that of a Flicker, a full clutch about four days incubated. Harlow then decided to investigate the second nest although he did not believe that the bird had laid a full set there. This time when he came to the stub the bird did not come out until he struck the tree twice. Then he could hear her hopping up and an enormous beak was thrust out of the hole and the female flew out, giving the wild nesting-call twice, always with the peculiar quirk at the finish. Besides myself there were in the party Burleigh who is a most indefatigable collector and a tireless climber and walker. He went to the front in France with a bird-book and field-glasses concealed in his uniform and was far more interested in Nightingales and Moor-hens than in the Boche. The other member of the party was McGrew who always carried about him the

largest camera in captivity and collected photographs instead of eggs. It is owing to this said camera and the skill back of it that this article is illustrated. The second nest and its contents were to be the property of Burleigh. He climbed up to it with high hopes. The hole proved to be only six inches deep and broke out clear to the bottom when he pulled off a bit of the outer bark. Then came an oological tragedy. The wretched bird, contrary to all the customs and usages obtaining among well-regulated Pileated Woodpeckers, had actually hatched out two young birds. A third egg hatched in front of Burleigh's horrified eyes while the fourth, which was addled, he brought down and gave to me. I gave it to Stuart who put it with an odd one that he had procured in Canada years ago and it now graces his collection. Harlow had discovered the nest with great difficulty, the bird having actually built three false nests before he trailed her to this last and true one so that this last perfidious act on her part was on a par with what had gone before. If that female Pileated Woodpecker could have heard what Harlow and Burleigh said about her I doubt if she would ever have built another nest.

This last nest was my last sight of the Pileated Woodpecker, but the two days I spent in the valley were filled full of other bird adventures. There was the song for example of the Prairie Horned Lark, "Sippy, sippy, sippy," from mid-sky as he soared like the Sky-lark he is and with flattened wings and drooping tail dropped down at last almost at the spot from which he started. Harlow considers the nest a most difficult one to find because the bird flushes a long ways ahead and never comes back while the collector is around. Then there were the three deserted Sharp-shinned Hawk's nests he showed me in white-pine trees made entirely of sticks and about the size of Crows' nests; and the Broad-winged Hawk's nest in a maple tree forty feet from the ground being an old nest rebuilt and lined with fresh hemlock twigs and green leaves. Harlow also showed me a Field Sparrow's nest in a small bush about three feet from the ground with four almost pure white eggs with a wreath around the larger end, looking like the eggs of some rare Warbler. Then we ran into a wave of Nashville

Warblers in full song and heard a Rose-breasted Grosbeak caroling his way north and the liquid "Sweet, sweet, sweet" song of the Louisiana Water Thrush. Harlow, too, found a Cooper's Hawk's nest forty-five feet up in a white pine with five eggs, well incubated, bluish-white and lightly spotted. This country is interesting also from the fact that the Wild Turkeys still nest here occasionally, although we were not fortunate enough to see any.

Next to the Pileated Woodpeckers' nests my most interesting experiences on that trip were hearing the flight-song of the Woodcock and the owl-call of Harlow. I have been fortunate enough to hear the wing-song of the Wilson's Snipe and to see that bird drop from mid-sky to its nest, and I have seen and heard a Bittern boom and of course have heard—but never seen—the Ruffed Grouse drum; but until that trip with Harlow I had never heard the Woodcock. We started out in a misty rainy twilight and went into a wet marshy meadow with clumps of underbrush scattered here and there. As we walked we heard a Chat and then the scolding note of the Short-billed Marsh Wren, the first that I had heard since Street, Stuart, Potter and myself hunted for their nests at Newton, N. J. Suddenly over in an adjacent and still wetter meadow among the clicking and peeping of the cricket-frogs and hylas we heard a note which at a distance seemed to be identical with the note of a Nighthawk. When we came to within fifty yards of the bird on the ground it sounded more metallic and harsh. "Scaaap" is perhaps a good representation of it. Within that distance we also heard a note unreported so far as I know in any of the books, a bubble exactly like that made by pouring water out of a bottle. This bubble is preliminary to the scaaap. For some time this was repeated and then suddenly there started a twittering and in the half-light we could plainly see a Woodcock buzzing straight up through the air, twittering as he went. At the top of his flight at perhaps a hundred feet up he began to fly in circles widening and becoming more and more erratic. Finally when the circles were entirely broken the twittering, which continued during all of the circling, changed to a few loud rather sweet notes "Cheep, cheep" and suddenly the bird

dropped like a stone from the sky, landing nearly where he started from. As soon as he landed he instantly began to "scaaap" again. The next time he started his flight we ran at full speed and crouched down on our knees in the wet meadow at almost the exact spot from which he went up. When he dropped he landed directly between us and only a few feet away. As he saw us he stood up stiffly on his toes with a comical air of surprise and then hurriedly flew away. He kept up these performances one after the other until it was so dark that we could not see him fly. Two other birds were going through the same performance in a near-by field. Sometimes the bubble note came alone. Usually it was preliminary to the "scaaap". Harlow says that the performance is ended when the bird says "scaaap" while he is flying, which means "Good night." He also said that the Woodcock has a dawn-song of much shorter duration and the next morning at five-forty-five I heard the "scaaap" note twice.

It was on the second morning that Harlow revealed to me unsuspected resources. We had gone out to look for Wild Turkeys and in a hemlock swamp heard several Crows cawing in the sky overhead. Pulling me down among a mass of hemlock boughs, Harlow suddenly imitated the deep, sudden note of the Great Horned Owl to perfection, "Hoo, hoo-hoo, hoo, hoo," he croaked in a sepulchral voice that seemed to come from underground. It was as uncanny as Akela giving his hunting-call at noon. As soon as the Crows heard this midnight note of old Death-in-the-dark they cawed at the top of their voices and were almost instantly joined by others. Everytime Harlow would give the note it seemed to madden the Crows and would be met with a perfect chorus of screaming caws while Crows came streaming in from every quarter until the air was black with them, cawing and screaming and hunting in and out of the hemlock boughs for the owl. They seemed wild with anger and excitement, and as they flapped and cawed and dashed back and forth it reminded me of the scene in Gosta Berling where the Countess never dares to leave her house for fear of the Crows. When the deafening chorus was at its height Harlow suddenly stepped out from behind the boughs. In-

stantly the cawing ceased, the Crows disappeared and in a moment the deep marsh was all silence again.

The trip ended with a wonderful dinner which Mrs. Harlow and a friend brought over from State College and cooked in the cabin. Thereafter we whirled twenty-four miles over slippery mountain roads at full speed along the brink of eternity—and never once fell in.