SUMMER BIRDS OF ROAN MOUNTAIN

BY ALBERT F. GANIER

Roan Mountain is situated on the line between Tennessee and North Carolina, about 33 miles south of the Virginia line. It is a part of the Unaka chain and its altitude (6313 ft. s.l.) is unsurpassed in the Eastern United States, except for a few peaks in the Mount Mitchell group and in the Great Smokies, 90 miles to the southwest. Roan Mountain proper extends from Carver's Gap (5500 ft.) in a southwesterly direction about 5 miles to a bit beyond Roan High Bluff (6287 ft.). Along this line we encounter, at mile 0.7, Roan High Knob (6313 ft.); at mile 1.3, site of the former Cloudland Inn (6150 ft.); the present lodge (6100 ft.) and the spring (6000 ft.); at mile 1.5, Sunset Rock (6200 ft.); at mile 1.7 to 2.0, the Rhododendron Gardens (5600-6000 ft.); and finally Roan High Bluff, above mentioned. A half mile to the east of The Gap, Little Roan Mountain rises to 5700 ft. and this area is included in the present paper.

The mountain, say from about 5000 ft. upward, is of the Canadian Zone in its fauna and flora. This is particularly evidenced by the presence, from the High Bluff to the High Knob, of an almost unbroken line, at or near the summits, of balsam fir (Abies frasari), red spruce (Picea rubra) and in places the dwarf shrub, sand myrtle (Dendjium buxifolium). Much of the actual summit consists of "balds" on which a short coarse grass grows thickly to form mountain meadows. Dotted about in some of these meadows are clumps and areas of rhododendrons, which here reach the greatest perfection in flower and form. One area of about 100 acres is very aptly called "The Rhododendron Gardens" and when in full bloom, about mid-June, the floral display of these shrubs is gorgeous. A half mile east of Roan High Bluff, on a bench of the mountain side, lies The Big Meadow (5200-5700 ft.) dotted and surrounded by the low growing, picturesque mountain beeches. The top of Little Roan is similar to the last mentioned area.

The summer temperature of the mountain is quite surprising in that it is probably the coolest place in the eastern United States at that season. The thermometer rarely registers above 60 degrees Fahrenheit in the shade on clear days and more often ranges below that at mid-day. On one morning, June 18, the writer witnessed frost, while on that day at Knoxville, in the valley, temperatures ranged from 76 to 98 degrees.

Within recent years, the once splendid forests of fir and spruce have been cut out, nearly to the tops, thus damaging the scenic aspects and perhaps altering the bird life to some extent. All in all, Roan Mountain is pleasingly different from any other, in many ways the queen of eastern mountains and the time will doubtless come when it will be added to our great system of National Parks.

Ornithologists on three previous occasions have visited this mountain in summer and published papers which included notes on its breeding birds. Unfortunately, none of these writers has made a definite separation of the species found "on top" and those found on the slopes at much lower altitudes. Too often their records refer merely to "Roan Mountain" without any clue as to whether on top or perhaps well down on the slopes.
The week of June 15 to 20 inclusive, of 1886, was spent on Roan Mountain by a party of twelve bird students* including the writer. Our purpose was to make as complete a list as possible of the breeding birds to be found about the summits. We confined our observations to the area lying above the 5000 foot contour, which area approximately embraces the Canadian zone. Except for a few hours of rain or heavy fog, we were afield continuously and covered every part of the mountain top. Our list for the area mentioned totaled 32 species but doubtless a few other species were present that escaped our attention. The subspecies shown are not based on specimens, except as noted, but are those believed to be the prevailing form. The list follows:

**TURKEY VULTURE (Cathartes aura septentrionalis).**—Noted soaring along the mountain top, as many as 5 on one occasion.

**EASTERN RED-TAILED HAWK (Buteo b. borealis).**—One observed soaring above Little Roan and another, a half mile south of Roan High Bluffs.

**SHARP-SHINNED HAWK (Accipiter velox).**—An individual noted near the lodge, by Carpenter, was believed to be this species though it may have been a male Cooper's Hawk.

**DUCK HAWK (Falco peregrinus anatum).**—One flew low over the “Rhododendron Gardens” on June 22, with prey in its talons. A “Peregrine” was also observed around Roan High Point, by Tyler, on June 24. The cliffs at the High Bluff, which I lacked time to examine closely, seemed well adapted to an eyrie.

**EASTERN RUFFED GROUSE (Bonasa u. umbellus).**—A single bird observed in flight at Big Meadow. Conditions on this mountain, especially in the open beech forest, seem well suited to this species.

**EASTERN BOB-WHITE (Colinus v. virginianus).**—One heard far down the mountainside. Conditions on top would seem suitable for it in summer.

**CHIMNEY SWIFT (Chaetura pelagica).**—Noted daily, sometimes eight or ten at a time. With only three or four chimneys on the mountain and those in use, it is probable that they descend to the valleys to nest and roost. Observed flying about evenings when it was nearly dark.

**RUBY-THROATED HUMMINGBIRD (Archilochus colubris).**—Observed daily, our record cards showing eight seen at various points along the summits. Most often seen in the Rhododendron Gardens feeding upon the profuse flowers of this shrub. Tyler states that here he counted about fifty on June 23, 1895.

**NORTHERN FLICKER (Colaptes auratus luteus).**—Apparently rare, for only two were seen on top.

**EASTERN Hairy Woodpecker (Dryobates v. vilosus).**—Seen on four occasions, once in the same buckeye tree with a pair of Downys.

**NORTHERN DOWNY WOODPECKER (Dryobates pubescens medianus).**—A pair observed at Big Meadow (5600 ft.) and a single bird at 5900 ft.

**PRAIRIE HORNY LARK (Octocoris alpestris pratjcola).**—A pair and a young

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*References: (a) 1887, Sennett. George B., "Observations in Western North Carolina Mountains in 1886," Auk, 4:240-245; he was on Roan Mtn. April 24 to 29 and during most of July: 1895, Rhoads S. N., "Contributions to the Zoology of Tenn.—Birds" Proc. Phil. Acad. Sci., 1895, pp 463-501; he was on and about the mountain from June 18 to 23; (c) 1912, Bruner, S. G. and Field A. L., "Notes on the birds observed on a trip through the mountains of western North Carolina," Auk, 29:368-377; they were on Roan Mtn. and its slopes from June 29 to July 9, recording 32 species.

**The party consisted of Mr. and Mrs. John Bamberg, F. S. Carpenter, Alfred Clebsch, Jr., Dr. Cynthia C. Counce, George Davis, Miss Amy Deane, A. F. Ganier, R. B. Lyle, Miss Evelyn Schneider, Miss Mabel Slack and Bruce P. Tyler."
bird on the wing, were observed by all of us on the summit of Little Roan (5800 ft.) just s.w. of Carver's Gap. This is an extensive nearly bald summit; the grass on top is short and therefore suitable for this short-legged, ground walking bird. The presence of this species here, when it was doubtless nesting, was of particular interest. Messrs. Tyler and Lyle had previously reported it here, on June 30, 1935.

**Northern Blue Jay** (*Cyanocitta cristata*).—Apparently rare along the summits for only 3 were seen or heard. Duck Hawks are known to favor this species as prey.

**Northern Raven** (*Corvus corax principalis*).—Perhaps the highlight of the trip was the sight of a flock of 7 or 8 of these birds on June 25, flying leisurely westward along the north side of Little Roan. Their flight was noticeably light and supple and they seemed to revel in following the air currents, up and down, with set wings after the manner of Turkey Vultures. Their bills are noticeably longer than those of Crows. We saw or heard one or more Ravens each day of our visit and at all points on the mountain. It would seem that they nest among the cliffs of Roan High Bluff or possibly in the fir trees, as they are known to do in Pennsylvania.

**Red-breasted Nuthatch** (*Sitta canadensis*).—Generally distributed in the fir belt, having been found in 7 different locations. A nest was found by Bamberg on June 23, at 5900 ft., containing 5 nearly fresh eggs. It was built 9 feet above the ground and a foot below the top of a dead spruce stub 12 in. in diameter, on a cut-over slope. The tree was punky and the wood soft, so the Nuthatch had excavated its own characteristic hole to a depth of 9 inches. As usual with this species, a small amount of gum had been brought and applied to the exterior about the entrance. A scanty pad of soft inner fibres of bark was beneath the eggs. The bird flushed readily when the tree was pounded on but later became harder to evict as a series of photos were being taken. A new nest cavity, partly finished, was found in the dead top of a small buckeye at Big Meadow and in a nearby spruce, old birds were watched at 10 feet, feeding young as large as themselves. By this it would seem that there is an early season nesting as with the White-breasted Nuthatch.

**Eastern Winter Wren** (*Nannus h. hiemalis*).—Our record card shows the finding of 6 singing males, they being found at various points alongside the summits where the fir timber was still standing. A parent bird was noted carrying food to its young on June 25.

**Catbird** (*Dumetella carolinensis*).—Noted at four points along the tops.

**Eastern Robin** (*Turdus m. migratorius*).—Quite common everywhere along the mountain. Three nests were examined; one with 4 incubated eggs in a spruce, one with 4 fresh eggs in a haw, and one with 2 eggs in a beech. A male and a female collected, on June 22 at 6000 ft., were identified as of this form by Dr. Oberholser.

**Veery** (*Hylocichla f. fuscoseaens*).—Fairly common in the fir belt and down the slopes into the deciduous forest. In the edge of the latter, at Big Meadow (6500 ft.) a nest was found on June 24, with 3 nearly fresh eggs. It was built 2 feet above the ground in one of a patch of small beech sprouts in thick woods. The bulky nest was built on a foundation of beech leaves and was principally of weed stems and fibres. An old nest was found nearby on low limb of a small spruce.
EASTERN BLUEBIRD (*Sialia s. sialis*).—The one pair noted were on top of Little Roan (5800 ft.) on June 25, feeding 5 nearly fledged young in nest in cavity of a small buckeye 12 feet up.

CEDAR WAXWING (*Bombycilla cedrorum*).—Three seen near Cloudland (6100 ft.) on June 25, and two the following day at Big Meadows.

MOUNTAIN VIREO (*Vireo solitarius alticola*).—Five observed at various points, from near the summits to Big Meadows (5600 ft.) where Lyle found a nest on June 22 with 3 young ready to leave. One of these young was captured two days later by watching the parent carry food. The nest was 9 feet up at end of beech limb near border of deciduous woodland.

CHESTNUT-SIDED WARBLER (*Dendroica pensylvanica*).—While we did not actually find this species “on top,” yet it is worthy of record that a nest was found at 3700 ft. by Mr. Lyle on June 22. It was built 2 feet up in a small maple sprout and held 3 fresh eggs.

CANADA WARBLERS (*Wilsonia canadensis*).—Two pair were found on June 25, at elev. 5800 ft., south of The Gardens, and each were tending young. The following day we watched one pair for half an hour, the female carrying food, and finally decided that the young were already out of the nest.

ROSE-BREASTED Grosbeak (*Hedycmeles ludovicianus*).—A male observed singing on the south side of Little Roan, near top at elev. 5700 ft., in deciduous growth.

INDIGO BUNTING (*Passerina cyanea*).—Fairly common along the summits, being seen or heard at eight locations.

EASTERN YELLOWRumped TOWHEE (*Pipilo e. erythropthalmus*).—A pair dwelt on the very summit of Roan High Knob (6313 ft.) and males were seen or heard singing at four other points along the ridge.

CAROLINA JUNCO (*Junco hyemalis carolinensis*).—The most abundant bird on Roan Mountain, preferring the high ridge to the mountainside, though one was seen as low as 4000 ft. The second nesting was just under way, we having found eight nests all with 3 or 4 eggs. All nests were built on the ground except one which was 2 feet up in a small fir. Several old nests were among the roots of upturned trees. Many young of the first brood were being tended in the trees by the parents birds and their spotted breasts made them differ conspicuously from the old birds. Bread crumbs scattered about are greatly relished by the Juncos.

EASTERN VESPER SPARROW (*Poecetes g. gramineus*).—We were pleased, and a little surprised to find one of these birds feeding on the grassy bald summit of Little Roan at elev. 5700 ft. It probably had a nest in the vicinity for conditions here were quite suitable.

MISSISSIPPI SONG SPARROW (*Melospiza melodia beata*).—Noted in five places, and usually several hundred feet below the tops, in the cut-over areas especially where there were small streams. The nest of one pair, at the spring (6000 ft.) near the lodge was found on June 22. It was tucked under the grass in the side of a gully and contained 5 eggs incubated about one week.

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