



## BIRDS AT TASSAJARA

by William W. Sterling

The birds of Tassajara are like the birds of Green Gulch in habit and pattern: some are residents throughout the year; some are migrants who dally in the environs during the warm months of spring and summer to mate, nest and brood and fledge their young; and some are transients, flying from winter grounds in the south to breeding grounds in the north, tarrying only momentarily for rest and provender while en route to some ulterior destination. Some species which appear at Tassajara (the dipper, the mountain quail, the canyon wren) are not to be seen at Green Gulch; and conversely there are many species which visit Green Gulch, notably the variety of ducks and shorebirds which frequent the ponds in the lower field and the beach, whose appearance in Tassajara Canyon would be extraordinary. Yet most of the birds easily and commonly seen at the one place may also be seen at the other. My haphazard notes listing birds seen during spring and summer months at Tassajara include kingfishers, olive-sided flycatchers, red-tailed hawks, turkey vultures, Steller's jays and scrub jays, downy and hairy woodpeckers, red-shafted flickers, Bewick's wrens, rufous-sided towhees, brown creepers, solitary vireos, warbling vireos and black phoebes, to name a few; and all are birds common at Green Gulch as well.

But, since I am at best only a casual summer visitor to Tassajara, the birds I especially recall are those particularly colorful species whose presence along Tassajara Creek has coincided with my own: the orange and black northern oriole, whose pendent nests are built in oaks and sycamores along the Creek; the western tanager, a species in which the male shows a red cap, bright yellow body and contrasting black wings; the ash-throated flycatcher, whose tail-feathers are rusty in hue but flash like flame when the bird is seen from below against a bright, translucent sky

framed by the canyon walls; and acorn woodpeckers, black and white of wing, flying acrobatics in combat with marauding crows.

Nesting birds are most readily found in the riparian foliage and the woods upstream and downstream from Tassajara's buildings. In the forepart of June this year we admired a solitary vireo on her nest; she had built it upon the extremity of a low and supple sycamore branch, some four to five feet above the ground. As we



we clambered out of the Creek onto the flat below the Hogback, just across from the waterfall, a sprightly breeze whirred the branch about, and the nest at its end rotated wildly, almost describing a full circle. The vireo rode securely nonetheless, sitting snugly over her eggs, holding them warm and steady while the nest swung nearly upside down from one side to the other.

But by no means all the nesting occurs outside of downtown Tassajara. There are unobservant folk who say that the Steller's jays have chased all other birds from the center of Tassajara between the pool and the baths.

Ubiquitous brown creepers give the lie to this assertion as do many other birds. In the space of an hour one afternoon I counted sixteen species between baths and pool, motivated in part, I confess, by a wish to vindicate the jays, whose beautiful, subtle blue feather patterns and wry intelligence may be noticed less than their raucous intrusions into lunch bags and tea tables. Thus house wrens nest in the shattered

sycamore at the southeast corner of the bridge outside the dining room. Red-shafted flickers nest in holes in the solitary sycamore above the old zendo site. Nuttall's woodpeckers nest in the trees which shade the office building. Birds abound in Tassajara proper, and in the evening, from the bathhouse bridge, the ever-genuflecting dipper may be seen preening mid-stream on a wet, gleaming rock.

An occasional visitor to Tassajara may see birds of the occasion. A year-round resident at Tassajara may see the birds of every season, the comings and goings of the migrants and the patterned movements upslope and downslope of the permanent bird residents. Whatever the length of one's stay, how-





ever, the process and experience of observation can take one out of time. When I returned to Muir Beach in late August this year from a vacation in the Adirondacks (fledging osprey, common loons, Blackburnian warblers), I received a letter from a year-round resident at Tassajara. Here, in part, is what he wrote:

“ . . . As you mentioned, bird watching is a mindfulness practice, and yet it is also a mirror and a teacher. I can't be rattled and watch birds, and on those occasions when I am I just forget about the birds and lie down. Sooner or later they grab my interest again and off I go. It's almost as if they won't show themselves to someone who is angry or discouraged . . . ”

So the observed may guide the observer and reveal the unlooked for when the searcher rests from looking.

