



EL PASO BIRD STUDY CLUB

# THE ROADRUNNER

January 1943

IN MEMORIAM

The members of the El Paso Bird Study Club mourn the loss of Tom Miller Kirksey, President, on Nov. 29, 1942. His services to the group have been invaluable, from the standpoint of inspiration, ability, and unstinted labor

OCTOBER MEETING

The El Paso Bird Study Club met on October 5, 1942, in the club rooms. Tom Kirksey gave a most informative talk on birds of the Taos Region. Of special interest was his vivid account of experiences with a group of humming birds at Vallecitos near Tres Piedras.

JANUARY MEETING

The El Paso Bird Study Club will meet at 504 Mills Building on Monday, January 4, 1943, at 4:45 P.M. There will be a short business meeting during which the nominating committee will make its report. Mrs. Lena McBee will talk on "Nesting Birds of Taos". Guests are invited.

A New Year's Resolution

To pay our dues at the very first meeting of the New Year, and to perform a real service by interesting others in this worthwhile hobby at a time when hobbies are doubly valuable to our national morale.

This issue of THE ROADRUNNER is the work of Mrs. Marguerite Wright, chairman of the Bird Study Club, assisted by Mrs. McBee and Mrs. Allen. Previous bulletins were edited by the late Tom Miller Kirksey, founder.

Mrs. Lovie Mae Whittaker of Las Vegas, New Mexico contributes a biography of a Texas Pyrrhuloxia under the title, "Life with Chico". The first installment appears on page 2.

Mrs. H. D. Slater is doing a series of articles on the flora of this region for THE ROADRUNNER. The first of these will be found on page 3.

We are indebted to Mrs. Lena McBee for the biographical sketch on the last page.

## LIFE WITH CHICA

by Lovie Mae Whittaker

Her birthplace was the Texas Big Bend. We got her the first day she ventured from the nest atop a fruiting stalk of yucca that grew among mesquite and catsclaw in the shadow of great yellow cliffs marking the junction of Tornillo Creek and the Rio Grande. It was on these bluffs incidentally, that Louis Agassiz Fuertes once was caught when retrieving a Zone-tailed Hawk and could get neither up nor down until his companions came with ropes. I believe Fuertes might have enjoyed watching Chica grow from a brownish-gray, top-knotted, thumb-sized baby into the aristocratic grace of an adult Texas Pyrrhuloxia. For us it was an adventure. We kept a journal of her behavior and development from August 2, 1941, until June 15, 1942, when she was returned to the very same thicket.

Her smoky gray upperparts and golden buffy breast were set off by a rounding, parrot-hooked bill of deep yellow and a long, dusky red crest of wonderful eloquence. What a barometer that crest! So expressive of her changing moods, I imagine we might have correctly judged them from seeing it alone. A slash of dull red marked the folded primaries and her dark tail had an overwash of the same hue. A delicate brushing of pink showed narrowly down her breast and banded her heels. Rosy patches encircled her eyes and extended to the bill where a blackish shadow outlined its base and ran dimly down the sides of the whitish chin patch. In flight her short, round wings winked an almost flamingo pink and made loud flup-flup sounds.

Chica's friendliness, playfulness and inveterate curiosity endeared her to the whole household and compelled the attention, if not the admiration, of the most unbirdconscious caller. Strangers were eyed and chipped at from a safe point and, if accepted, were likely to have their glasses chewed, hair pins removed or an ear lobe pinched none too gently. Low chup-chups bespoke her absorption in these things. Companion for several months to other hand-raised birds which were less gentle, she never adopted their ways and rarely did she fail to respond to calls or the invitation of an extended forefinger. Some persons she trusted from the first, others she never made bold with, no matter how often she saw them. But for all her familiarity, there were certain intimacies she would not permit and, although she might investigate your clothing, nibbling at buttons and poking her head into pockets to get meal worms, sunflower seed or a bright bead, she would not let you close your fingers upon her--at least not if she could help it. If you liked you might bury your nose in the soft feathers of her nape while she squatted in the palm of your hand, but if you tried to rub or pet her she would fly away.

Having the fly of the house much of the time, she enjoyed swooping through rooms, just brushing the heads of her flightless friends and skewing around corners in a barnstorming style. Although we were often breathless at these wild gyrations, which she renewed with greater daring if we were attentive, we never once saw her make a slip or miscalculate distance.

The sounds of running water or grilling foods brought her as quickly or quicker than our calls and frequently provoked ecstatic chipperings in high staccato, or whisper songs. A favorite song-perch was the towel rack near the kitchen stove. If anyone was showering and inadvertently left the door ajar, he was certain to have company under the spray--company and entertainment; for the water beat her fine crest awry until it was a miniature ragged chrysanthemum dangling in her eyes, washing away her beautiful body contours and changed her into a little ragamuffin.

Left alone, she would spend as much as ten minutes flying through the spray, sometimes lifting her head and opening her bill to catch the drops. When completely water-logged, she fluttered heavily to the bottom of the tub and with dragging tail hopped about and made sharp cheet calls. Bathing finished, she would with mighty effort make the edge of the tub, give a few rapid flits of wings and tail, rise to a more secure perch and there spend a long time preening. She fluttered her wings and tail, ran the quills through her bill and worked her plumage until it was dry and fluffy and she was once more respectable looking.

(Continued in next ROADRUNNER)

Those of us who climb the mountain or loiter along the river bank, botanizing, as well as looking for birds, boast that there is never a month of the year when we cannot find at least nine varieties of flowers in full bloom.

The Groundsel or Senecio, a yellow straggling daisy, bright but somewhat irregular, (you might say slouchy or weak-stemmed) is a vagabond of our roadsides, scant and wizened in our long dry spells, but brilliant in a good rain. "Senecio" the family name, refers to the old fuzzy white head when it goes to seed.

A real verbena as distinguished from "Sand Verbena" blooms every day of the El Paso year, in bright amethystine purples. It has the characteristic circles, the rough texture of its green stuff and the jointed, toothed leaves of our garden verbena and is much the same size. "Sand Verbenas" are four o'clocks; believe it or not.

Apache Plume, *Fallugia Paradoxa*, a shrub varying from waist to shoulder in height, has bone-white, slender, thickly tangled stems and inconspicuous leaves complicated in design, showing the rose family's five leaflets. The flower looks exactly like a wild strawberry blossom (also of the rose kin), five somewhat heart-shaped and most fugacious petals- Burns has a better word for it- "white as the snowflakes falling past it" as it goes on blooming through the worst storms we can blow. While the rose has its scarlet tips and the strawberry its scarlet fruit, the Apache Plume puts forth a bunch of feathered seeds hung lightly backward, like an Apache's war bonnet. Up Franklin these bunches may be an inch and a half long and mountain color- the color of the day, only slightly tinged with the family's favorite pink. As you climb to Clouderoft in September, the bushes are higher, the flowers as wide as a quarter and the plumes a good two inches long, and changing pink and purple tossing soft and twining white as a cloud making sunset effects along the road.

With our December wild flowers Franklin's tall spired wallflowers put on an odd performance. You will be arrested by the fragrance- nothing like it at fifteen dollars a drop on the department stores' counters. Like the violet and rose the perfume haunts you happily the rest of your life; it is so honey sweet and alluring. Searching you find that near the base the old withered flower spires have put out new green which is blooming in bright yellow. Wallflowers scientifically are listed as "crucifers", - cross bearers- because the big family, which includes a lot of our table vegetables, carries the flowers in a cross: four petals, two up and down, two across. The crucifers use the number four as the rose genera uses five. It is a family characteristic.

Wild buckwheat has wide representation in our local flora, among them *erigenum pinetorum*. High up the mountain it may be found like a miniature apple tree with a four inch long gnarled and crooked trunk back in a crevice and a thickly blossoming top all pink and white. Lower down, in the open or in the shelter of boulders it grows higher and sprawls out in films of meshed stems and small bunches of tiny flowers- like a Venetian lace made without needles. Pink or rich orange it may be, stems and all, or delicately gray stems and practically no green this time of year. The flowers are not bigger than a pin head, three curled petals, three papery sepals which add glisten to the pattern. The wee flowers are crowded into involucre which are on slightly angling stems giving the flower its lace pattern.

If you love the Tiny Tims you can find them every time you walk out of town- patches of fine moss-like green out of which hop wee perfect daisy circles of yellow flowers- most cheerful and quite the tidiest posy we have. *Hymenanthorum* or *Thymifolia hartwegii*, the botanics call them.

January should permit you to find a cactus in bloom, *Mamillaria tuberculosa*, which name does not refer to the disease. Round, dark, rough, the size of a baseball, it flowers in a crown of white or pink flowers followed by crimson fruits. It likes sunny limestone cracks and is listed as common, but bargain stores all over the country offering pots of small cacti testify to the kidnapping from our mountain of its small cacti folk, and it is not so easy to find although not difficult to identify by its crown and its baseball dimension. Some cacti wear the flowers as belts, some as shoulder wreaths, some as crowns and some as topknots. With the small cacti of the winter appears a small black and silver bee who sets as side at the flower weddings.

Your eighth, ninth, tenth and so on into dozens of December and January wild flowers may be a splashing silver-leaved paint brush, a high fragrant purple sage, a delicate yellow flax, a newly-minted gold *Baileya* daisy, an obtrusive yellow paper flower, a homely copper or senna or a surprising white blackfoot daisy.

## TOM MILLER KIRKSEY

Tom Miller Kirksey was born March 16, 1918, the son of Colonel Guy Kirksey, now in command at Hammer Field, Fresno, California, and Helen Miller Kirksey, who fostered the boy's hobbies of bird study, water color sketching and nature photography. In the Spring of 1938, bird students in El Paso became aware of the residence in their midst of a promising young ornithologist who was also a writer and an artist of considerable talent.

He was then engaged in preparing a list of birds of the El Paso area, which was to be presented to the newly organized Bird Study Club of El Paso, when finished and checked by Dr. Oberholser. As an active member of the St. Louis Bird Study group, Tom had written two units of his "A Field Catalogue of Birds of the St. Louis Region" and had edited the bulletin of the Club. He helped the El Paso group with its first Audubon Bird Christmas count, 1938, and put up feeding tables for birds in Highland Park. From its birth, the local club has profited by Tom's extraordinary skill in recognizing birds, his organized lore, his large bird library and technical equipment for bird study, his experience in bird banding and in the taking and preparation of specimen. He assisted in the procurement and upkeep of the Paso del Norte Bird Refuge. He founded The Roadrunner and edited all the previous issues. He organized numerous field trips and brought speakers of distinction to address the Club.

In June, 1941, Tom was married to Jane Hondo Loomis of El Paso, who survives him. That summer the young pair lived in Starksville, Mississippi, and Tom was in charge of the Noxubee Bird Refuge. The summer of 1942 they spent in the vicinity of Taos, New Mexico, where they made a study of the birds of the area and, incidentally, built a summer cabin.

On receiving the appointment of Air Forces cadet in October, Tom closed his photographic studio in El Paso and, with his young wife, moved to Fresno, to be near his parents while awaiting orders to report for training in Denver, Colorado. On November 29 occurred the fatal automobile accident in which Tom and his mother met their deaths. The bodies were taken to St. Louis for interment.

It was Tom's wish, expressed at the October meeting, that the Club meet regularly and continue the publication of THE ROADRUNNER. He expressed a desire, "If I come back", to build up the collection of bird specimen at the College of Mines. His private collection remains in the museum at present as his loan to the institution.

### TOM KIRKSEY'S LAST FIELD TRIP

This list of birds seen in San Francisco, about Nov. 18, is taken from a letter written by Tom to Mrs. Lena McBee, dated Nov. 24, 1942:

"Of birds I saw only a few--on the run. Lake Merced, in the city park, contained many ducks, mostly Baldpates, with a few Mallards, etc., a large number of Coots, a few Ruddy Ducks, a few Fallarone and Brandt's Cormorants, a raft of Surf Scoters; and five Holboell's Grebes. Of course, Gulls--Western, California, Glaucus-winged, and Ring-billed. In the park were many Golden-crowned and Gambel's Sparrows and a Junco, which I think is the Point Pinos variety.

"In route to and from Fresno, we passed the extensive Los Banos marshes, where I once went on a field trip when I was at Stanford. It is a marvelous place--miles and miles of shallow water and tules, at the head of the San Joaquin Valley. There were many Snowy and American Egrets, some Great Blue Herons, a Green Heron, and hundreds of Ducks and Coots. We stopped near there for lunch, and I found a pair of Black-chinned Hummingbirds and several Audubon's Warblers.

"I have located a man here named John G. Tyler, 1115 Thorne, Fresno, who has been studying the birds of this region for over forty years. He has published a local list, and apparently is the authority on this area. Jane and I spent a very happy evening at his home night before last. He has promised me a trip to the Los Banos Refuge, perhaps next Sunday. He seems to be well informed on birds and habitats of the entire western United States, and seems very anxious to have any old copies of THE ROADRUNNER. Will you look over the stock and send him what you can?

"So far as I know, I am still going to report in Denver on the 7th as Air Forces Cadet."