



WILDLIFE NOTES

Brown creeper

Certhia familiaris

What's that? A little bit of bark moving up the tree trunk? Look again. It's a small bird so well camouflaged that when it stops moving, it virtually disappears. This bit of imitation bark is really a brown creeper, a slender five- to six-inch bird that clings to tree trunks while it spies for caterpillars, insect eggs, larvae, beetles, and spider cocoons hidden in the crevices. The streaked and speckled, brown, gray, and buffy plumage with a narrow white line over the eye helps the bird to blend so well with its background that one has to get a very good look to see that the creeper has contrasting white underparts or to notice the reddish tail and rump.

As a creeper moves up a tree trunk, it uses its long, stiff tail feathers as a brace. Although its posture resembles that of a woodpecker, the creeper's thin, downcurved bill is designed for picking and prying rather than hammering. It has the distinctive habit of hitching up the trunk in a spiral and then flitting down to the base of the next tree to start its spiraling ascent again. In addition to gleaning insect food from bark, the creeper occasionally eats small seeds and nuts and will come to feeders for chopped peanuts or to suet/peanut butter/cornmeal mixtures put in the bark of trees.

The brown creeper is a permanent resident in New Mexico for-

ests. In Canada and the northern United States it may migrate north/south in spring and fall, but in New Mexico seasonal movements tend to be elevational. Outside the breeding season creepers occur in a variety of habitats from 5,000 to more than 9,000 feet, but in summer they prefer mature forests of pine or mixed conifers.

Although creepers will use knotholes or woodpecker holes, their favorite nest location is behind a loose slab of bark against the trunk of a tree. Because old growth forests have more decaying trees with detached bark, they provide creepers with a greater number of suitable nest sites. The nest itself, often only a few feet off the ground, is built of twigs, moss and shredded bark, with a few feathers in the lining. A typical nest is described as hammock- or crescent-shaped with corners rising above the nest cup like horns and firmly attached to the inner surface of the bark. The eggs are white with a sparse spotting of reddish-brown and typically are five to six in number.

Brown creepers seem to be uncommon but it may be that they are simply overlooked because of their inconspicuous color and thin voice. In the breeding season the male sings a wiry, five-parted song described as *see-ti-wee-tu-wee* or *trees-trees-trees-see-the-trees*, but

in the winter the brown creeper's only sound is a single, thin, high *seet*. Seldom are creepers found in company with their own kind, except when nesting or for a short time after the young fledge, but they are known to travel in company with chickadees, kinglets, and nuthatches. Perhaps the best way to find a brown creeper is to locate a noisy flock of chickadees, and then watch to see if a little bit of brown bark is traveling along near them.

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