

A Portion of
“A GOLDFINCH ROMANCE”

From “Bird Memories of the Rockies” by Enos A. Mills

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One late May morning, as I stood in the shadow of a tree by the beaver pond, watching the droll and serious antics of some young beaver, two neatly dressed little birds alighted near and began to eat dandelion seed. They were my first goldfinches. Her call of “Sweet” was the most bewitching I had ever heard. I lay for a long time among the daisies and watched them. For the first and only time in my life I lost all interest in beaver.

Chattering away merrily like little children, this pair moved quietly about. I followed. Evidently they were young mates. He was handsome with his black cap, olive-green coat, and gold vest almost the color of the dandelion bloom against which he stood. She wore a gray-green gown, with a wash of gold upon her breast.

They seemed so trustful of this good old world, so merry, and so glad to be alive, as they flitted happily among the yellow flowers, I wished that every one might know them. “Hear me, hear me, dearie,” they called as they fed among the weeds or on the birch buds.

The meal finished, they launched into the air, and to the tune of a cheery “Per-chic-o-ree, per-chic-o-ree” went singing through space in long, bounding undulations. They flew in a spirited gallop, as if coasting at high speed over a series of invisible little hills and hollows. I watched them until they flew into the grove. As Mr. Goldfinch

alighted, I noted that he was marked by a broken feather.

Two weeks later I saw the pair again, as merry as ever. But why was this young couple not busy nest-building? They probably had been courting for at least six weeks when I first saw them, and they were still at it. I wished that I might have seen the beginning of this long courtship.

It was mid-June, and the robins and the bluebirds by my cabin were working about sixteen hours a day trying to deliver food to nests of youngsters ever shouting for more and more. The chickadees were the only other birds that had not as yet commenced nest-building; usually they selected hollow trees, often abandoned woodpecker or flicker nests of the year before. If they have good reasons for late nesting, I have not discovered them. It is possible that the chickadees that lived around my cabin in winter went farther north, or farther up the mountain to nest; but at any rate there were chickadees in the region practically the year round.

On the Fourth of July I saw the goldfinches again—still courting. He was parading proudly before her, and she proudly watching him. His manner was most winsome. As they galloped away through the air I heard them calling, “Sweet-eet, sweet-eet,” to each other. These slender little yellow-breasted birds were graceful and charming. Everything they did was appealing.

Never have I seen any bird or being more bewitch-ingly or inspiringly happy. Often I heard his love song. He sang with ecstasy and in such plaintive, winsome tones as to be intensely thrilling. It was enchanting, enticing, and rapturous. Low and sweetly he talked, long and lovingly he chatted with his mate. Every day, rain or shine,

these loving mates went flying about, constantly calling “Sweet-eet” in their bounding flight through the air. And thus in rapture their courtship went on.

On the 15th of July this vivacious young couple commenced house-hunting. The following day they were building in an alder near the beaver pond. A number of birds and their young children were already starting on the southward migratory journey. Others were bringing their second broods off the nest.

Four days later, when I went back to the alder, I found that the nest was wrecked and abandoned without having been completed. I could find no clue, no one to blame for the damage. But birds have many enemies; often they suffer ill-deserved misfortune.

But it did not end the goldfinch romance. In an alder about fifty feet away I found little Mrs. Goldfinch busy— oh, ever so busy—with another nest. It was about six feet above the ground. Evidently she was of a trusting nature. Shreds of hemplike bark from last year’s fallen weeds were being used. She insisted on doing all the work.

While I watched he brought good nesting-material. It must have been good, for she had used it in the first nest. He wanted to weave this into the new nest, but she would not let him. More strangely, she refused, when he gave it to her, to weave it in herself. But, though she refused his material and his assistance again and again, she did it oh so sweetly; there was no scolding.

Another day the little goldfinch home-maker carried off part of the material from the wrecked nest and used it in the new one. Busily the little lady worked. Occasionally she paused to call sweetly to her young and handsome husband, while he,

always responsive, was the most gentle and devoted creature that I have seen. Most of the time he sat on a tree-top near by and observed every detail, now and then giving a low call. She as sweetly answered, but without looking up from her nest-building.

If he could not help in the nest-building, at least he was ever on guard for enemies. If very many minutes elapsed after she disappeared for more material, he ceased his song and peered down to catch a glimpse of her. If still she did not return, he gave up doing anything, restlessly looking this way and that, as though thinking, "I wonder if anything has happened!" With what eagerness and excitement he rushed out to meet her when she came in sight!

Once when I stood close, watching her work, she had been too busy to call or look up for some time. He, with his eye on something in the distance, had neither spoken nor dropped down to see her. Questioningly she called. He was at her side in an instant. "Sweet," she answered in all confidence and went on with her work. She did not want a thing, but had to assure herself that her sweet-voiced husband was still around.

I do not know if he extended the luncheon invitation or if she did. But she would suddenly break away from her nest-building, in which she had appeared all concentration, and alight within a few inches of him. After chattering deliciously for a moment, they would go romping off together. Lovingly the nest was prepared. Built of stringy bark, of fallen plants and grass, it was luxuriously, thickly lined with thistle-down. Quantities of thistle-down were used during the last two days. The little nest-builder had hardly looked up. She was felting and quilting it after her own individual

pattern.

The nest completed, Mrs. Goldfinch started to fly off, but turned back and smoothed the lining again. Seating herself in it, she tried the nest, turning first one way and then the other. I doubt it the eggs of any bird in the world rest upon softer or more luxurious beds than those of the goldfinches. Later there were five pale bluish-white eggs.

The Arkansas goldfinch, with yellow dress and heart of gold is one of the treasures of the earth. Wild canary, thistle-bird, yellowbird, and dandelion bird, are some of the names applied to him. His relatives are scattered over the United States and in some localities there is a numerous population. The bird was named from its first discovery on the Arkansas River in Colorado. Like the bluebirds, robins, red-winged blackbirds, Audubon and Townsend warblers, flickers, Audubon hermit thrushes, wrens, and northern violet-green swallows, the Arkansas goldfinches come to the mountain zone to nest and spend the summer. They are always a rare delight. Their gentle ways and sweet disposition would be never-failing antidotes for discontent.

None of the goldfinch family nest early; in fact, they often are the last nest-builders of the season. The males regain their bright color in April, but they are evidently believers in prolonged courtships, and although the nuptial dress is acquired so early, housekeeping is apparently not thought of until July. During three years that I watched them around me, I found that they built between July first and twenty-first.

Most birds time the hatching of their young so that there is an abundant close-to-

home food-supply for the youngsters, many of whom daily eat their weight of food. There may be other factors in determining the nesting-time.

Goldfinches eat the seeds of the dandelion, thistle, and sunflower chiefly, where these are obtainable. If you would attract goldfinches (and you would be well repaid for doing so) devote a corner of your garden to sunflowers. Goldfinches perhaps nest late to have a supply of new soft thistle and milkweed down for thickly and softly lining the nest. Or, it may simply be one of their many interesting characteristics.

Mrs. Goldfinch completed the nest on the tenth day; this was quick work, but the material from the wrecked nest may have helped speed up its completion. But even though she speeded up, there was certainly no slighting the job.

I spent much time near the goldfinch nest and discovered other nesting birds. While they had been building, a pair of white-crowned sparrows had brought off a second brood from the willow-clump. Usually for the second nest they go two thousand feet up the mountain-side, where summer has just arrived and where food is as abundant as down the mountain a month earlier. I had watched a pair of noisy magpies train their awkward children in the ways considered good in magpie world. Their nest had been a big brush-heap up near the top of an old pine.

The goldfinch alder was one of a clump that stood in an aspen wild-flower garden. Among the aspen were orchids, the silver and blue columbine, tiger lilies with "heart of fire," and in late summer the blue fringed gentians. There was always something of interest. I often wished for two or three pairs of eyes. I could have used them.

After my second close approach the goldfinches paid little attention to me, even when I stood near their tree. Nor did they seem to mind other birds alighting near by. They were too absorbed with their own affairs, and with each other. Often the long-crested jays simply shouted from the near-by tree-tops, but this made no difference to the goldfinches.

She sat on the nest nearly all the time; often he brought her something to eat. Sometimes she gave a strangely appealing call. With haste her husband came singing to her side or talked to her in tender, solicitous tone from a near-by limb.

One day, when I appeared from an unusual direction, she gave a startled note of alarm. He darted over to me and then to her. Evidently, judging from his tones, he assured her that I was not in the least dangerous. Having satisfied her, he flew away. But he was constantly near, ever lived for her. And sometimes, without her calling, he went to her—simply, I suppose, because he could not stay away longer.

While Mrs. Goldfinch was off the nest one day, I went up close for a look at the eggs. She returned sooner than expected and alighted on a limb so near that I could have touched her. Looking at me intently, she said, “Sweet-eet,” as though to ask, “Aren’t they the dearest things in all the world?” Afterwards, she caught me handling the eggs, but did not in any way object and apparently was pleased.

Before the nest was completed the birds often went bathing together in a shallow, sandy little bay of the brook within an easy stone’s throw of the nest. Daintily they waded about, occasionally flapping their wings and fluttering in the water. One day a pair of water-ouzels, whose nest was by the brook quite near, stood solemnly,

interestedly watching the bathers, who may have appeared to the swimming, diving ouzels as if afraid of the water.

The goldfinch eggs hatched out in fourteen days. Just as I arrived at the nest one day, Mr. Goldfinch came swinging and singing through the air with his bill full of insects for his mate on the nest. He was so happy that he must sing even with his mouth full. One tiny young bird came through the shell that afternoon; I could not tell whether he broke out or whether it was his mother who broke in. She kept leaning over and billing around the nest, but, fearing to disturb her, I kept back. Two days later, when I returned to the nest, there were five babies, none of them larger than a bumblebee.

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