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## WINTER BEDS FOR BIRDS

by

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(This story is about bird life in the  
southwest where Mrs. Finley is spending  
the winter.)

Tourists go south in winter and travel north in summer for an obvious reason. Birds migrate south in winter and north in summer for the same reason, to avoid the snow and cold. In the case of the birds, the snow and cold destroy their food supply, kill the insects and freeze up the ground with the vegetable and fruit supplies and the weed seeds. It is a natural sequence.

Arriving in Arizona about February 1st, we of course expected to find no birds courting or nesting, as the mating season for birds holds good in almost any region. May, June and July are the home building months almost the whole world over. We were surprised to find so many birds flitting about among the cactus on the upper mesas and a quiet activity in the mesquites and willows of the lowlands and washes. We thought this must be an all year around place, but a little investigation revealed the true situation.

Rolling along comfortably in the crisp sunshine of a February day, we saw thrashers, of which there are three species in Arizona, the Palmer, the Bendire and the Crissal, and other birds flitting about their usual haunts. If they were not as exuberant as in May or June, still they were there. A gila woodpecker hitched quietly up a mesquite tree. A red-headed linnet buzzed busily from one cactus to another. A gnatcatcher flitted fussily underneath the bushes. To a novice, it would seem that something was going on, even though subdued.

Taking a little stroll quietly by ourselves, we found out the real situation and some surprises that were interesting. Crunching



the sand of a dry wash in a little gully, we saw what looked to be a small bunch of grass or roots caught on the bare limb of a cat's-claw bush. It looked like a piece of drift caught by high water. Out of curiosity, we went closer and found a small round hole in the under part of the little ball. It was late afternoon and no one was around. Soon a little fellow arrived whom I recognized as a cousin of the chickadee. It was a male verdin. He fidgeted and skulked and finally popped into the round doorway in the ball of dry drift that rattled in the wind.. This was no nest for children: it was his winter bed. We left him to his sleep.

He was a tiny, olive gray bird, yellow on the neck and head, with a chestnut patch on the shoulder, and about the size of his cousin, the chickadee. He was using the summer home for a winter bed. The verdin's home is an accomplishment in nest building. It has both secrecy and inaccessibility. An open nest with the eggs exposed out on a bare branch would not last long in Arizona. This elaborate home is the result of many generations of verdin history. Living in a hostile country and surrounded by a long line of enemies, the verdin has learned to choose trees and bushes that are studded with thorns. More than that, he selects and weaves thorns into the webs and fibers for the walls of this home. It is in this way a fortified house with a doorway in the bottom so that lizard and snake enemies cannot enter. And it is as good for winter as summer.

Another common bird of the desert follows this same practice. The cactus wren, like the verdin, builds a well protected, covered home. He selects the thorniest place in a cholla cactus, although sometimes he nests in a mesquite or palo verde. The cactus wren, like the tule wren or winter wren, often builds nests that are not used in summer. These are called "cock nests" and are probably built by the male while the female is incubating. It is a question whether they



are built from the standpoint of protection, - that is, having several unused nests about as a ruse, - or whether the birds build homes until they get one that suits them exactly. At least, a good many of these gourd-shaped, fine grass wren nests are used by the cocks for winter beds.