# Brown Creeper

*Certhia americana*

September 2016

## Field Notes

Brown creeper. Photo: Tom Talbott, Creative Commons.

### General Description

If you see a piece of bark at the base of a big tree suddenly start hopping upward in a spiral around the trunk, you've just spotted North America's only treecreeper: the brown creeper. This cryptic bird is not easy to spot, and no easier to hear, but actually occurs widely from Alaska to Central America, and from coast to coast.

### Identification

The brown creeper is a small songbird, 12–13 cm (4.5–5 in) long from the tip of its slender, downcurved bill to the tip of its tail. It weighs no more than two nickels (10 g). Its back is mottled with black, gray, and brown, sometimes with a reddish hue. It has a creamy white eyebrow and mostly white underparts.

### Diet and Habitat

Brown creepers eat invertebrates that they glean with their slender bill out of crevices in the bark of trees. Beetles, ants, spiders, and pseudoscorpions are common prey. Deeply furrowed bark is a gold mine for these birds, which explains why they tend to inhabit older forests containing large trees that have had to time to develop thick bark. For nesting, they rely on another feature of older forest: snags, or standing dead trees. In the West, they tend to occur in coniferous or mixed forests, but can also inhabit orchards, woodlands, forested floodplains, and swamps.

### Behavior and Life History

Brown creepers spend most of their time in motion, foraging. Starting at the base of a tree, they move upward, often in a spiral, probing and picking through the bark, with their legs spread widely to either side and their long, stiff tail propped against the trunk for balance. Once the branches become too dense for efficient foraging, they fly back down to the base of another tree, typically confining their foraging to the lower 10 m of a tree. This spiral movement around and up a tree can speed up and become a chase during courtship.

Their thin, high-pitched vocalizations are sometimes hard to hear. Calls include a series of *tsee* notes, and their short, melodic song is often repeated.

Brown creepers are typically year-round residents, but northern and high-elevation populations are known to migrate south or to lower elevations during the winter.

### Ecology

Brown creepers fall prey to sharp-shinned and Cooper's hawks—forest raptors in the genus *Accipiter* equipped with short wings and long tails for maneuvering in dense forest conditions. Squirrels, deer mice, and other rodents will take eggs and young from the nest.

### Reproduction

Beginning in April or May, the female builds her nest behind a loose flap of bark against the trunk of a tree, typically a snag. The base layer is coarser twigs and bark held together by insect cocoons and spider-egg cases, forming a sort of "sling." The nest cup is made of finer material such as wood fibers, hair, feathers, grass, lichens, and mosses. The female lays 4–8 white eggs, speckled with pink or reddish-brown spots at the large end. Altricial (dependent) nestlings hatch from the eggs in approximately 15 days, and fledge 17 days later.

Brown creeper at nest. Photo: Larry Jordan, Creative Commons.

### Where to See

The brown creeper breeds in all of the Klamath Network parks.

### References and Further Reading

Birds of North America online: http://bna.birds.cornell.edu/bna/species/669