AUTUMN IN NEW MEXICO

In September the birds begin to come down from the mountains. Each morning my wife and I walk out into the pinons and junipers to watch for them and to look at the wild flowers. It was a wet August this year with almost daily rain storms right up into September. It is like a second spring with blooming flowers and the songs of birds. One calls with a sweet clear note -- a single flute-like note -- again and again. I cannot find the bird, for I am blinded by the morning sun just rising over the western foothills of the Sangre de Cristo range. From the top branches of the low pinons and junipers, other birds answer the call, indistinguishable in the bushy trees in the sharp morning light. Then one begins a soft melodious warble, which I have heard high in the mountains in June. Like a shaft of light in a darkened room, a bright illumination stirs sudden recognition and I remember the Townsend solitaire.

Solitaires are well named. They haunt the grassy mountain tops where forest fires long ago destroyed the trees creating open, alpine slopes. They nest in June or July on the ground under the shelter of a rotting log or projecting slab of rock, and move down to the desert foothills of sage and pinon and cactus to pass the winter.

The other birds who first appear in the fall are driven from their cool summer homes in the high altitudes by freezing weather. Juncos and white-crowned sparrows come to feast on the millions of tiny seeds of the chamisa, or rabbit bush, growing profusely in

arroyos illuminated by its golden blooms. Clark's nutcrackers come in late September when the pitchy pinon cones begin to unfold and reveal their brown nestled fruit.

Jays come too for the harvest. The Steller's jays, like the Clark's nutcrackers, are solitary birds who make their presence known by grating raucous calls. Both birds prefer to feed on the topmost cones of the pinon pines. You can see them easily among the upper branches. The Clark's nutcracker is a stocky gray bird with black and white wings and tail, and a long black dagger-like bill. His white tail feathers and wing patches show clearly when he flies. The Steller's jay has blue plumage so dark that it looks black in all but the best light, and a short bill and high pointed crest. His voice is a series of harsh chopping notes, easily distinguishable from the nutcracker's single or double rasping call.

Pinon jays have shorter tails than the Steller's jays, and their plumage is a soft medium blue color, dark at the wing tips. They raise but one brood a year, nesting at a time determined by the abundance of food anywhere from as early as February till early summer. They nest in loose colonies of a few to several dozen pairs on the juniper-pinon mesas and flat lands that surround the mountains, and on the high plateaus of the arid west. After the young have fledged and can look after themselves, the pinon jays begin to move around in groups of all ages in search of food. As winter approaches, these groups coalesce into flocks of several hundred.

In New Mexico's September second spring, when the arroyos are filled with different yellow flowering, herbaceous plants and

shrubs and with masses of purple asters, flights of chattering jays appear unexpectedly near my house like an undisciplined troop of bandits, clucking and mewing and cooing to one another to cement their leaderless confederation into ragged coherence. They caw noisily from the cottonwoods while they look the place over with crowlike curiosity. They have been here before and will return again when natural forage becomes scarce, but they do not yet deign to approach my feeder. On a sudden unanimous impulse they all take off in a straggling flock, still conversing among themselves, and fly off.