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Working around Red-Winged's Nest

On the ranch I took care of in northeastern Oregon's Blue Mountains, my next work in irrigating about eight-hundred acres of wild mountain grasses and flowers toward fall hay harvest was to place a plastic curtain dam in the ditch bringing water down the west edge of the meadow, at the foot of the sharply rising, forested ridge. I stood the motorcycle on its stand, unstrapped the dam and my shovel from the luggage rack, carried them to the ditch bank, and put them down in the growing grass.

Two red-winged blackbirds flew up from the grass, then around my head, trilling shrill blackbird warnings that I must leave immediately. I walked slowly toward where they had flown up from dense grass.

The blackbirds had woven last year's bleached grasses into a nest fastened to reeds that grew from the ditch. The well-concealed nest held five small blue-green eggs, mottled with irregular, dark brown splotches. If I dammed the ditch as I usually did, so the water would rise and flow through low spots in the bank down three parallel ditches, the rising water would inundate the nest.

I spoke to the frantic blackbird parents, "Okay. Okay. Thanks for bringing the nest to my attention. You should build on higher ground next time." I walked back to the motorcycle, and the birds returned to more important business than driving away a gross, lumbering intruder.

The three ditches ran from high on bench ground almost to the river. Forty acres of wild meadow hay stood in need of water. I would have to change my approach to running water down the long ditches.

I rode through growing green grasses and spring flowers of multitudinous colors and odors, forded the river, and rode to the barn. I tied a bale of hay and several sharpened posts onto the motorcycle's luggage rack. I rode back across the meadow to the ditch, left my load there, retrieved my shovel, rode off across the meadow, and tended other irrigating chores, where birds hadn't built nests.

For the next few days, every time I rode the motorcycle

from home anywhere near the red-winged's nest, I dropped off another bale of hay, posts, or tools. I couldn't carry much on the small motorcycle, but any larger vehicle would sink into the soft soil on the wet meadow and refuse to move. Every time I arrived with more freight, mother and father blackbird flew around me and threatened fiercely, until I rode away from their homesite again.

The ditch was deep and wide where I now had to block water to spare the blackbird's nest, a hard spot to place a plastic curtain dam with a long pole through the sewn-over top and depend on it to stay in place.

I turned the water flowing down the ditch back into the river, placed the bales of hay in the bottom of the ditch, and drove the sharpened posts through the bales and into the bottom of the ditch to pin the bales down. Blackbirds flew around me and threatened me as I worked. I laid the plastic curtain across the ditch and the bales supported the bottom of the curtain. I shoveled mud onto the bottom of the curtain to hold it down, so water wouldn't go under it..

A little at a time, I dug a small ditch across forty feet of grassy meadow, to carry water into the ditches I needed to fill. When I was close to their nest, the blackbirds used all their time and energy importuning me to leave, and during their most desperate moments, threatening me with dire violence. I kept my times of working short, so the blackbirds could brood on their nest, undisturbed. I had plenty to do other places on the meadow.

When I was confident the dam was firmly placed, and after I finished digging the small ditch to get water into the ditches I needed to fill, I turned water from the river back down the large ditch. Water stopped at the dam, rose in the ditch, flowed through cuts in the ditch bank and spread across the meadow toward the river. Water soaked roots deep into the soil. The blackbirds' nest sat in the grass downstream from the dam, high and dry.

I irrigated mountain meadow both sides of the river and both sides of Camp Creek. I repaired fences.

When I returned to the red-winged's nest, I saw the new dam still worked just the way it should. Three fledglings sat quite still in the nest, safe from water. Adult red-winged blackbirds flew around me and shrieked that I was still unwelcome there. I didn't argue with them but left quickly.

When I got to that area again, the nest stood empty; the fledglings had grown and had flown from the nest to

independence.

I irrigated a lush crop of hay. Irrigation improved habitat for birds that like marshes and growing grasses and flowers. Blackbirds hatched, grew, and flew from their nest to join many other blackbirds on the meadow, many other species of birds that made their living from the meadow. I whistled and sang as I worked, pleased with life on the meadow. Birds whistled and sang all around me, pleased with life on the meadow.