



GAMBEL'S CHICKADEE

By linking the name of our Newsletter, The Mountain Chickadee, to a bird species that is characteristic of our area, we join many other Audubon chapters in recognizing our focus on birds, other wildlife, and habitat. Naming our publication after a bird is also part of a long tradition in ornithology. This article describes the close historical ties that the Mountain Chickadee has to Santa Fe. Continue reading to learn about the bird's connection to Mrs. Bailey.

The Mountain Chickadee (*Poecile gambeli*) was discovered (by Western science) by the well-known early ornithologist William Gambel (1823-1849) in 1841. Although his name is well represented in ornithology, botany, and herpetology in the names of organisms he either discovered or that were named in his honor, he made only one trip to the Southwest. He arrived in New Mexico over the Santa Fe Trail in 1841 and spent most of June and July in Santa Fe. He then left for California over the Old Spanish Trail, discovering the quail for which he is known and later in California, Nuttall's Woodpecker, the Oak Titmouse, and the Wrentit. After several years in and around California, he returned to the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia in 1845 after a trip around the Horn.

Gambel spent two months in and around Santa Fé without commenting on the Mountain Chickadee, although he is known to have frequented areas where the bird would have been found. He also clearly identifies his locations along the Rio Grande—a likely place for him to find the chickadee—for his botanical collections but did not do so for the chickadee. These facts suggest that his first observation of the bird was not after his arrival in Santa Fé.

So where did he first find the chickadee? As wagon trains approached Santa Fé on the trail, their final campsites prior to arrival in Santa Fé are known to have been near Glorieta in Santa Fé County (17 miles southeast of Santa Fé) and near Pecos in San Miguel County (27 miles southeast of Santa Fé), both about a-day's journey southeast of Santa Fé. The trains would have stopped at one or both of these places on June 30 and/or July 1, 1841. Both of these locales are likely habitat for *P. gambeli*. Gambel's statement that the bird was found "from thence" together with the bird's almost certain appearance during his time in Santa Fé reinforces the conclusion that the bird was "first observed about a day's journey" prior to his arrival in Santa Fé along the Santa Fé Trail.

Gambel began studying to become a medical doctor in 1846 while still working on his researches in California and trying to get a job at the Academy. He did not get the job he desired and he did not impress John Cassin of the Academy with his scholarship. So he completed his medical education and planned to settle in California. He was on his way to meet his bride in San Francisco in 1849 when he died of typhoid fever contracted while aiding sick miners on the Yuba River in California after a grueling trip through Wyoming, Utah, and northern Nevada, crossing the Sierras in winter.

The Mountain Chickadee was originally described by Gambel as *Parus montanus*, not realizing that this name was “taken” by the Willow Tit of Europe. Robert Ridgway later corrected the scientific name to honor its discoverer but today’s common name recognizes Gambel’s original description, which well-characterizes the habitat in which it is found. The generic name was changed from *Parus* to *Poecile* quite recently.

In 1908, Joseph Grinnell identified a southern California subspecies collected in 1903 on Mount Wilson in Los Angeles County, California. He named it Mrs. Bailey’s Chickadee (*Parus gambeli baileyae*) (note **not bailey!**) after Florence Merriam Bailey, a pioneer ornithologist in her own right. Florence Merriam Bailey was a noted ornithologist of New Mexico and the Southwest. Her 1927 book, *Birds of New Mexico*, is a masterpiece both of ornithological description and of good writing. Given the number of birds named after the wives, daughters, and sisters of ornithologists, it is a pity that this notable female ornithologist is not commemorated by the name of a bird. Florence’s brother, C. Hart Merriam and husband, Vernon Bailey, were both notable naturalists as well.

Recent DNA-based examination of the phylogeography of the Mountain Chickadee has identified two quite distinct clades of the “Mountain Chickadee” with only a small area of retrogression (overlap) near Mono Lake. The Eastern Clade includes the Rocky Mountain and Great Basin populations which Gambel would have first encountered in New Mexico. The distinct Western Clade includes the coastal California, Sierra Nevada, and Cascade populations. Grinnell’s *P. g. baileyae* of 1908 would be the first description of the Western Clade taxon.

It seems likely that these non-interbreeding populations will be recognized in the near future as separate species. If that separation is deemed appropriate, we in New Mexico can hope that the names Gambel’s Chickadee (*Poecile gambeli*) and Bailey’s Chickadee (*Poecile baileyae*) would most appropriately follow from scientific nomenclature and the history and discovery record of the two species.