

BIRDS
THROUGH AN OPERA-GLASS

BY

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INTRODUCTION

WHEREVER there are people there are birds, so it makes comparatively little difference where you live, if you are only in earnest about getting acquainted with your feathered neighbors. Even in a Chicago back yard fifty-seven kinds of birds have been seen in a year, and in a yard in Portland, Connecticut, ninety-one species have been recorded. Twenty-six kinds are known to nest in the city of Washington, and in the parks and cemeteries of San Francisco in winter I have found twenty-two kinds, while seventy-six are recorded for Prospect Park, Brooklyn, and a hundred and forty-two for Central Park, New York.

There are especial advantages in beginning to study birds in the cities, for by going to the museums you can compare the bird skins with the birds you have seen in the field. And, moreover, you can get an idea of the grouping of the different families which will help you materially in placing the live bird when you meet him at home.

If you do not live in the city, as I have said elsewhere, "shrubby village dooryards, the trees of village streets, and orchards, roadside fences,

overgrown pastures, and the borders of brooks and rivers are among the best places to look for birds.”¹

When going to watch birds, “provided with opera-glass and note-book, and dressed in inconspicuous colors, proceed to some good birdy place, — the bushy bank of a stream or an old juniper pasture, — and sit down in the undergrowth or against a concealing tree-trunk, with your back to the sun, to look and listen in silence. You will be able to trace most songs to their singers by finding which tree the song comes from, and then watching for *movement*, as birds are rarely motionless long at a time when singing. It will be a help if, besides writing a careful description of both bird and song, you draw a rough diagram of the bird’s markings, and put down the actual notes of his song as nearly as may be.

“If you have time for only a walk through the woods, go as quietly as possible and stop often, listening to catch the notes which your footsteps have drowned. Timid birds may often be attracted by answering their calls, for it is very reassuring to be addressed in one’s native tongue.”²

Birds’ habits differ in different localities, and as this book was written in the East, many birds are spoken of as common which Western readers will find rare or wanting; but nearly the same

¹ *Birds of Village and Field.*

² *Maynard’s Birds of Washington.* Introduction by F. A. M.

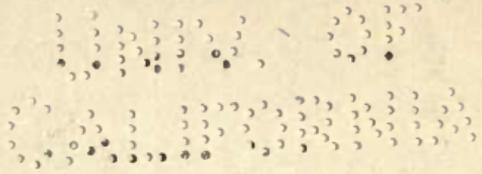
families of birds are found in all parts of the United States, so that, if not able to name your bird exactly, at least you will be able to tell who his relatives are.

Boys who are interested in watching the coming of the birds from the south in spring, and their return from the north in the fall, can get blank migration schedules by applying to the Biological Survey, Department of Agriculture, Washington, D. C.; and teachers and others who want material for bird work can get, free on application, the publications of the Biological Survey, which show how the food of birds affects the farm and garden. Much additional information can be obtained from the secretaries of the State Audubon Societies, and their official organ, "Bird-Lore."

Photography is coming to hold an important place in nature work, as its notes cannot be questioned, and the student who goes afield armed with opera-glass and camera will not only add more to our knowledge than he who goes armed with a gun, but will gain for himself a fund of enthusiasm and a lasting store of pleasant memories. For more than all the statistics is the sanity and serenity of spirit that comes when we step aside from the turmoil of the world to hold quiet converse with Nature.

FLORENCE A. MERRIAM.

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BIRDS THROUGH AN OPERA-GLASS.

WE are so in the habit of focusing our spy-glasses on our human neighbors that it seems an easy matter to label them and their affairs, but when it comes to birds, — alas! not only are there legions of kinds, but, to our bewildered fancy, they look and sing and act exactly alike. Yet though our task seems hopeless at the outset, before we recognize the conjurer a new world of interest and beauty has opened before us.

The best way is the simplest. Begin with the commonest birds, and train your ears and eyes by pigeon-holing every bird you see and every song you hear. Classify roughly at first, — the finer distinctions will easily be made later. Suppose, for instance, you are in the fields on a spring morning. Standing still a moment, you hear what sounds like a confusion of songs. You think you can never tell one from another, but by listening carefully you at once notice a difference. Some are true songs, with a definite melody, — and tune, if one may use that word, — like the song of several of the sparrows, with three high notes and a run

down the scale. Others are only monotonous trills, always the same two notes, varying only in length and intensity, such as that of the chipping bird, who makes one's ears fairly ache as he sits in the sun and trills to himself, like a complacent prima donna. Then there is always plenty of gossiping going on, chippering and chattering that does not rise to the dignity of song, though it adds to the general jumble of sounds; but this should be ignored at first, and only the loud songs listened for. When the trill and the elaborate song are once contrasted, other distinctions are easily made. The ear then catches the quality of songs. On the right the plaintive note of the meadow-lark is heard, while out of the grass at the left comes the rollicking song of the bobolink.

Having begun sorting sounds, you naturally group sights, and so find yourself parceling out the birds by size and color. As the robin is a well-known bird, he serves as a convenient unit of measure — an ornithological foot. If you call anything from a humming-bird to a robin small, and from a robin to a crow large, you have a practical division line, of use in getting your bearings. And the moment you give heed to colors, the birds will no longer look alike. To simplify matters, the bluebird, the oriole with his orange and black coat, the scarlet tanager with his flaming plumage, and all the other bright birds can be classed together; while the sparrows, fly-

catchers, thrushes, and vireos may be thought of as the dull birds.

When the crudest part of the work is done, and your eye and ear naturally seize differences of size, color, and sound, the interesting part begins. You soon learn to associate the birds with fixed localities, and once knowing their favorite haunts, quickly find other clues to their ways of life.

By going among the birds, watching them closely, comparing them carefully, and writing down, while in the field, all the characteristics of every new bird seen, — its locality, size, color, details of marking, song, food, flight, eggs, nest, and habits, — you will come easily and naturally to know the birds that are living about you. The first law of field work is *exact observation*, but not only are you more likely to observe accurately if what you see is put in black and white, but you will find it much easier to identify the birds from your notes than from memory.

With these hints in mind, go to look for your friends. Carry a pocket note-book, and above all, take an opera or field glass with you. Its rapid adjustment may be troublesome at first, but it should be the "inseparable article" of a careful observer. If you begin work in spring, don't start out before seven o'clock, because the confusion of the matins is discouraging — there is too much to see and hear. But go as soon as possible after breakfast, for the birds grow quiet and

must be to the poor worm when they suddenly tip forward, give a few rapid hops, and diving into the grass drag him out of his retreat. Though they run from a chicken, robins will chase chipmunks and fight with red squirrels in defense of their nests or young.

II.

THE CROW.

THE despised crow is one of our most interesting birds. His call is like the smell of the brown furrows in spring — life is more sound and wholesome for it. Though the crow has no song, what a variety of notes and tones he can boast! In vocabulary, he is a very Shakespeare among birds. Listening to a family of Frenchmen, though you do not know a word of French, you easily guess the temper and drift of their talk, and so it is in listening to crows — tone, inflection, gesture, all betray their secrets. One morning last October I caught, in this way, a spicy chapter in crow family discipline.

I was standing in a meadow of rich aftermath lying between a stony pasture and a small piece of woods, when a young crow flew over my head, cawing softly to himself. He flew straight west toward the pasture for several seconds, and then, as if an idea had come to him, turned his head

and neck around in the intelligent crow fashion, circled back to the woods, lit, and cawed vociferously to three other crows till they came over across the pasture.

After making them all circle over my head, perhaps merely as a blind, he took them back to his perch where he wanted them to go beechnutting — or something else. Whatever it was, they evidently scorned his childishness, for they flew back to their tree across the field as fast as they had come. This put him in a pet, and he would not budge, but sat there sputtering like a spoiled child. To everything he said, whether in a complaining or teasing tone, the same gruff paternal caw came back from the pasture. "Come along!" it seemed to say. To this the refractory son would respond, "I won't." They kept it up for several minutes, but at last paternal authority conquered, and the big boy, making a wide detour, flew slowly and reluctantly back to his family. He lit on a low branch under them, and when the father gave a gruff "I should think it was time you came," he defiantly shook his tail and cleaned his bill. After a few moments he condescended to make a low half sullen, half subdued remark, but when the family all started off again he sat and scolded some time before he would follow them, and I suspect he compromised matters then only because he did not want to be left behind.

The "intelligence of the crow" has become a

platitude, but when we hear of his cracking clams by dropping them on a fence, coming to roost with the hens in cold weather, and — in the case of a tame crow — opening a door by lighting on the latch, his originality is a surprise. A family near here had much merriment over the gambols of a pet crow named Jim. Whenever he saw the gardener passing to and fro between the house and garden, he would fly down from the trees, light on his hat, and ride back and forth. He liked to pick the bright blossoms, particularly pansies and scarlet geraniums, and would not only steal bright colored worsteds and ribbons, but tear all the yellow covers from any novels he came across. When any one went to the vegetable garden he showed the most commendable eagerness to help with the work, being anxious to pick whatever was wanted — from raspberries and currants to the little cucumbers gathered for pickling.

The sight of the big black puppy waddling along wagging high in air a long black tail incongruously finished off with a tipping of white hairs was too much for Jim's sobriety. Down he would dive, give a nip at the hairs, and be gravely seated on a branch just out of reach by the time Bruno had turned to snap at him. Let the puppy move on a step, and down the mischief would come again, and so the two would play — sometimes for more than half an hour at a time. Then again, the joke would take a more practical turn, for, in-

stead of flying overhead when Bruno looked back, Jim would steal the bone the puppy had been gnawing.

The crow was happy as long as any one would play with him, and never tired of flying low over the ground with a string dangling from his bill for the children to run after. Another favorite play was to hold on to a string or small stick with his bill while some one lifted him up by it, as a baby is tossed by its arms. He would even hold on and let you "swing him around your head." He was never daunted, and when the toddling two-year-old would get too rough in her play and strike at him with her stick, he would either catch the hem of her pinafore and hold on till she ran away, or would try scaring her, rushing at her — his big black wings spread out and his bill wide open.

One day his pluck was thoroughly tested. Hearing loud caws of distress coming from the lawn, the gardener rushed across and found Jim lying on his back, his claw tightly gripping the end of one of the wings of a large hawk, that, surprised and terrified by this turn of the tables was struggling frantically to get away. Jim held him as tight as a vise, and only loosened his grasp to give his enemy into the gardener's hands. After letting go he submitted to the victor's reward, letting his wounds be examined and his bravery extolled while he was carried about — wearing a most consciously heroic air, it must be confessed — for due celebration of the victory.

themselves with angry words and looks. The next year they, or their children, returned, and each took amicable possession of his old nesting-place, neither deigning to notice his neighbor."

VII.

BOBOLINK ; REED-BIRD ; RICE-BIRD.

THOUGH the bluebird brings the poet pictures of fields blooming with dandelions and blue violets, and visions of all the freshness and beauty of nature, it tinges his thought with the tremulous sadness and longing of spring ; but Robert o' Lincoln, the light-hearted laugher of June, brings him the spirit of the long bright days when the sun streams full upon meadows glistening with buttercups and daisies.

Pray, have you seen the merry minstrel singing over the fields, or sitting atilt of a grass stem ? And do you know what an odd dress he masquerades in ? If not, let me warn you. One day at college some young observers came to me in great excitement. They had seen a new bird. It was a marvelous, unheard-of creature — its back was white and its breast black. What could it be ? Later on, when we were out one day, a bobolink flew on to the campus. That was their bird. And to justify their description they exclaimed, "He looks as if his clothes were turned around." And so he does.

Shades of short hair and bloomers, what an innovation! How the birds must gossip! Instead of the light-colored shirt and vest and decorous dark coat sanctioned by the Worth of conven-



tional bird circles for centuries, this radical decks himself out in a jet-black shirt and vest, with not so much as a white collar to redeem him; besides having all of four almost white patches on the back of his coat! But don't berate him—who knows but this unique coloring is due to a process unrecognized by the Parisian Worth, but designated by Mr. Darwin as “adaptation”? Most field birds are protected by sparrowy backs, and with his black back, the tendency certainly seems to be to lessen the striking effect with lighter colors, leaving the breast, which is unseen when he

is on the grass, as black as may be. In the fall when flying into dangers that necessitate an inconspicuous suit, the bobolink makes amends for the confusion caused in the spring, by adopting the uniform ochraceous tints of his wife. In this dress he joins large companies of his brothers and flies south, where he is known first as the "reed-bird," and then, in the rice-fields, as the "rice-bird."

What could resemble the old time "needle in the hay-stack" more than a bobolink's nest in a meadow full of high grass? But, do you say, the birds act as a magnet to discover it? That seems to remove all difficulties. But suppose your magnet were bound to make you believe north, south, and east, west? When the bobolinks assure you their nest is — anywhere except where it is — within a radius of five or six rods, you — well, try it some warm day next summer! Here is a bit of my experience.

One day in June I think I have surely found a bobolink's nest. Everything is simplified. Instead of a dozen pairs of birds flying up helter skelter from all parts of the field, there is only one pair, and they kindly give me a line across the meadow ending with a small elm on the west, and a fence on the east. As they only occasionally diverge to an evergreen on the north or go for a run to a distant field on the south, I am confident. In imagination I am already examin-

ing the brownish white, deeply speckled eggs and noting the details of the nest. But the best way is to keep perfectly still and let the birds show me just where the nest is, though of course it is only a matter of a few minutes more or less. I sit down in the grass, pull the timothy stems over my dress, make myself look as much as possible like a meadow, and keep one eye on the bobolinks, while appearing to be absorbed with an object on the other side. But they are better actors than I.

Twitter-itter-itter the anxious mother reiterates in a high key as she hovers suggestively over a tuft of grass a few rods away. So soon! My impatience can hardly be restrained. But—the father is coming.

Lingkum-lingkum-lingkum, he vociferates loudly, hovering over a bunch of weeds in just the opposite direction. By this time the mother is atilt of another timothy stem in a new place, looking as if just ready to fly down to her nest. And so they keep it up. I examine all the weeds and tussocks of grass they point out. On nearing one of them, the mother flies about my head with a show of the greatest alarm; my hopes reach certainty—there is nothing there! I look under every nodding buttercup and spreading daisy for yards around only to see Mrs. Robert of Lincoln hovering above a spot she had avoided before. The next day I offer a reward to two children if they will find the nest, but the birds probably

practice the same wiles on them — they can discover nothing. What a pity the poor birds can't tell friends from enemies. They treat me as if I were a brigand; but if they knew I wanted to peep at their pretty eggs and admire their house-keeping arrangements, how gladly they would show me about!

After noticing the clear cut, direct flight of the robin, the undulating flight of the bluebird, and the circling and zigzagging of the swift, you will study with interest the labored sallies and eccentricities of the bobolink. When he soars, he turns his wings down till he looks like an open umbrella; and when getting ready to light in the grass puts them up sail fashion, so that the umbrella seems to be turned inside out. Indeed, from the skillful way he uses his wings and tail to steer and balance himself, you might think he had been trained for an acrobat.

The most animated song of the bobolink is given on the wing, although he sings constantly in the grass, and on low trees and bushes. The most exuberantly happy of all our birds, he seems to contain the essence of summer joy and sunshine. "*Bobolinkum-linkum-deah-deah-deah*" he warbles away, the notes fairly tumbling over each other as they pour out of his throat. Up from the midst of the buttercups and daisies he starts and flies along a little way, singing this joyous song with such light-hearted fervor that he is

glad to sink down on the stem of some sturdy young timothy before giving his last burst of song.

Thoreau gives the best description I have ever seen of the first notes of the bobolink's song. He says: "I hear the note of a bobolink concealed in the top of an apple-tree behind me. . . . He is just touching the strings of his theorbo, his glassichord, his water organ, and one or two notes globe themselves and fall in liquid bubbles from his tuning throat. It is as if he touched his harp within a vase of liquid melody, and when he lifted it out the notes fell like bubbles from the trembling strings. Methinks they are the most liquidly sweet and melodious sounds I ever heard."

Almost every one gives a different rendering of the bobolink's meaning. The little German children playing in our meadows cry after him in merry mimicry, "*Oncle-dey dunkel-dey oncle-dey dunkel-dey.*" The farm boy calls him the "corn-planting bird," and thinks he says, "*Dig a hole, dig a hole, put it in, put it in, cover 't up, cover 't up, stamp on 't, stamp on 't, step along.*"

VIII.

RUFFED GROUSE; PARTRIDGE.

THE partridge, or ruffed grouse as he is more properly called, is our first true woods bird. His

opening in the swamp where the cat-tails stood guard, and the long-banded rushes soughed like wind in a forest.

XXVI.

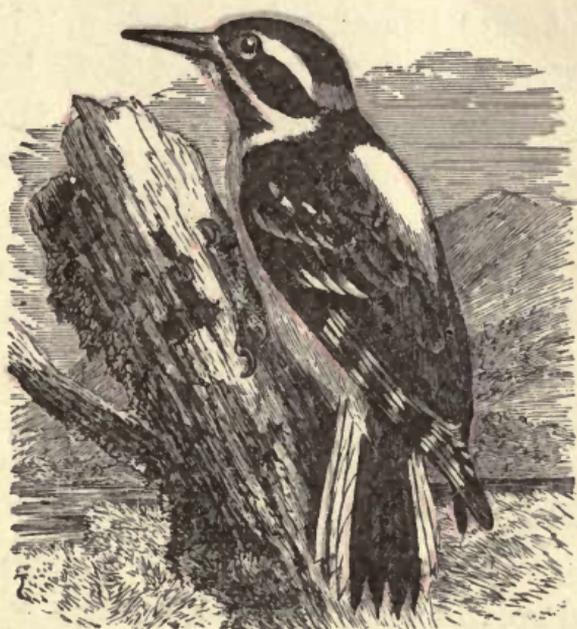
HAIRY WOODPECKER.

THE habits of the woodpecker family are more distinctive, perhaps, than those of any group of the birds we have been considering, and the most superficial observer cannot fail to recognize its members.

Woodpeckers — the very name proclaims them unique. The robin drags his fish-worm from its hiding place in the sod, and carols his happiness to every sunrise and sunset; the sparrow eats crumbs in the dooryard and builds his nest in a sweetbriar; the thrushes turn over the brown leaves for food and chant their matins among the moss and ferns of the shadowy forest; the goldfinch balances himself on the pink thistle or yellow mullein top, while he makes them “pay toll” for his visit, and then saunters through the air in the abandonment of blue skies and sunshine; the red-wing flutes his *o-ka-lee* over cat-tails and cow-slips; the bobolink, forgetting everything else, rollicks amid buttercups and daisies; but the woodpecker finds his larder under the hard bark of the trees, and, oblivious to sunrise and sunset,

flowering marsh and laughing meadow, clings close to the side of a stub, as if the very sun himself moved around a tree trunk!

But who knows how much these grave monomaniacs have discovered that lies a sealed book



to all the world besides? Why should we scorn them? They are philosophers! They have the secret of happiness. Any bird could be joyous with plenty of blue sky and sunshine, and the poets, from Chaucer to Wordsworth, have relaxed their brows at the sight of a daisy; but what does the happy goldfinch know of the wonders of tree trunks, and what poet could find inspiration in a dead stub on a bleak November day? Jack Frost sends both thrush and goldfinch flying south, and

the poets shut their study doors in his face, drawing their arm-chairs up to the hearth while they rail at November. But the wise woodpecker clings to the side of a tree and fluffing his feathers about his toes makes the woods reverberate with his cheery song, — for it is a song, and bears an important part in nature's orchestra. Its rhythmical *rat tap, tap, tap, tap*, not only beats time for the chickadees and nuthatches, but is a reveille that sets all the brave winter blood tingling in our veins.

There the hardy drummer stands beating on the wood with all the enjoyment of a drum major. How handsome he looks with the scarlet cap on the back of his head, and what a fine show the white central stripe makes against the glossy black of his back!

Who can say how much he has learned from the wood spirits? What does he care for rain or blinding storm? He can never lose his way. No woodsman need tell him how the hemlock branches tip, or how to use a lichen compass.

Do you say the birds are gone, the leaves have fallen, the bare branches rattle, rains have blackened the tree trunks? What does he care? All this makes him rejoice! The merry chickadee hears his shrill call above the moaning of the wind and the rattling of the branches, for our alchemist is turning to his lichen workshop.

The sealed book whose pictures are seen only

by children and wood fairies opens at his touch. The black unshaded tree trunks turn into enchanted lichen palaces, rich with green and gold of every tint. The "pert fairies and the dapper elves" have left their magic circles in the grass, and trip lightly around the soft green velvet moss mounds so well suited for the throne of their queen. Here they find the tiny moss spears Lowell christened, "Arthurian lances," and quickly arm themselves for deeds of fairy valor. Here, too, are dainty silver goblets from which they can quaff the crystal globes that drop one by one from the dark moss high on the trees after rain. And there — what wonders in fern tracery, silver filigree and coral for the fairy Guinevere!

But hark! the children are coming — and off the grave magician flies to watch their play from behind a neighboring tree trunk. There they come, straight to his workshop, and laugh in glee at the white chips he has scattered on the ground.

They are in league with the fairies, too, and cast magic spells over all they see. First they spy the upturned roots of a fallen tree. It is a mountain! And up they clamber, to overlook their little world. And that pool left by the fall rains. Ha! It is a lake! And away they go, to cross it bravely on a bridge of quaking moss.

As they pass under the shadow of a giant hemlock and pick up the cones for playthings, they catch sight of the pile of dark red sawdust at the

foot of the tree and stand open-mouthed while the oldest child tells of a long ant procession she saw there when each tiny worker came to the door to drop its borings from its jaws. How big their eyes get at the story! If the woodpecker could only give his cousin the yellow hammer's tragic sequel to it!

But soon they have found a new delight. A stem of basswood seeds whirls through the air to their feet. They all scramble for it. What a pity they have no string! The last stem they found was a kite and a spinning air-top for a day's play. But this — never mind — there it goes up in the air dancing and whirling like a gay young fairy treading the mazes with the wind.

“Just see this piece of moss! How pretty!” And so they go through the woods, till the brown beech leaves shake with their laughter, and the gray squirrels look out of their oriel tree trunk windows to see who goes by, and the absorbed magician — who can tell how much fun he steals from his lofty observation post to make him content with his stub!

Why should he fly south when every day brings him some secret of the woods, or some scene like this that his philosopher's stone can turn to happiness? Let us proclaim him the sage of the birds!

If he could speak! The children would gather about him for tales of the woodsprites; the student of trees would learn facts and figures enough

to store a book ; and the mechanic ! Just watch the dexterous bird as he works !

A master of his trade, he has various methods. One day in September he flew past me with a loud scream, and when I came up to him was hard at excavating. His claws were fast in the bark on the edge of the hole, and he seemed to be half clinging to it, half lying against it. His stiff tail quills helped to brace him against the tree, and he drilled straight down, making the bark fly with his rapid strokes. When the hole did not clear itself with his blows, he would give a quick scrape with his bill and drill away again. Suddenly he stopped, picked up something, and flew up on a branch with it. He had found what he was after. And what a relish it proved ! I could almost see him holding it on his tongue.

Another day in November he had to work harder for his breakfast, and perhaps it was fortunate. The night before there had been a sharp snowstorm from the north, so that in passing through the woods all the trees and undergrowth on the south of me were pure white, while on the opposite side the gray trees with all their confusion of branches, twigs, and noble trunks stood out in bold relief. The snow that had fallen made it rather cold standing still, and I would have been glad to do part of Mr. Hairy's work myself. But he needed no help. He marched up the side of the stub, tapping as he went, and when his bill

gave back the sound for which he had been listening, he began work without ado. This bark must have been harder or thicker than the other, for instead of boring straight through, he loosened it by drilling, first from one side and then from the other. When he could not get it off in this way, he went above, and below, to try to start it, so that, before he found his worm he had stripped off pieces of bark several inches long and fully two across. He was so much engrossed that I came to the very foot of the stub without disturbing him.

Indeed, woodpeckers are not at all shy here but work as unconcernedly by the side of the house as anywhere else. Once I was attracted by the cries of a hairy, and creeping up discovered a mother feeding her half-grown baby. She flew off when she saw me, probably warning the little fellow to keep still, for he stayed where she left him for five or ten minutes as if pinioned to the branch, crouching close, and hardly daring to stir even his head. Then, as she did not come back, and he saw no reason to be afraid of me, he flew off independently to another limb, and marched up the side arching his neck and bowing his head as much as to say, "Just see how well I walk!"