

ERNEST SETON

BIRD
PORTRAITS

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Ernest Seton-Thompson

Bird Portraits

INTRODUCTION

This book is called "Bird Portraits" because Mr. Seton-Thompson's pictures are always faithful and charming portraits of the birds which he draws. But since a bird's portrait, no matter how accurate, can show its subject in only one position, singing, feeding, flying, or sitting, a short account of some of the main events of the bird's life has been added to each picture.

Any one who learns from such books as Mr. Seton-Thompson's how beset with perils is the life of every wild creature will take the greatest pains at all times, and especially in the nesting season, not only not to injure or persecute such defenseless little creatures as our song birds, but also to protect them in every way. Whoever seeks their acquaintance, in the spirit of friendship, will always be grateful for the interest and pleasure to be gained from such friends.

Of the twenty birds whose portraits are here presented, a majority are only summer residents in the Northern States; some visit us only in winter; a few spend the whole year near the same spot. The birds which are first described are those that are most closely associated with the return of spring; then follow those whose gay colors and bright songs give much of its charm to early summer; last come those that brave, even in the North, the tempests of winter.

R. H.

THE SONG SPARROW

After a severe winter, while snow and ice still remind us of the past, the Song Sparrow, mounting to the top of some bush or small tree, repeats his cheerful tinkling song, "helping," as Thoreau says, "to crack the ice" in the ponds. Few people are so unobservant as not to notice this bright strain, after the silence of winter. A peculiarity of the song is the amount of variation shown by different individuals and often by the same bird. At almost regular distances along the bushy roadside, or over the hedge-intersected fields, one will meet on the early spring mornings one Song Sparrow after another, each restricted to his part of the road or field. If one notices the songs of each, it is evident that, though the songs have the same general character, there are almost as many ways of beginning a strain as there are singers. Moreover, the same bird has been observed to alter his song in a short space of time to two or three different variations. Probably, if one's ear were acute enough, all birds of one species would be found to sing with slight differences, but few show in so marked a degree as the Song Sparrow the tendency to variation which characterizes a species.

In early April, the Song Sparrow builds a nest of grass, either on the ground beneath a tuft of grass, or under some brambles, or less frequently a few feet above the ground, in a bush or on the lower limbs of a tree. In the latter situation, twigs are of course necessary for the support of the structure. Here again the bird shows a tendency to vary in its habits. The eggs are from four to five in number, greenish white, thickly marked with shades of brown, lavender, or purple. Sometimes an egg is found in the nest much larger than the others; this has been laid by the lazy Cowbird. As the large egg receives most warmth and hatches first, the young Cowbird soon crowds out the rightful occupants of the nest, and the parent Song Sparrows will be seen later, working busily to feed a great homely youngster as large as themselves, who will afterwards go off to join a flock of his own kind. Probably every Cowbird has been reared at the expense of a brood of some small bird, Sparrow, Warbler, or Vireo.

In June, the young Song Sparrows are able to take care of themselves, and the energetic parents build another nest and rear another brood. The brooding time is the chief period of song, so that birds that breed twice sing later in the summer than others. The Song Sparrow's little strain may be heard well into August; but toward the end of that month we hear from the cornfields and gardens a curious, husky warble, unlike the bright spring carol of the Song Sparrow, but nevertheless made by that bird. In the fall, and even during the winter, a warm bright day will occasionally induce a Song Sparrow to sing his lively spring song, so that where the Song Sparrow winters, the strain may be heard every month of the year.

In the late summer and fall, the neglected corners of gardens and fields, where the seeds of weeds and grasses offer an abundance of food, are the favorite resort of the sparrows. The Song Sparrow may be distinguished from most of its relatives by its streaked breast, in the middle of which the spots generally form a conspicuous blotch, and by its long tail, which it constantly jerks as it flies. The Song Sparrow is very retiring, and when alarmed, slips into brush heaps or bushes, where it hides as skillfully as a mouse.

THE FLICKER

The Flicker is most beloved in March, when his hearty shout is one of the characteristic sounds of the first warm days of early spring. The same week which brings the Bluebird and the Blackbird hears the cheerful song of the Song Sparrow and the loud call of the Flicker.

Though a woodpecker, the Flicker has departed somewhat from the habits of its relatives, spending considerable time on the ground, and depending largely for its food on berries and ants. It is often startled from lawns and hillsides, where it has been thrusting its long tongue into colonies of black ants, seizing them on the moist, brushy tip. When so engaged, the bird may sometimes be closely approached, and a sight of its plumage is then a revelation to one who has seen from a distance only its dark brown body and white rump. The ashy gray nape sets off a bright red patch; there is a handsome black crescent across the breast, and the male wears black mustaches. The breast is handsomely spotted, and the quills and undersides of the wing and tail feathers are golden yellow. Unless one can steal up close to a bird, few of these marks show; but the Flicker may always be distinguished by his size (he is the largest of our common birds except the Crow), by the white rump, and the gleam of yellow which has given him the name Golden-winged Woodpecker. The flight, too, like that of all the woodpeckers, is characteristic; the wing strokes are slow, and between them the bird drops a little, so that its progress is in waves instead of in a straight line.

All the woodpeckers nest in holes, which they chisel out of decayed or even live wood. A circular entrance leads to a vertical passage, and this to a wide chamber some distance below. No lining of moss or feathers is put in; the pure white, nearly round eggs are laid directly on the chips at the bottom of the cavity, and the young birds after a few days hang by their claws to the side of the hole. Young Flickers, like young Humming-birds, are fed by their parents with a liquid food, which is pumped into their wide-opened mouths, the parent's bill being thrust far into the young one's.

The Flicker is one of the few birds that frequently return to the old nest. Most birds, contrary to the common notion, instead of refurnishing the weather-beaten and insecure structure into which their last year's home has been converted by snow, rain, and wind, prefer to build a new one. The material is everywhere at hand, and time is not so precious before the young are hatched. The Flicker, however, having built in a stout limb, can safely return for several seasons to the same cavity, or, if this becomes insecure, can cut another in the same trunk. Branches are often seen where three or four round openings show the tenements of several generations of these noisy birds. South of Massachusetts, Flickers generally spend the whole year in one spot, and in winter live largely on berries; a favorite food at this season is the berry of the poison ivy. In the fall, the rum cherry becomes a resort for all fruit-loving species.

The Flicker, though not known to raise a second brood, has a second period of song, so that we hear again in June the shout, or mating call, of the early spring days. Besides this high-pitched *wick, wick, wick*, the Flicker utters, when startled, a curious note like *worroo*; a sharp *ti'ou* is the call to its kind, and the syllables *yucker, yucker*, often accompanied by ludicrous bowing with wings and tail outspread, are used to show affection.

THE BROWN THRASHER

The Thrasher is the first great musician of the year; he arrives in the last week of April, so that his song forms the prelude of the chorus which is given in May by the true Thrushes, the Bobolink, and the Oriole. There is a spirit, a brilliancy of execution, and a power in his song which is perhaps more appropriate to early spring than the rich, sweet tone of the birds who take up the strain in warmer days. He sings when spring, though assured, is not everywhere manifest, and the vigor of his ringing phrases serves to dispel any lingering doubt that the faint-hearted may yet entertain.

The trees are yet leafless, and the singer can be seen afar off on the very topmost twig of some hillside tree; his long tail is held straight below him, his head is up-lifted, and from his full throat comes phrase after phrase, a succession of the most varied and apparently extremely difficult notes, executed with an ease and full-hearted joy which, to the ears of many, place the Thrasher in the class with the true Thrushes. Like the song of all male birds, the performance is not only an offering or an invitation to the female, but also an answer to some rival whose fainter notes reach the ear from the neighboring grove.

This last week of April is often one of the most delightful seasons of the year, and particularly attractive to a beginner in bird study. There are only a few bushes in leaf, and those of a delicate green; the dried leaves under them are starred with white bloodroot; on the hillsides, the purple violet and yellow five-finger are wide open in the warm sun, and in the woods, the mayflower and the hepatica surprise the visitor in spots where the late snow still lingers. The birds are easy to find; there is no dense foliage to hide them, and the number of species is still so few that their songs and figures are not difficult to distinguish.

The Thrasher's song ceases as you approach him. He slips down like a wren to the undergrowth, where, if you listen, you hear him rustling and scratching in the dry leaves. If you sit down near by, you will see him as he mounts again from one twig to the next. His white breast is heavily spotted with black, his head, back, and tail are of a bright rufous shade, and his yellow eye glitters like a snake's. When he is alarmed, he puffs like a turtle, or utters a note curiously like a loud smack. The whole air of the bird is one of vigor and intelligence. The sexes are alike in size and color. By watching patiently near the spot where the male sings, it is often possible to surprise the pair bringing bark and roots to the bush among whose roots or stems the nest is woven.

It is one of the most delightful experiences in the study of birds thus to watch a pair of birds building their nest, to note later the laying of each egg, to see the female brooding till the nestlings are hatched and finally leave the nest. One always heaves a sigh of relief at the last moment, for so many tragedies may put an end to the story. The female Thrasher is very bold when on the nest, and sits close till the visitor, if he approach quietly, is within a few feet of her. She gazes fixedly at him with her bright eye, but let him draw a step nearer and she slips off into the bushes. The eggs are four or five, whitish, covered with many light brown markings.

The food of the Thrasher consists of insects and fruit. Many linger in the North till the end of October, and spend the winter in the Southern States, where the ground is generally free from snow.

THE BARN SWALLOW

There is no pleasanter sight among birds than a family of young reared in the neighborhood of man and often on some part of his house itself. Visit an old farmhouse; look about and see how many welcome guests the farmer shelters without thought of pecuniary profit. Under the woodshed, on a beam, the Phoebe has built a nest of moss, from which she flies to the barnyard to pursue the insects that swarm there. In the vines on the piazza, Robins and Chipping Sparrows have reared their young. In the old elm over the door, an Oriole has woven a nest with thread twitched from the clothesline or perhaps purposely laid out for her, and the orchard shelters numbers of species – Bluebirds, Woodpeckers, Kingbirds, and Chebecs. Of all these tenants, however, none seem so completely at home as the swallows; none show so little concern at man's presence; none take possession so coolly of the boxes, the eaves, or the rafters where they build. Their kindred lived with man, ages ago, in Greece and Rome; they have been welcomed each spring as heralds of a joyful season; their departure has been watched with regret. Though they have but few notes which are musical, yet their grace, agility, and swiftness have passed into proverb and song.

There are several species of swallow, or martin, which take advantage of man's structures in or on which to place their nests, but the most numerous, the most familiar to people in general, and perhaps the most attractive, is the Barn Swallow. This is the only species whose outer tail feathers are long and pointed, and form with the rest of the tail the peculiar figure known as "swallow-tail." The head, back, wings, and tail are all of a beautiful lustrous blue, and the tail, when spread, shows large white spots in the inner feathers. The under parts vary from whitish in immature birds to a rich chestnut in fully mature ones, who have also the throat and forehead of a darker reddish brown. The bill opens far back, so that there is a wide cavity to engulf any insect which may be met in the ceaseless flight backward and forward over grass and water.

The nest of the Barn Swallow is familiar to all who have enjoyed life on a farm. It is made of straws and grass, plastered together with mud, and is placed on a beam or rafter in the barn. One hospitable farmer drove a horseshoe into a beam, and on this ledge a swallow built each year. Through the open door or window of the barn the swallows fly in and out, and up into the gloom above, where twittering sounds tell of young that are being fed. As soon as the young are old enough, the parents urge them to fly, and in a few days they become skillful enough to take food on the wing. This is an extremely pretty spectacle; the parent and the young meet, and then fly upward for an instant, their breasts apparently touching, while the food is passed from one bill to the other. One July afternoon the writer watched a row of six young swallows clinging to the shingles on a barn roof, every mouth gaping for food whenever the parents approached. When the father brought the food, the bird sitting nearest him got the mouthful, and in an instant later another from the mother. Five times in succession this favored youngster was fed, while the other five seemed neglected. But when the little fellow had all that he could hold, he went to sleep, and the next wide-open mouth received the food. What seemed at first an unfair arrangement was after all the surest way to feed all alike.

THE CHIMNEY SWIFT

The Swift is universally known as the Chimney Swallow, from a belief that it belongs to the swallow family. It is, in fact, no relative of the swallows, but very nearly related to the Whippoorwill and Night-hawk. Swifts and swallows both have long, powerful wings, which enable them to remain for long periods on the wing in a restless search for insects. Scientists themselves were for a long time misled by the resemblance in the appearance and habits of the two families, but a close examination of the skeleton of the two birds has convinced naturalists that the two families descended from different ancestors, but have arrived at similar solutions of the problem presented to them in their search for food.

The Swift builds, as is well known, in the flues of chimneys. It is often seen in May, dashing past the dead twigs of some tree, and then off to the chimney, where the twigs are glued together and to the bricks by the help of saliva secreted by the bird. A common and distressing experience after a storm in summer is the discovery of the young Chimney Swifts at the wrong end of the chimney, – on the hearth, in other words. Even in their proper place in the chimney, the young birds can make their presence very well known by beginning, as soon as it is light, an incessant clamor for food.

The long narrow wings, the powerful chest muscles, the cut of the bird's body, and the way the keel is ballasted, so to speak, enable the bird to remain for hours in constant flight without apparently experiencing the least fatigue. Swallows are often seen resting on telegraph wires, but I have never seen a Swift perch on any support outside a chimney. At night and during such part of the day as is given up to rest, the bird supports itself in chimneys by clinging to projections or crevices. The stiff, sharp-pointed tail feathers aid greatly in supporting it. Before the coming of the white man, hollow trees served as the roosting and nesting places of the Swifts.

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