

# JOHN BURROUGHS

BIRD STORIES  
FROM  
BURROUGHS

John Burroughs

**Bird Stories from Burroughs**

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**Burroughs J.**

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# **Bird Stories from Burroughs Sketches of Bird Life Taken from the Works of John Burroughs**

## **PUBLISHERS' NOTE**

John Burroughs's first book, "Wake-Robin," contained a chapter entitled "The Invitation." It was an invitation to the study of birds. He has reiterated it, implicitly if not explicitly, in most of the books he has published since then, and many of his readers have joyfully accepted it. Indeed, such an invitation from Mr. Burroughs is the best possible introduction to the birds of our Northeastern States, and it is likewise an introduction to some very good reading. To convey this invitation to a wider circle of young readers the most interesting bird stories in Mr. Burroughs's books have been gathered into a single volume. A chapter is given to each species of bird, and the chapters are arranged in a sort of chronological order, according to the time of the bird's arrival in the spring, the nesting time, or the season when for some other reason the species is particularly conspicuous. In taking the stories out of their original setting a few slight verbal alterations have been necessary here and there, but these have been made either by Mr. Burroughs himself or with his approval.

## THE BLUEBIRD

It is sure to be a bright March morning when you first hear the bluebird's note; and it is as if the milder influences up above had found a voice and let a word fall upon your ear, so tender is it and so prophetic, a hope tinged with a regret.

There never was a happier or more devoted husband than the male bluebird. He is the gay champion and escort of the female at all times, and while she is sitting he feeds her regularly. It is very pretty to watch them building their nest. The male is very active in hunting out a place and exploring the boxes and cavities, but seems to have no choice in the matter and is anxious only to please and encourage his mate, who has the practical turn and knows what will do and what will not. After she has suited herself he applauds her immensely, and away the two go in quest of material for the nest, the male acting as guard and flying above and in advance of the female. She brings all the material and does all the work of building, he looking on and encouraging her with gesture and song. He acts also as inspector of her work, but I fear is a very partial one. She enters the nest with her bit of dry grass or straw, and, having adjusted it to her notion, withdraws and waits near by while he goes in and looks it over. On coming out he exclaims very plainly, "Excellent! excellent!" and away the two go again for more material.

I was much amused one summer day in seeing a bluebird feeding her young one in the shaded street of a large town. She had captured a cicada or harvest-fly, and, after bruising it awhile on the ground, flew with it to a tree and placed it in the beak of the young bird. It was a large morsel, and the mother seemed to have doubts of her chick's ability to dispose of it, for she stood near and watched its efforts with great solicitude. The young bird struggled valiantly with the cicada, but made no headway in swallowing it, when the mother took it from him and flew to the sidewalk, and proceeded to break and bruise it more thoroughly. Then she again placed it in his beak, and seemed to say, "There, try it now," and sympathized so thoroughly with his efforts that she repeated many of his motions and contortions. But the great fly was unyielding, and, indeed, seemed ridiculously disproportioned to the beak that held it. The young bird fluttered and fluttered, and screamed, "I'm stuck, I'm stuck!" till the anxious parent again seized the morsel and carried it to an iron railing, where she came down upon it for the space of a minute with all the force and momentum her beak could command. Then she offered it to her young a third time, but with the same result as before, except that this time the bird dropped it; but she reached the ground as soon as the cicada did, and taking it in her beak flew a little distance to a high board fence, where she sat motionless for some moments. While pondering the problem how that fly should be broken, the male bluebird approached her, and said very plainly, and I thought rather curtly, "Give me that bug," but she quickly resented his interference and flew farther away, where she sat apparently quite discouraged when I last saw her.

One day in early May, Ted and I made an expedition to the Shattega, a still, dark, deep stream that loiters silently through the woods not far from my cabin. As we paddled along, we were on the alert for any bit of wild life of bird or beast that might turn up.

There were so many abandoned woodpecker chambers in the small dead trees as we went along that I determined to secure the section of a tree containing a good one to take home and put up for the bluebirds. "Why don't the bluebirds occupy them here?" inquired Ted. "Oh," I replied, "bluebirds do not come so far into the woods as this. They prefer nesting-places in the open, and near human habitations." After carefully scrutinizing several of the trees, we at last saw one that seemed to fill the bill. It was a small dead tree-trunk seven or eight inches in diameter, that leaned out over the water, and from which the top had been broken. The hole, round and firm, was ten or twelve feet above us. After considerable effort I succeeded in breaking the stub off near the ground, and brought it down into the boat. "Just the thing," I said; "surely the bluebirds will prefer this to an artificial box." But, lo and behold, it already had bluebirds in it! We had not heard a sound or seen a feather till the trunk

was in our hands, when, on peering into the cavity, we discovered two young bluebirds about half grown. This was a predicament indeed!

Well, the only thing we could do was to stand the tree-trunk up again as well as we could, and as near as we could to where it had stood before. This was no easy thing. But after a time we had it fairly well replaced, one end standing in the mud of the shallow water and the other resting against a tree. This left the hole to the nest about ten feet below and to one side of its former position. Just then we heard the voice of one of the parent birds, and we quickly paddled to the other side of the stream, fifty feet away, to watch her proceedings, saying to each other, "Too bad! too bad!" The mother bird had a large beetle in her beak. She alighted upon a limb a few feet above the former site of her nest, looked down upon us, uttered a note or two, and then dropped down confidently to the point in the vacant air where the entrance to her nest had been but a few moments before. Here she hovered on the wing a second or two, looking for something that was not there, and then returned to the perch she had just left, apparently not a little disturbed. She hammered the beetle rather excitedly upon the limb a few times, as if it were in some way at fault, then dropped down to try for her nest again. Only vacant air there! She hovers and hovers, her blue wings flickering in the checkered light; surely that precious hole *must* be there; but no, again she is baffled, and again she returns to her perch, and mauls the poor beetle till it must be reduced to a pulp. Then she makes a third attempt, then a fourth, and a fifth, and a sixth, till she becomes very much excited. "What could have happened? am I dreaming? has that beetle hoodooed me?" she seems to say, and in her dismay she lets the bug drop, and looks bewilderedly about her. Then she flies away through the woods, calling. "Going for her mate," I said to Ted. "She is in deep trouble, and she wants sympathy and help."

In a few minutes we heard her mate answer, and presently the two birds came hurrying to the spot, both with loaded beaks. They perched upon the familiar limb above the site of the nest, and the mate seemed to say, "My dear, what has happened to you? I can find that nest." And he dived down, and brought up in the empty air just as the mother had done. How he winnowed it with his eager wings! how he seemed to bear on to that blank space! His mate sat regarding him intently, confident, I think, that he would find the clew. But he did not. Baffled and excited, he returned to the perch beside her. Then she tried again, then he rushed down once more, then they both assaulted the place, but it would not give up its secret. They talked, they encouraged each other, and they kept up the search, now one, now the other, now both together. Sometimes they dropped down to within a few feet of the entrance to the nest, and we thought they would surely find it. No, their minds and eyes were intent only upon that square foot of space where the nest had been. Soon they withdrew to a large limb many feet higher up, and seemed to say to themselves, "Well, it is not there, but it must be here somewhere; let us look about." A few minutes elapsed, when we saw the mother bird spring from her perch and go straight as an arrow to the nest. Her maternal eye had proved the quicker. She had found her young. Something like reason and common sense had come to her rescue; she had taken time to look about, and behold! there was that precious doorway. She thrust her head into it, then sent back a call to her mate, then went farther in, then withdrew. "Yes, it is true, they are here, they are here!" Then she went in again, gave them the food in her beak, and then gave place to her mate, who, after similar demonstrations of joy, also gave them his morsel.

Ted and I breathed freer. A burden had been taken from our minds and hearts, and we went cheerfully on our way. We had learned something, too; we had learned that when in the deep woods you think of bluebirds, bluebirds may be nearer you than you think.

One mid-April morning two pairs of bluebirds were in very active and at times violent courtship about my grounds. I could not quite understand the meaning of all the fuss and flutter. Both birds of each pair were very demonstrative, but the female in each case the more so. She followed the male everywhere, lifting and twinkling her wings, and apparently seeking to win him by both word and gesture. If she was not telling him by that cheery, animated, confiding, softly endearing speech of hers, which she poured out incessantly, how much she loved him, what was she saying? She was

constantly filled with a desire to perch upon the precise spot where he was sitting, and if he had not moved away I think she would have alighted upon his back. Now and then, when she flitted away from him, he followed her with like gestures and tones and demonstrations of affection, but never with quite the same ardor. The two pairs kept near each other, about the house, the bird-boxes, the trees, the posts and vines in the vineyard, filling the ear with their soft, insistent warbles, and the eye with their twinkling azure wings.

Was it this constant presence of rivals on both sides that so stimulated them and kept them up to such a pitch of courtship? Finally, after I had watched them over an hour, the birds began to come into collision. As they met in the vineyard, the two males clinched and fell to the ground, lying there for a moment with wings sprawled out, like birds brought down by a gun. Then they separated, and each returned to his mate, warbling and twinkling his wings. Very soon the females clinched and fell to the ground and fought savagely, rolling over and over each other, clawing and tweaking and locking beaks and hanging on like bull terriers. They did this repeatedly; once one of the males dashed in and separated them, by giving one of the females a sharp tweak and blow. Then the males were at it again, their blue plumage mixing with the green grass and ruffled by the ruddy soil. What a soft, feathery, ineffectual battle it seemed in both cases! – no sound, no blood, no flying feathers, just a sudden mixing up and general disarray of blue wings and tails and ruddy breasts, there on the ground; assault but no visible wounds; thrust of beak and grip of claw, but no feather loosened and but little ruffling; long holding of one down by the other, but no cry of pain or fury. It was the kind of battle that one likes to witness. The birds usually locked beaks, and held their grip half a minute at a time. One of the females would always alight by the struggling males and lift her wings and utter her soft notes, but what she said – whether she was encouraging one of the blue coats or berating the other, or imploring them both to desist, or egging them on – I could not tell. So far as I could understand her speech, it was the same that she had been uttering to her mate all the time.

When my bluebirds dashed at each other with beak and claw, their preliminary utterances had to my ears anything but a hostile sound. Indeed, for the bluebird to make a harsh, discordant sound seems out of the question. Once, when the two males lay upon the ground with outspread wings and locked beaks, a robin flew down by them and for a moment gazed intently at the blue splash upon the grass, and then went his way.

As the birds drifted about the grounds, first the males, then the females rolling on the grass or in the dust in fierce combat, and between times the members of each pair assuring each other of undying interest and attachment, I followed them, apparently quite unnoticed by them. Sometimes they would lie more than a minute upon the ground, each trying to keep his own or to break the other's hold. They seemed so oblivious of everything about them that I wondered if they might not at such times fall an easy prey to cats and hawks. Let me put their watchfulness to the test, I said. So, as the two males clinched again and fell to the ground, I cautiously approached them, hat in hand. When ten feet away and unregarded, I made a sudden dash and covered them with my hat. The struggle continued for a few seconds under there, then all was still. Sudden darkness had fallen upon the field of battle. What did they think had happened? Presently their heads and wings began to brush the inside of my hat. Then all was still again. Then I spoke to them, called to them, exulted over them, but they betrayed no excitement or alarm. Occasionally a head or a body came in gentle contact with the top or the sides of my hat.

But the two females were evidently agitated by the sudden disappearance of their contending lovers, and began uttering their mournful alarm-note. After a minute or two I lifted one side of my hat and out darted one of the birds; then I lifted the hat from the other. One of the females then rushed, apparently with notes of joy and congratulation, to one of the males, who gave her a spiteful tweak and blow. Then the other came and he served her the same. He was evidently a little bewildered, and not certain what had happened or who was responsible for it. Did he think the two females were in some way to blame? But he was soon reconciled to one of them again, as was the other male with the



other, yet the two couples did not separate till the males had come into collision once more. Presently, however, they drifted apart, and each pair was soon holding an animated conversation punctuated by those pretty wing gestures, about the two bird-boxes.

These scenes of love and rivalry had lasted nearly all the forenoon, and matters between the birds apparently remained as they were before – the members of each pair quite satisfied with each other. One pair occupied one of the bird-boxes in the vineyard and reared two broods there during the season, but the other pair drifted away and took up their abode somewhere else.

## THE BLUEBIRD

A wistful note from out the sky,  
"Pure, pure, pure," in plaintive tone,  
As if the wand'rer were alone,  
And hardly knew to sing or cry.

But now a flash of eager wing,  
Flitting, twinkling by the wall,  
And pleadings sweet and am'rous call, —  
Ah, now I know his heart doth sing!

O bluebird, welcome back again,  
Thy azure coat and ruddy vest  
Are hues that April loveth best, —  
Warm skies above the furrowed plain.

The farm boy hears thy tender voice,  
And visions come of crystal days,  
With sugar-camps in maple ways,  
And scenes that make his heart rejoice.

The lucid smoke drifts on the breeze,  
The steaming pans are mantling white,  
And thy blue wing's a joyous sight,  
Among the brown and leafless trees.

Now loosened currents glance and run,  
And buckets shine on sturdy boles,  
The forest folk peep from their holes,  
And work is play from sun to sun.

The downy beats his sounding limb,  
The nuthatch pipes his nasal call,  
And Robin perched on tree-top tall  
Heavenward lifts his evening hymn.

Now go and bring thy homesick bride,  
Persuade her here is just the place  
To build a home and found a race

In Downy's cell, my lodge beside.

## THE ROBIN

Not long after the bluebird comes the robin. In large numbers they scour the fields and groves. You hear their piping in the meadow, in the pasture, on the hillside. Walk in the woods, and the dry leaves rustle with the whirl of their wings, the air is vocal with their cheery call. In excess of joy and vivacity, they run, leap, scream, chase each other through the air, diving and sweeping among the trees with perilous rapidity.

In that free, fascinating, half-work-and-half-play pursuit, – sugar-making, – a pursuit which still lingers in many parts of New York, as in New England, – the robin is one's constant companion. When the day is sunny and the ground bare, you meet him at all points and hear him at all hours. At sunset, on the tops of the tall maples, with look heavenward, and in a spirit of utter abandonment, he carols his simple strain. And sitting thus amid the stark, silent trees, above the wet, cold earth, with the chill of winter still in the air, there is no fitter or sweeter songster in the whole round year. It is in keeping with the scene and the occasion. How round and genuine the notes are, and how eagerly our ears drink them in! The first utterance, and the spell of winter is thoroughly broken, and the remembrance of it afar off.

One of the most graceful of warriors is the robin. I know few prettier sights than two males challenging and curvetting about each other upon the grass in early spring. Their attentions to each other are so courteous and restrained. In alternate curves and graceful sallies, they pursue and circumvent each other. First one hops a few feet, then the other, each one standing erect in true military style while his fellow passes him and describes the segment of an ellipse about him, both uttering the while a fine complacent warble in a high but suppressed key. Are they lovers or enemies? the beholder wonders, until they make a spring and are beak to beak in the twinkling of an eye, and perhaps mount a few feet into the air, but rarely actually deliver blows upon each other. Every thrust is parried, every movement met. They follow each other with dignified composure about the fields or lawn, into trees and upon the ground, with plumage slightly spread, breasts glowing, their lisping, shrill war-song just audible. It forms on the whole the most civil and high-bred tilt to be witnessed during the season.

In the latter half of April, we pass through what I call the "robin racket," – trains of three or four birds rushing pell-mell over the lawn and fetching up in a tree or bush, or occasionally upon the ground, all piping and screaming at the top of their voices, but whether in mirth or anger it is hard to tell. The nucleus of the train is a female. One cannot see that the males in pursuit of her are rivals; it seems rather as if they had united to hustle her out of the place. But somehow the matches are no doubt made and sealed during these mad rushes. Maybe the female shouts out to her suitors, "Who touches me first wins," and away she scurries like an arrow. The males shout out, "Agreed!" and away they go in pursuit, each trying to outdo the other. The game is a brief one. Before one can get the clew to it, the party has dispersed.

The first year of my cabin life a pair of robins attempted to build a nest upon the round timber that forms the plate under my porch roof. But it was a poor place to build in. It took nearly a week's time and caused the birds a great waste of labor to find this out. The coarse material they brought for the foundation would not bed well upon the rounded surface of the timber, and every vagrant breeze that came along swept it off. My porch was kept littered with twigs and weed-stalks for days, till finally the birds abandoned the undertaking. The next season a wiser or more experienced pair made the attempt again, and succeeded. They placed the nest against the rafter where it joins the plate; they used mud from the start to level up with and to hold the first twigs and straws, and had soon completed a firm, shapely structure. When the young were about ready to fly, it was interesting to note that there was apparently an older and a younger, as in most families. One bird was more advanced than any of the others. Had the parent birds intentionally stimulated it with extra quantities

of food, so as to be able to launch their offspring into the world one at a time? At any rate, one of the birds was ready to leave the nest a day and a half before any of the others. I happened to be looking at it when the first impulse to get outside the nest seemed to seize it. Its parents were encouraging it with calls and assurances from some rocks a few yards away. It answered their calls in vigorous, strident tones. Then it climbed over the edge of the nest upon the plate, took a few steps forward, then a few more, till it was a yard from the nest and near the end of the timber, and could look off into free space. Its parents apparently shouted, "Come on!" But its courage was not quite equal to the leap; it looked around, and, seeing how far it was from home, scampered back to the nest, and climbed into it like a frightened child. It had made its first journey into the world, but the home tie had brought it quickly back. A few hours afterward it journeyed to the end of the plate again, and then turned and rushed back. The third time its heart was braver, its wings stronger, and, leaping into the air with a shout, it flew easily to some rocks a dozen or more yards away. Each of the young in succession, at intervals of nearly a day, left the nest in this manner. There would be the first journey of a few feet along the plate, the first sudden panic at being so far from home, the rush back, a second and perhaps a third attempt, and then the irrevocable leap into the air, and a clamorous flight to a near-by bush or rock. Young birds never go back when they have once taken flight. The first free flap of the wings severs forever the ties that bind them to home.

I recently observed a robin boring for grubs in a country dooryard. It is a common enough sight to witness one seize an angle-worm and drag it from its burrow in the turf, but I am not sure that I ever before saw one drill for grubs and bring the big white morsel to the surface. The robin I am speaking of had a nest of young in a maple near by, and she worked the neighborhood very industriously for food. She would run along over the short grass after the manner of robins, stopping every few feet, her form stiff and erect. Now and then she would suddenly bend her head toward the ground and bring eye or ear for a moment to bear intently upon it. Then she would spring to boring the turf vigorously with her bill, changing her attitude at each stroke, alert and watchful, throwing up the grass roots and little jets of soil, stabbing deeper and deeper, growing every moment more and more excited, till finally a fat grub was seized and brought forth. Time after time, during several days, I saw her mine for grubs in this way and drag them forth. How did she know where to drill? The insect was in every case an inch below the surface. Did she hear it gnawing the roots of the grasses, or did she see a movement in the turf beneath which the grub was at work? I know not. I only know that she struck her game unerringly each time. Only twice did I see her make a few thrusts and then desist, as if she had been for the moment deceived.

## THE FLICKER

Another April comer, who arrives shortly after Robin Redbreast, with whom he associates both at this season and in the autumn, is the golden-winged woodpecker, *alias* "high-hole," *alias* "flicker," *alias* "yarup," *alias* "yellow-hammer." He is an old favorite of my boyhood, and his note to me means very much. He announces his arrival by a long, loud call, repeated from the dry branch of some tree, or a stake in the fence, – a thoroughly melodious April sound. I think how Solomon finished that beautiful description of spring, "and the voice of the turtle is heard in our land," and see that a description of spring in this farming country, to be equally characteristic, should culminate in like manner, – "and the call of the high-hole comes up from the wood." It is a loud, strong, sonorous call, and does not seem to imply an answer, but rather to subserve some purpose of love or music. It is "Yarup's" proclamation of peace and good-will to all.

I recall an ancient maple standing sentry to a large sugar-bush, that, year after year, afforded protection to a brood of yellow-hammers in its decayed heart. A week or two before the nesting seemed actually to have begun, three or four of these birds might be seen, on almost any bright morning, gamboling and courting amid its decayed branches. Sometimes you would hear only a gentle persuasive cooing, or a quiet confidential chattering; then that long, loud call, taken up by first one, then another, as they sat about upon the naked limbs; anon, a sort of wild, rollicking laughter, intermingled with various cries, yelps, and squeals, as if some incident had excited their mirth and ridicule. Whether this social hilarity and boisterousness is in celebration of the pairing or mating ceremony, or whether it is only a sort of annual "house-warming" common among high-holes on resuming their summer quarters, is a question upon which I reserve my judgment.

Unlike most of his kinsmen, the golden-wing prefers the fields and the borders of the forest to the deeper seclusion of the woods, and hence, contrary to the habit of his tribe, obtains most of his subsistence from the ground, probing it for ants and crickets. He is not quite satisfied with being a woodpecker. He courts the society of the robin and the finches, abandons the trees for the meadow, and feeds eagerly upon berries and grain. What may be the final upshot of this course of living is a question worthy the attention of Darwin. Will his taking to the ground and his pedestrian feats result in lengthening his legs, his feeding upon berries and grains subdue his tints and soften his voice, and his associating with Robin put a song into his heart?

In the cavity of an apple-tree, much nearer the house than they usually build, a pair of high-holes took up their abode. A knot-hole which led to the decayed interior was enlarged, the live wood being cut away as clean as a squirrel would have done it. The inside preparations I could not witness, but day after day, as I passed near, I heard the bird hammering away, evidently beating down obstructions and shaping and enlarging the cavity. The chips were not brought out, but were used rather to floor the interior. The woodpeckers are not nest-builders, but rather nest-carvers.

The time seemed very short before the voices of the young were heard in the heart of the old tree, – at first feebly, but waxing stronger day by day until they could be heard many rods distant. When I put my hand upon the trunk of the tree, they would set up an eager, expectant chattering; but if I climbed up it toward the opening, they soon detected the unusual sound and would hush quickly, only now and then uttering a warning note. Long before they were fully fledged they clambered up to the orifice to receive their food. As but one could stand in the opening at a time, there was a good deal of elbowing and struggling for this position. It was a very desirable one aside from the advantages it had when food was served; it looked out upon the great, shining world, into which the young birds seemed never tired of gazing. The fresh air must have been a consideration also, for the interior of a high-hole's dwelling is not sweet. When the parent birds came with food, the young one in the opening did not get it all, but after he had received a portion, either on his own motion or on a hint from the old one, he would give place to the one behind him. Still, one bird evidently

outstripped his fellows, and in the race of life was two or three days in advance of them. His voice was loudest and his head oftenest at the window. But I noticed that, when he had kept the position too long, the others evidently made it uncomfortable in his rear, and, after "fidgeting" about awhile, he would be compelled to "back down." But retaliation was then easy, and I fear his mates spent few easy moments at that lookout. They would close their eyes and slide back into the cavity as if the world had suddenly lost all its charms for them.

This bird was, of course, the first to leave the nest. For two days before that event he kept his position in the opening most of the time and sent forth his strong voice incessantly. The old ones abstained from feeding him almost entirely, no doubt to encourage his exit. As I stood looking at him one afternoon and noting his progress, he suddenly reached a resolution, – seconded, I have no doubt, from the rear, – and launched forth upon his untried wings. They served him well, and carried him about fifty yards up-hill the first heat. The second day after, the next in size and spirit left in the same manner; then another, till only one remained. The parent birds ceased their visits to him, and for one day he called and called till our ears were tired of the sound. His was the faintest heart of all. Then he had none to encourage him from behind. He left the nest and clung to the outer bole of the tree, and yelped and piped for an hour longer; then he committed himself to his wings and went his way like the rest.

The matchmaking of the high-holes, which often comes under my observation, is in marked contrast to that of the robins and the bluebirds. There does not appear to be any anger or any blows. The male or two males will alight on a limb in front of the female, and go through with a series of bowings and scrapings that are truly comical. He spreads his tail, he puffs out his breast, he throws back his head and then bends his body to the right and to the left, uttering all the while a curious musical hiccough. The female confronts him unmoved, but whether her attitude is critical or defensive, I cannot tell. Presently she flies away, followed by her suitor or suitors, and the little comedy is enacted on another stump or tree. Among all the woodpeckers the drum plays an important part in the matchmaking. The male takes up his stand on a dry, resonant limb, or on the ridgeboard of a building, and beats the loudest call he is capable of. A favorite drum of the high-holes about me is a hollow wooden tube, a section of a pump, which stands as a bird-box upon my summer-house. It is a good instrument; its tone is sharp and clear. A high-hole alights upon it, and sends forth a rattle that can be heard a long way off. Then he lifts up his head and utters that long April call, *Wick, wick, wick, wick*. Then he drums again. If the female does not find him, it is not because he does not make noise enough. But his sounds are all welcome to the ear. They are simple and primitive, and voice well a certain sentiment of the April days. As I write these lines I hear through the half-open door his call come up from a distant field. Then I hear the steady hammering of one that has been for three days trying to penetrate the weather boarding of the big icehouse by the river, and to reach the sawdust filling for a nesting-place.

## THE PHOEBE

Another April bird whose memory I fondly cherish is the phoebe-bird, the pioneer of the flycatchers. In the inland farming districts, I used to notice him, on some bright morning about Easter Day, proclaiming his arrival, with much variety of motion and attitude, from the peak of the barn or hay-shed. As yet, you may have heard only the plaintive, homesick note of the bluebird, or the faint trill of the song sparrow; and the phoebe's clear, vivacious assurance of his veritable bodily presence among us again is welcomed by all ears. At agreeable intervals in his lay he describes a circle or an ellipse in the air, ostensibly prospecting for insects, but really, I suspect, as an artistic flourish, thrown in to make up in some way for the deficiency of his musical performance. If plainness of dress indicates powers of song, as it usually does, the phoebe ought to be unrivaled in musical ability, for surely that ashen-gray suit is the superlative of plainness; and that form, likewise, would hardly pass for a "perfect figure" of a bird. The seasonableness of his coming, however, and his civil, neighborly ways, shall make up for all deficiencies in song and plumage.

The phoebe-bird is a wise architect and perhaps enjoys as great an immunity from danger, both in its person and its nest, as any other bird. Its modest ashen-gray suit is the color of the rocks where it builds, and the moss of which it makes such free use gives to its nest the look of a natural growth or accretion. But when it comes into the barn or under the shed to build, as it so frequently does, the moss is rather out of place. Doubtless in time the bird will take the hint, and when she builds in such places will leave the moss out. I noted but two nests the summer I am speaking of: one in a barn failed of issue, on account of the rats, I suspect, though the little owl may have been the depredator; the other, in the woods, sent forth three young. This latter nest was most charmingly and ingeniously placed. I discovered it while in quest of pond-lilies, in a long, deep, level stretch of water in the woods. A large tree had blown over at the edge of the water, and its dense mass of upturned roots, with the black, peaty soil filling the interstices, was like the fragment of a wall several feet high, rising from the edge of the languid current. In a niche in this earthy wall, and visible and accessible only from the water, a phoebe had built her nest and reared her brood. I paddled my boat up and came alongside prepared to take the family aboard. The young, nearly ready to fly, were quite undisturbed by my presence, having probably been assured that no danger need be apprehended from that side. It was not a likely place for minks, or they would not have been so secure.

## THE COMING OF PHOEBE

When buckets shine 'gainst maple trees  
And drop by drop the sap doth flow,  
When days are warm, but still nights freeze,  
And deep in woods lie drifts of snow,  
When cattle low and fret in stall,  
Then morning brings the phoebe's call,  
"Phoebe,  
Phoebe, phoebe," a cheery note,  
While cackling hens make such a rout.

When snowbanks run, and hills are bare,  
And early bees hum round the hive,  
When woodchucks creep from out their lair

Right glad to find themselves alive,  
When sheep go nibbling through the fields,  
Then Phœbe oft her name reveals,  
"Phœbe,  
Phœbe, phœbe," a plaintive cry,  
While jack-snipes call in morning sky.

When wild ducks quack in creek and pond  
And bluebirds perch on mullein-stalks,  
When spring has burst her icy bond  
And in brown fields the sleek crow walks,  
When chipmunks court in roadside walls,  
Then Phœbe from the ridgeboard calls,  
"Phœbe,  
Phœbe, phœbe," and lifts her cap,  
While smoking Dick doth boil the sap.



## THE COWBIRD

The cow blackbird is a noticeable songster in April, though it takes a back seat a little later. It utters a peculiarly liquid April sound. Indeed, one would think its crop was full of water, its notes so bubble up and regurgitate, and are delivered with such an apparent stomachic contraction. This bird is the only feathered polygamist we have. The females are greatly in excess of the males, and the latter are usually attended by three or four of the former. As soon as the other birds begin to build, they are on the *qui vive*, prowling about like gypsies, not to steal the young of others, but to steal their eggs into other birds' nests, and so shirk the labor and responsibility of hatching and rearing their own young.

The cowbird's tactics are probably to watch the movements of the parent bird. She may often be seen searching anxiously through the trees or bushes for a suitable nest, yet she may still oftener be seen perched upon some good point of observation watching the birds as they come and go about her. There is no doubt that, in many cases, the cowbird makes room for her own illegitimate egg in the nest by removing one of the bird's own. I found a sparrow's nest with two sparrow's eggs and one cowbird's egg, and another egg lying a foot or so below it on the ground. I replaced the ejected egg, and the next day found it again removed, and another cowbird's egg in its place. I put it back the second time, when it was again ejected, or destroyed, for I failed to find it anywhere. Very alert and sensitive birds, like the warblers, often bury the strange egg beneath a second nest built on top of the old. A lady living in the suburbs of an Eastern city heard cries of distress one morning from a pair of house wrens that had a nest in a honeysuckle on her front porch. On looking out of the window, she beheld this little comedy, – comedy from her point of view, but no doubt grim tragedy from the point of view of the wrens: a cowbird with a wren's egg in its beak running rapidly along the walk, with the outraged wrens forming a procession behind it, screaming, scolding, and gesticulating as only these voluble little birds can. The cowbird had probably been surprised in the act of violating the nest, and the wrens were giving her a piece of their minds.

Every cowbird is reared at the expense of two or more song-birds. For every one of these dusky little pedestrians there amid the grazing cattle there are two or more sparrows, or vireos, or warblers, the less. It is a big price to pay, – two larks for a bunting, – two sovereigns for a shilling; but Nature does not hesitate occasionally to contradict herself in just this way. The young of the cowbird is disproportionately large and aggressive, one might say hoggish. When disturbed, it will clasp the nest and scream and snap its beak threateningly. One was hatched out in a song sparrow's nest which was under my observation, and would soon have overridden and overborne the young sparrow which came out of the shell a few hours later, had I not interfered from time to time and lent the young sparrow a helping hand. Every day I would visit the nest and take the sparrow out from under the potbellied interloper, and place it on top, so that presently it was able to hold its own against its enemy. Both birds became fledged and left the nest about the same time. Whether the race was an even one after that, I know not.

## THE CHIPPING SPARROW

When the true flycatcher catches a fly, it is quick business. There is no strife, no pursuit, – one fell swoop, and the matter is ended. Now note that yonder little sparrow is less skilled. It is the chippy, and he finds his subsistence properly in various seeds and the larvæ of insects, though he occasionally has higher aspirations, and seeks to emulate the pewee, commencing and ending his career as a flycatcher by an awkward chase after a beetle or "miller." He is hunting around in the grass now, I suspect, with the desire to indulge this favorite whim. There! – the opportunity is afforded him. Away goes a little cream-colored meadow-moth in the most tortuous course he is capable of, and away goes Chippy in pursuit. The contest is quite comical, though I dare say it is serious enough to the moth. The chase continues for a few yards, when there is a sudden rushing to cover in the grass, – then a taking to wing again, when the search has become too close, and the moth has recovered his wind. Chippy chirps angrily, and is determined not to be beaten. Keeping, with the slightest effort, upon the heels of the fugitive, he is ever on the point of halting to snap him up, but never quite does it; and so, between disappointment and expectation, is soon disgusted, and returns to pursue his more legitimate means of subsistence.

Last summer I made this record in my notebook: "A nest of young robins in the maple in front of the house being fed by a chipping sparrow. The little sparrow is very attentive; seems decidedly fond of her adopted babies. The old robins resent her services, and hustle her out of the tree whenever they find her near the nest. (It was this hurried departure of Chippy from the tree that first attracted my attention.) She watches her chances, and comes with food in their absence. The young birds are about ready to fly, and when the chippy feeds them her head fairly disappears in their capacious mouths. She jerks it back as if she were afraid of being swallowed. Then she lingers near them on the edge of the nest, and seems to admire them. When she sees the old robin coming, she spreads her wings in an attitude of defense, and then flies away. I wonder if she has had the experience of rearing a cow-bunting?" (A day later.) "The robins are out of the nest, and the little sparrow continues to feed them. She approaches them rather timidly and hesitatingly, as if she feared they might swallow her, then thrusts her titbit quickly into the distended mouth and jerks back."

Whether the chippy had lost her own brood, whether she was an unmated bird, or whether the case was simply the overflowing of the maternal instinct, it would be interesting to know.

## THE CHEWINK

The chewink is a shy bird, but not stealthy. It is very inquisitive, and sets up a great scratching among the leaves, apparently to attract your attention. The male is perhaps the most conspicuously marked of all the ground-birds except the bobolink, being black above, bay on the sides, and white beneath. The bay is in compliment to the leaves he is forever scratching among, – they have rustled against his breast and sides so long that these parts have taken their color; but whence come the white and the black? The bird seems to be aware that his color betrays him, for there are few birds in the woods so careful about keeping themselves screened from view. When in song, its favorite perch is the top of some high bush near to cover. On being disturbed at such times, it pitches down into the brush and is instantly lost to view.

This is the bird that Thomas Jefferson wrote to Wilson about, greatly exciting the latter's curiosity. Wilson was just then upon the threshold of his career as an ornithologist, and had made a drawing of the Canada jay which he sent to the President. It was a new bird, and in reply Jefferson called his attention to a "curious bird" which was everywhere to be heard, but scarcely ever to be seen. He had for twenty years interested the young sportsmen of his neighborhood to shoot one for him, but without success. "It is in all the forests, from spring to fall," he says in his letter, "and never but on the tops of the tallest trees, from which it perpetually serenades us with some of the sweetest notes, and as clear as those of the nightingale. I have followed it for miles, without ever but once getting a good view of it. It is of the size and make of the mockingbird, lightly thrush-colored on the back, and a grayish-white on the breast and belly. Mr. Randolph, my son-in-law, was in possession of one which had been shot by a neighbor," etc. Randolph pronounced it a flycatcher, which was a good way wide of the mark. Jefferson must have seen only the female, after all his tramp, from his description of the color; but he was doubtless following his own great thoughts more than the bird, else he would have had an earlier view. The bird was not a new one, but was well known then as the ground-robin. The President put Wilson on the wrong scent by his erroneous description, and it was a long time before the latter got at the truth of the case. But Jefferson's letter is a good sample of those which specialists often receive from intelligent persons who have seen or heard something in their line very curious or entirely new, and who set the man of science agog by a description of the supposed novelty, – a description that generally fits the facts of the case about as well as your coat fits the chair-back. Strange and curious things in the air, and in the water, and in the earth beneath, are seen every day except by those who are looking for them, namely, the naturalists. When Wilson or Audubon gets his eye on the unknown bird, the illusion vanishes, and your phenomenon turns out to be one of the commonplaces of the fields or woods.

## THE BROWN THRASHER

Our long-tailed thrush, or thrasher, delights in a high branch of some solitary tree, whence it will pour out its rich and intricate warble for an hour together. This bird is the great American chipper. There is no other bird that I know of that can chip with such emphasis and military decision as this yellow-eyed songster. It is like the click of a giant gunlock. Why is the thrasher so stealthy? It always seems to be going about on tip-toe. I never knew it to steal anything, and yet it skulks and hides like a fugitive from justice. One never sees it flying aloft in the air and traversing the world openly, like most birds, but it darts along fences and through bushes as if pursued by a guilty conscience. Only when the musical fit is upon it does it come up into full view, and invite the world to hear and behold.

Years pass without my finding a brown thrasher's nest; it is not a nest you are likely to stumble upon in your walk; it is hidden as a miser hides his gold, and watched as jealously. The male pours out his rich and triumphant song from the tallest tree he can find, and fairly challenges you to come and look for his treasures in his vicinity. But you will not find them if you go. The nest is somewhere on the outer circle of his song; he is never so imprudent as to take up his stand very near it. The artists who draw those cozy little pictures of a brooding mother bird, with the male perched but a yard away in full song, do not copy from nature. The thrasher's nest I found was thirty or forty rods from the point where the male was wont to indulge in his brilliant recitative. It was in an open field under a low ground-juniper. My dog disturbed the sitting bird as I was passing near. The nest could be seen only by lifting up and parting away the branches. All the arts of concealment had been carefully studied. It was the last place you would think of looking in, and, if you did look, nothing was visible but the dense green circle of the low-spreading juniper. When you approached, the bird would keep her place till you had begun to stir the branches, when she would start out, and, just skimming the ground, make a bright brown line to the near fence and bushes. I confidently expected that this nest would escape molestation, but it did not. Its discovery by myself and dog probably opened the door for ill luck, as one day, not long afterward, when I peeped in upon it, it was empty. The proud song of the male had ceased from his accustomed tree, and the pair were seen no more in that vicinity.

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