

**JOHN  
BURROUGHS**

WAKE-ROBIN

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*Wake-Robin:*

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# John Burroughs

## Wake-Robin

### PREFACE

This is mainly a book about the Birds, or more properly an invitation to the study of Ornithology, and the purpose of the author will be carried out in proportion as it awakens and stimulates the interest of the reader in this branch of Natural History.

Though written less in the spirit of exact science than with the freedom of love and old acquaintance, yet I have in no instance taken liberties with facts, or allowed my imagination to influence me to the extent of giving a false impression or a wrong coloring. I have reaped my harvest more in the woods than in the study; what I offer, in fact, is a careful and conscientious record of actual observations and experiences, and is true as it stands written, every word of it. But what has interested me most in Ornithology, is the pursuit, the chase, the discovery; that part of it which is akin to hunting, fishing, and wild sports, and which I could carry with me in my eye and ear, wherever I went.

I cannot answer with much confidence the poet's inquiry, but I have done what I could to bring home the "earth and the sky" with the sparrow I heard "singing at dawn on the alder bough."

In other words, I have tried to present a live bird, – a bird in the woods or the fields, – with the atmosphere and associations of the place, and not merely a stuffed and labeled specimen.

“Hast thou named all the birds without a gun?”

A more specific title for the volume would have suited me better, but not being able to satisfy myself in this direction, I cast about for a word thoroughly in the atmosphere and spirit of the book, which I hope I have found in “Wake-Robin” – the common name of the white Trillium, which blooms in all our woods, and which marks the arrival of all the birds.

# THE RETURN OF THE BIRDS

Spring in our northern climate may fairly be said to extend from the middle of March to the middle of June. At least, the vernal tide continues to rise until the latter date, and it is not till after the summer solstice that the shoots and twigs begin to harden and turn to wood, or the grass to lose any of its freshness and succulency.

It is this period that marks the return of the birds, – one or two of the more hardy or half-domesticated species, like the song-sparrow and the bluebird, usually arriving in March, while the rarer and more brilliant wood-birds bring up the procession in June. But each stage of the advancing season gives prominence to certain species, as to certain flowers. The dandelion tells me when to look for the swallow, the dog-toothed violet when to expect the wood-thrush, and when I have found the wake-robin in bloom I know the season is fairly inaugurated. With me this flower is associated, not merely with the awakening of Robin, for he has been awake some weeks, but with the universal awakening and rehabilitation of nature.

Yet the coming and going of the birds is more or less a mystery and a surprise. We go out in the morning, and no thrush or vireo is to be heard; we go out again, and every tree and grove is musical; yet again, and all is silent. Who saw them come? Who saw them depart?

This pert little winter-wren, for instance, darting in and out the fence, diving under the rubbish here and coming up yards away, – how does he manage with those little circular wings to compass degrees and zones, and arrive always in the nick of time? Last August I saw him in the remotest wilds of the Adirondacs, impatient and inquisitive as usual; a few weeks later, on the Potomac, I was greeted by the same hardy little busybody. Does he travel by easy stages from bush to bush and from wood to wood? or has that compact little body force and courage to brave the night and the upper air, and so achieve leagues at one pull?

And yonder bluebird with the earth tinge on his breast and the sky tinge on his back, – did he come down out of heaven on that bright March morning when he told us so softly and plaintively that if we pleased, spring had come? Indeed, there is nothing in the return of the birds more curious and suggestive than in the first appearance, or rumors of the appearance, of this little blue-coat. The bird at first seems a mere wandering voice in the air; one hears its call or carol on some bright March morning, but is uncertain of its source or direction; it falls like a drop of rain when no cloud is visible; one looks and listens, but to no purpose. The weather changes, perhaps a cold snap with snow comes on, and it may be a week before I hear the note again, and this time or the next perchance see the bird sitting on a stake in the fence lifting his wing as he calls cheerily to his mate. Its notes now become daily more frequent; the birds multiply, and, flitting from point to point, call and warble more confidently and

gleefully. Their boldness increases till one sees them hovering with a saucy, inquiring air about barns and out-buildings, peeping into dove-cotes, and stable windows, inspecting knot-holes and pump-trees, intent only on a place to nest. They wage war against robins and wrens, pick quarrels with swallows, and seem to deliberate for days over the policy of taking forcible possession of one of the mud-houses of the latter. But as the season advances they drift more into the background. Schemes of conquest which they at first seemed bent upon are abandoned, and they settle down very quietly in their old quarters in remote stumpy fields.

Not long after the bluebird comes the robin, sometimes in March, but in most of the Northern States April is the month of the robin. In large numbers they scour the fields and groves. You hear their piping in the meadow, in the pasture, on the hill-side. Walk in the woods, and the dry leaves rustle with the whir 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.

Robin is one of the most native and democratic of our birds; he is one of the family, and seems much nearer to us than those rare, exotic visitants, as the orchard starling or rose-breasted grossbeak, with their distant, high-bred ways. Hardy, noisy, frolicsome, neighborly and domestic in his habits, strong of wing and bold in spirit, he is the pioneer of the thrush family, and well worthy of the finer artists whose coming he heralds and in a measure prepares us for.

I could wish Robin less native and plebeian in one respect, – the building of his nest. Its coarse material and rough masonry are creditable neither to his skill as a workman nor to his taste as an artist. I am the more forcibly reminded of his deficiency in this respect from observing yonder humming-bird's nest, which is a marvel of fitness and adaptation, a proper setting for this winged gem, – the body of it composed of a white, felt-like substance, probably the down of some plant or the wool of some worm, and toned down in keeping with the branch on which it sits by minute tree-lichens, woven together by threads as fine and frail as gossamer. From Robin's good looks and musical turn we might reasonably predict a domicile of equal fitness and elegance. At least I demand of him as clean and handsome a nest as the

king-bird's, whose harsh jingle, compared with Robin's evening melody, is as the clatter of pots and kettles beside the tone of a flute. I love his note and ways better even than those of the orchard starling or the Baltimore oriole; yet his nest, compared with theirs, is a half-subterranean hut contrasted with a Roman villa. There is something courtly and poetical in a pensile nest. Next to a castle in the air is a dwelling suspended to the slender branch of a tall tree, swayed and rocked forever by the wind. Why need wings be afraid of falling? Why build only where boys can climb? After all, we must set it down to the account of Robin's democratic turn; he is no aristocrat, but one of the people; and therefore we should expect stability in his workmanship, rather than elegance.

Another April bird, which makes her appearance sometimes earlier and sometimes later than Robin, and whose memory I fondly cherish, is the Phoebe-bird (*Muscicapa nunciola*), the pioneer of the fly-catchers. In the inland farming districts, I used to notice her, on some bright morning about Easter-day, proclaiming her 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 Phoebe's clear, vivacious assurance of her veritable bodily presence among us again is welcomed by all ears. At agreeable intervals in her lay she 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 her musical performance. If plainness of dress indicates powers of song, as it usually does, then Phœbe 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 reasonableness of her coming, however, and her civil, neighborly ways, shall make up for all deficiencies in song and plumage. After a few weeks Phœbe is seldom seen, except as she darts from her moss-covered nest beneath some bridge or shelving cliff.

Another April comer, who arrives shortly after Robin-redbreast, with whom he associates both at this season and in the autumn, is the gold-winged woodpecker, *alias* “high-hole,” *alias* “flicker,” *alias* “yarup.” 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 the 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. On looking at the matter closely, I perceive that most birds, not

denominated songsters, have, in the spring, some note or sound or call that hints of a song, and answers imperfectly the end of beauty and art. As a “livelier iris changes on the burnished dove,” and the fancy of the young man turns lightly to thoughts of his pretty cousin, so the same renewing spirit touches the “silent singers,” and they are no longer dumb; faintly they lisp the first syllables of the marvelous tale. Witness the clear, sweet whistle of the gray-crested titmouse, – the soft, nasal piping of the nuthatch, – the amorous, vivacious warble of the bluebird, – the long, rich note of the meadow-lark, – the whistle of the quail, – the drumming of the partridge, – the animation and loquacity of the swallows, and the like. Even the hen has a homely, contented carol; and I credit the owls with a desire to fill the night with music. All birds are incipient or would-be songsters in the spring. I find corroborative evidence of this even in the crowing of the cock. The flowering of the maple is not so obvious as that of the magnolia; nevertheless, there is actual inflorescence.

Few writers award any song to that familiar little sparrow, the *Socialis*; yet who that has observed him sitting by the way-side, and repeating, with devout attitude, that fine sliding chant, does not recognize the neglect? Who has heard the snow-bird sing? Yet he has a lisping warble very savory to the ear. I have heard him indulge in it even in February.

Even the cow-bunting feels the musical tendency, and aspires to its expression, with the rest. Perched upon the topmost branch beside his mate or mates, – for he is quite a polygamist, and

usually has two or three demure little ladies in faded black beside him, – generally in the early part of the day, he seems literally to vomit up his notes. Apparently with much labor and effort, they gargle and blubber up out of him, falling on the ear with a peculiar subtile ring, as of turning water from a glass bottle, and not without a certain pleasing cadence.

Neither is the common woodpecker entirely insensible to the wooing of the spring, and, like the partridge, testifies his appreciation of melody after quite a primitive fashion. Passing through the woods, on some clear, still morning in March, while the metallic ring and tension of winter are still in the earth and air, the silence is suddenly broken by long, resonant hammering upon a dry limb or stub. It is Downy beating a reveille to spring. In the utter stillness and amid the rigid forms we listen with pleasure; and as it comes to my ear oftener at this season than at any other, I freely exonerate the author of it from the imputation of any gastronomic motives, and credit him with a genuine musical performance.

It is to be expected, therefore, that “Yellow-hammer” will respond to the general tendency, and contribute his part to the spring chorus. His April call is his finest touch, his most musical expression.

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?

Indeed, what would be more interesting than the history of our birds for the last two or three centuries? There can be

no doubt that the presence of man has exerted a very marked and friendly influence upon them, since they so multiply in his society. The birds of California, it is said, were mostly silent till after its settlement, and I doubt if the Indians heard the wood-thrush as we hear him. Where did the bobolink disport himself before there were meadows in the North and rice fields in the South? Was he the same blithe, merry-hearted beau then as now? And the sparrow, the lark, and the goldfinch, birds that seem so indigenous to the open fields and so averse to the woods, – we cannot conceive of their existence in a vast wilderness and without man.

But to return. The song-sparrow, that universal favorite and firstling of the spring, comes before April, and its simple strain gladdens all hearts.

May is the month of the swallows and the orioles. There are many other distinguished arrivals, indeed nine tenths of the birds are here by the last week in May, yet the swallows and orioles are the most conspicuous. The bright plumage of the latter seems really like an arrival from the tropics. I see them flash through the blossoming trees, and all the forenoon hear their incessant warbling and wooing. The swallows dive and chatter about the barn, or squeak and build beneath the eaves; the partridge drums in the fresh sprouting woods; the long, tender note of the meadow-lark comes up from the meadow; and at sunset, from every marsh and pond come the ten thousand voices of the hylas. May is the transition month, and exists to connect

April and June, the root with the flower.

With June the cup is full, our hearts are satisfied, there is no more to be desired. The perfection of the season, among other things, has brought the perfection of the song and plumage of the birds. The master artists are all here; and the expectations excited by the robin and the song-sparrow are fully justified. The thrushes have all come; and I sit down upon the first rock, with hands full of the pink azalea, to listen. With me, the cuckoo does not arrive till June; and often the goldfinch, the king-bird, the scarlet tanager delay their coming till then. In the meadows the bobolink is in all his glory; in the high pastures the field-sparrow sings his breezy vesper-hymn; and the woods are unfolding to the music of the thrushes.

The cuckoo is one of the most solitary birds of our forests, and is strangely tame and quiet, appearing equally untouched by joy or grief, fear or anger. Something remote seems ever weighing upon his mind. His note or call is as of one lost or wandering, and to the farmer is prophetic of rain. Amid the general joy and the sweet assurance of things, I love to listen to the strange clairvoyant call. Heard a quarter of a mile away, from out the depths of the forest, there is something peculiarly weird and monkish about it. Wordsworth's lines upon the European species apply equally well to ours: —

“O blithe new-comer! I have heard,  
I hear thee and rejoice:

O cuckoo! shall I call thee bird?  
Or but a wandering voice?

“While I am lying on the grass,  
Thy loud note smites my ear!  
From hill to hill it seems to pass,  
At once far off and near!

“Thrice welcome, darling of the spring!  
Even yet thou art to me  
No bird, but an invisible thing,  
A voice, a mystery.”

The black-billed is the only species found in my locality, the yellow-billed abounds farther south. Their note or call is nearly the same. The former sometimes suggests the voice of a turkey. The call of the latter may be suggested thus: *k-k-k-k-k-kow, kow, kow-ow, kow-ow*.

The yellow-billed will take up his stand in a tree, and explore its branches till he has caught every worm. He sits on a twig, and with a peculiar swaying movement of his head examines the surrounding foliage. When he discovers his prey, he leaps upon it in a fluttering manner.

In June the black-billed makes a tour through the orchard and garden, regaling himself upon the canker-worms. At this time he is one of the tamest of birds, and will allow you to approach within a few yards of him. I have even come within a few feet of

one without seeming to excite his fear or suspicion. He is quite unsophisticated, or else royally indifferent.

The plumage of the cuckoo is a rich glossy brown, and is unrivaled in beauty by any other neutral tint with which I am acquainted. It is also remarkable for its firmness and fineness.

Notwithstanding the disparity in size and color, the black-billed species has certain peculiarities that remind one of the passenger-pigeon. His eye, with its red circle, the shape of his head, and his motions on alighting and taking flight, quickly suggest the resemblance; though in grace and speed, when on the wing, he is far inferior. His tail seems disproportionately long, like that of the red-thrush, and his flight among the trees is very still, contrasting strongly with the honest clatter of the robin or pigeon.

Have you heard the song of the field-sparrow? If you have lived in a pastoral country with broad upland pastures, you could hardly have missed him. Wilson, I believe, calls him the grass-finch, and was evidently unacquainted with his powers of song. The two white lateral quills in his tail, and his habit of running and skulking a few yards in advance of you as you walk through the fields, are sufficient to identify him. Not in meadows or orchards, but in high, breezy pasture-grounds, will you look for him. His song is most noticeable after sundown, when other birds are silent; for which reason he has been aptly called the vesper-sparrow. The farmer following his team from the field at dusk catches his sweetest strain. His song is not so brisk and varied

as that of the song-sparrow, being softer and wilder, sweeter and more plaintive. Add the best parts of the lay of the latter to the sweet vibrating chant of the wood-sparrow, and you have the evening hymn of the vesper-bird, – the poet of the plain, unadorned pastures. Go to those broad, smooth, uplying fields where the cattle and sheep are grazing, and sit down in the twilight on one of those warm, clean stones, and listen to this song. On every side, near and remote, from out the short grass which the herds are cropping, the strain rises. Two or three long, silver notes of peace and rest, ending in some subdued trills and quavers, constitute each separate song. Often you will catch only one or two of the bars, the breeze having blown the minor part away. Such unambitious, quiet, unconscious melody! It is one of the most characteristic sounds in Nature. The grass, the stones, the stubble, the furrow, the quiet herds, and the warm twilight among the hills, are all subtly expressed in this song; this is what they are at last capable of.

The female builds a plain nest in the open field, without so much as a bush or thistle or tuft of grass to protect it or mark its site; you may step upon it or the cattle may tread it into the ground. But the danger from this source, I presume, the bird considers less than that from another. Skunks and foxes have a very impertinent curiosity, as Finchie well knows, – and a bank or hedge, or a rank growth of grass or thistles, that might promise protection and cover to mouse or bird, these cunning rogues would be apt to explore most thoroughly. The partridge is

undoubtedly acquainted with the same process of reasoning; for, like the vesper-bird, she, too, nests in open, unprotected places, avoiding all show of concealment, – coming from the tangled and almost impenetrable parts of the forest, to the clean, open woods, where she can command all the approaches and fly with equal ease in any direction.

Another favorite sparrow, but little noticed, is the wood or bush sparrow, usually called by the ornithologists *Spizella pusilla*. Its size and form is that of the *socialis*, but is less distinctly marked, being of a duller redder tinge. He prefers remote bushy heathery fields, where his song is one of the sweetest to be heard. It is sometimes very noticeable, especially early in spring. I remember sitting one bright day in the still leafless April woods, when one of these birds struck up a few rods from me, repeating its lay at short intervals for nearly an hour. It was a perfect piece of wood-music, and was of course all the more noticeable for being projected upon such a broad unoccupied page of silence. Its song is like the words, *fe-o, fe-o, fe-o, few, few, few, fee fee fee*, uttered at first high and leisurely, but running very rapidly toward the close, which is low and soft.

Still keeping among the unrecognized, the white-eyed vireo, or fly-catcher, deserves particular mention. The song of this bird is not particularly sweet and soft; on the contrary, it is a little hard and shrill, like that of the indigo-bird or oriole; but for brightness, volubility, execution, and power of imitation, he is unsurpassed by any of our northern birds. His ordinary note

is forcible and emphatic, but, as stated, not especially musical: *Chick-a-re'r-chick*, he seems to say, hiding himself in the low, dense undergrowth, and eluding your most vigilant search, as if playing some part in a game. But in July or August, if you are on good terms with the sylvan deities, you may listen to a far more rare and artistic performance. Your first impression will be that that cluster of azalea, or that clump of swamp-huckleberry, conceals three or four different songsters, each vying with the others to lead the chorus. Such a medley of notes, snatched from half the songsters of the field and forest, and uttered with the utmost clearness and rapidity, I am sure you cannot hear short of the haunts of the genuine mocking-bird. If not fully and accurately repeated, there are at least suggested the notes of the robin, wren, cat-bird, high-hole, goldfinch, and song-sparrow. The *pip, pip*, of the last is produced so accurately that I verily believe it would deceive the bird herself; – and the whole uttered in such rapid succession that it seems as if the movement that gives the concluding note of one strain must form the first note of the next. The effect is very rich, and, to my ear, entirely unique. The performer is very careful not to reveal himself in the mean time; yet there is a conscious air about the strain that impresses me with the idea that my presence is understood and my attention courted. A tone of pride and glee, and, occasionally, of bantering jocoseness, is discernible. I believe it is only rarely, and when he is sure of his audience, that he displays his parts in this manner. You are to look for him, not in tall trees or deep forests, but in

low, dense shrubbery about wet places, where there are plenty of gnats and mosquitoes.

The winter-wren is another marvelous songster, in speaking of whom it is difficult to avoid superlatives. He is not so conscious of his powers and so ambitious of effect as the white-eyed fly-catcher, yet you will not be less astonished and delighted on hearing him. He possesses the fluency and copiousness for which the wrens are noted, and besides these qualities, and what is rarely found conjoined with them, a wild, sweet, rhythmical cadence that holds you entranced. I shall not soon forget that perfect June day, when, loitering in a low, ancient hemlock wood, in whose cathedral aisles the coolness and freshness seems perennial, the silence was suddenly broken by a strain so rapid and gushing, and touched with such a wild, sylvan plaintiveness, that I listened in amazement. And so shy and coy was the little minstrel, that I came twice to the woods before I was sure to whom I was listening. In summer he is one of those birds of the deep northern forests, that, like the speckled Canada warbler and the hermit-thrush, only the privileged ones hear.

The distribution of plants in a given locality is not more marked and defined than that of the birds. Show a botanist a landscape, and he will tell you where to look for the lady's-slipper, the columbine, or the harebell. On the same principles the ornithologist will direct you where to look for the greenlets, the wood-sparrow, or the chewink. In adjoining counties, in the same latitude, and equally inland, but possessing

a different geological formation and different forest-timber, you will observe quite a different class of birds. In a land of the beech and sugar-maple I do not find the same songsters that I know where thrive the oak, chestnut, and laurel. In going from a district of the Old Red Sandstone to where I walk upon the old Plutonic Rock, not fifty miles distant, I miss in the woods the veery, the hermit-thrush, the chestnut-sided warbler, the blue-backed warbler, the green-backed warbler, the black and yellow warbler, and many others, and find in their stead the wood-thrush, the chewink, the redstart, the yellow-throat, the yellow-breasted fly-catcher, the white-eyed fly-catcher, the quail, and the turtle-dove.

In my neighborhood here in the Highlands the distribution is very marked. South of the village I invariably find one species of birds, north of it another. In only one locality, full of azalea and swamp-huckleberry, I am always sure of finding the hooded warbler. In a dense undergrowth of spice-bush, witch-hazel, and alder, I meet the worm-eating warbler. In a remote clearing, covered with heath and fern, with here and there a chestnut and an oak, I go to hear in July the wood-sparrow, and returning by a stumpy, shallow pond, I am sure to find the water-thrush.

Only one locality within my range seems to possess attractions for all comers. Here one may study almost the entire ornithology of the State. It is a rocky piece of ground, long ago cleared, but now fast relapsing into the wildness and freedom of nature, and marked by those half-cultivated, half-wild features which

birds and boys love. It is bounded on two sides by the village and highway, crossed at various points by carriage-roads, and threaded in all directions by paths and by-ways, along which soldiers, laborers, and truant school-boys are passing at all hours of the day. It is so far escaping from the axe and the bush-hook as to have opened communication with the forest and mountain beyond by straggling lines of cedar, laurel, and blackberry. The ground is mainly occupied with cedar and chestnut, with an undergrowth, in many places, of heath and bramble. The chief feature, however, is a dense growth in the centre, consisting of dogwood, water-beech, swamp-ash, alder, spice-bush, hazel, etc., with a net-work of smilax and frost-grape. A little zigzag stream, the draining of a swamp beyond, which passes through this tangle-wood, accounts for many of its features and productions, if not for its entire existence. Birds that are not attracted by the heath or the cedar and chestnut, are sure to find some excuse for visiting this miscellaneous growth in the centre. Most of the common birds literally throng this idle-wild; and I have met here many of the rarer species, such as the great-crested fly-catcher, the solitary warbler, the blue-winged swamp-warbler, the worm-eating warbler, the fox-sparrow, etc. The absence of all birds of prey, and the great number of flies and insects, both the result of proximity to the village, are considerations which no hawk-fearing, peace-loving minstrel passes over lightly; hence the popularity of the resort.

But the crowning glory of all these robins, fly-catchers, and

warblers is the wood-thrush. More abundant than all other birds, except the robin and cat-bird, he greets you from every rock and shrub. Shy and reserved when he first makes his appearance in May, before the end of June he is tame and familiar, and sings on the tree over your head, or on the rock a few paces in advance. A pair even built their nest and reared their brood within ten or twelve feet of the piazza of a large summer-house in the vicinity. But when the guests commenced to arrive and the piazza to be thronged with gay crowds, I noticed something like dread and foreboding in the manner of the mother-bird; and from her still, quiet ways, and habit of sitting long and silently within a few feet of the precious charge, it seemed as if the dear creature had resolved, if possible, to avoid all observation.

If we take the quality of melody as the test, the wood-thrush, hermit-thrush, and the veery-thrush, stand at the head of our list of songsters.

The mocking-bird undoubtedly possesses the greatest range of mere talent, the most varied executive ability, and never fails to surprise and delight one anew at each hearing; but being mostly an imitator, he never approaches the serene beauty and sublimity of the hermit-thrush. The word that best expresses my feelings, on hearing the mocking-bird, is admiration, though the first emotion is one of surprise and incredulity. That so many and such various notes should proceed from one throat is a marvel, and we regard the performance with feelings akin to those we experience on witnessing the astounding feats of the athlete or gymnast, —

and this, notwithstanding many of the notes imitated have all the freshness and sweetness of the originals. The emotions excited by the songs of these thrushes belong to a higher order, springing as they do from our deepest sense of the beauty and harmony of the world.

The wood-thrush is worthy of all, and more than all, the praises he has received; and considering the number of his appreciative listeners, it is not a little surprising that his relative and equal, the hermit-thrush, should have received so little notice. Both the great ornithologists, Wilson and Audubon, are lavish in their praises of the former, but have little or nothing to say of the song of the latter. Audubon says it is sometimes agreeable, but evidently has never heard it. Nuttall, I am glad to find, is more discriminating, and does the bird fuller justice.

It is quite a rare bird, of very shy and secluded habits, being found in the Middle and Eastern States, during the period of song, only in the deepest and most remote forests, usually in damp and swampy localities. On this account the people in the Adirondac region call it the "Swamp Angel." Its being so much of a recluse accounts for the comparative ignorance that prevails in regard to it.

The cast of its song is very much like that of the wood-thrush, and a good observer might easily confound the two. But hear them together and the difference is quite marked: the song of the hermit is in a higher key, and is more wild and ethereal. His instrument is a silver horn which he winds in the most solitary

places. The song of the wood-thrush is more golden and leisurely. Its tone comes near to that of some rare stringed instrument. One feels that perhaps the wood-thrush has more compass and power, if he would only let himself out, but on the whole he comes a little short of the pure, serene, hymn-like strain of the hermit.

Yet those who have heard only the wood-thrush may well place him first on the list. He is truly a royal minstrel, and considering his liberal distribution throughout our Atlantic seaboard, perhaps contributes more than any other bird to our sylvan melody. One may object that he spends a little too much time in tuning his instrument, yet his careless and uncertain touches reveal its rare compass and power.

He is the only songster of my acquaintance, excepting the canary, that displays different degrees of proficiency in the exercise of his musical gifts. Not long since, while walking one Sunday in the edge of an orchard adjoining a wood, I heard one that so obviously and unmistakably surpassed all his rivals, that my companion, though slow to notice such things, remarked it wonderingly; and with one accord we paused to listen to so rare a performer. It was not different in quality so much as in quantity. Such a flood of it! Such copiousness! Such long, trilling, accelerating preludes! Such sudden, ecstatic overtures, would have intoxicated the dullest ear. He was really without a compeer – a master-artist. Twice afterward I was conscious of having heard the same bird.

The wood-thrush is the handsomest species of this family. In

grace and elegance of manner he has no equal. Such a gentle, high-bred air, and such inimitable ease and composure in his flight and movement! He is a poet in very word and deed. His carriage is music to the eye. His performance of the commonest act, as catching a beetle, or picking a worm from the mud, pleases like a stroke of wit or eloquence. Was he a prince in the olden time, and do the regal grace and mien still adhere to him in his transformation? What a finely proportioned form! How plain, yet rich his color, – the bright russet of his back, the clear white of his breast, with the distinct heart-shaped spots! It may be objected to Robin that he is noisy and demonstrative; he hurries away or rises to a branch with an angry note, and flirts his wings in ill-bred suspicion. The mavis, or red-thrush, sneaks and skulks like a culprit, hiding in the densest alders; the cat-bird is a coquette and a flirt, as well as a sort of female Paul Pry; and the chewink shows his inhospitality by espying your movements like a Japanese. The wood-thrush has none of these under-bred traits. He regards me unsuspiciously, or avoids me with a noble reserve, – or, if I am quiet and incurious, graciously hops toward me, as if to pay his respects, or to make my acquaintance. I have passed under his nest within a few feet of his mate and brood, when he sat near by on a branch eying me sharply, but without opening his beak; but the moment I raised my hand toward his defenseless household his anger and indignation were beautiful to behold.

What a noble pride he has! Late one October, after his mates and companions had long since gone south, I noticed one

for several successive days in the dense part of this next-door wood, flitting noiselessly about, very grave and silent, as if doing penance for some violation of the code of honor. By many gentle, indirect approaches, I perceived that part of his tail-feathers were undeveloped. The sylvan prince could not think of returning to court in this plight, and so, amid the falling leaves and cold rains of autumn, was patiently biding his time.

The soft, mellow flute of the veery fills a place in the chorus of the woods that the song of the vesper-sparrow fills in the chorus of the fields. It has the nightingale's habit of singing in the twilight, as indeed have all our thrushes. Walk out toward the forest in the warm twilight of a June day, and when fifty rods distant you will hear their soft, reverberating notes, rising from a dozen different throats.

It is one of the simplest strains to be heard, – as simple as the curve in form, delighting from the pure element of harmony and beauty it contains, and not from any novel or fantastic modulation of it, – thus contrasting strongly with such rollicking, hilarious songsters as the bobolink, in whom we are chiefly pleased with the tintinnabulation, the verbal and labial excellence, and the evident conceit and delight of the performer.

I hardly know whether I am more pleased or annoyed with the cat-bird. Perhaps she is a little too common, and her part in the general chorus a little too conspicuous. If you are listening for the note of another bird, she is sure to be prompted to the most loud and protracted singing, drowning all other sounds; if you

sit quietly down to observe a favorite or study a new-comer, her curiosity knows no bounds, and you are scanned and ridiculed from every point of observation. Yet I would not miss her; I would only subordinate her a little, make her less conspicuous.

She is the parodist of the woods, and there is ever a mischievous, bantering, half-ironical undertone in her lay, as if she were conscious of mimicking and disconcerting some envied songster. Ambitious of song, practicing and rehearsing in private, she yet seems the least sincere and genuine of the sylvan minstrels, as if she had taken up music only to be in the fashion, or not to be outdone by the robins and thrushes. In other words, she seems to sing from some outward motive, and not from inward joyousness. She is a good versifier, but not a great poet. Vigorous, rapid, copious, not without fine touches, but destitute of any high, serene melody, her performance, like that of Thoreau's squirrel, always implies a spectator.

There is a certain air and polish about her strain, however, like that in the vivacious conversation of a well-bred lady of the world, that commands respect. Her maternal instinct, also, is very strong, and that simple structure of dead twigs and dry grass is the centre of much anxious solicitude. Not long since, while strolling through the woods, my attention was attracted to a small densely grown swamp, hedged in with eglantine, brambles, and the everlasting smilax, from which proceeded loud cries of distress and alarm, indicating that some terrible calamity was threatening my sombre-colored minstrel. On effecting an entrance, which,

however, was not accomplished till I had doffed coat and hat, so as to diminish the surface exposed to the thorns and brambles, and looking around me from a square yard of terra firma, I found myself the spectator of a loathsome, yet fascinating scene. Three or four yards from me was the nest, beneath which, in long festoons, rested a huge black snake; a bird two thirds grown, was slowly disappearing between his expanded jaws. As he seemed unconscious of my presence, I quietly observed the proceedings. By slow degrees he compassed the bird about with his elastic mouth; his head flattened, his neck writhed and swelled, and two or three undulatory movements of his glistening body finished the work. Then, he cautiously raised himself up, his tongue flaming from his mouth the while, curved over the nest, and, with wavy, subtle motions, explored the interior. I can conceive of nothing more overpoweringly terrible to an unsuspecting family of birds than the sudden appearance above their domicile of the head and neck of this arch-enemy. It is enough to petrify the blood in their veins. Not finding the object of his search, he came streaming down from the nest to a lower limb, and commenced extending his researches in other directions, sliding stealthily through the branches, bent on capturing one of the parent birds. That a legless, wingless creature should move with such ease and rapidity where only birds and squirrels are considered at home, lifting himself up, letting himself down, running out on the yielding boughs, and traversing with marvelous celerity the whole length and breadth of the thicket, was truly surprising. One

thinks of the great myth, of the Tempter and the “cause of all our woe,” and wonders if the Arch One is not now playing off some of his pranks before him. Whether we call it snake or devil matters little. I could but admire his terrible beauty, however; his black, shining folds, his easy, gliding movement, head erect, eyes glistening, tongue playing like subtle flame, and the invisible means of his almost winged locomotion.

The parent birds, in the mean while, kept up the most agonizing cry, – at times fluttering furiously about their pursuer, and actually laying hold of his tail with their beaks and claws. On being thus attacked, the snake would suddenly double upon himself and follow his own body back, thus executing a strategic movement that at first seemed almost to paralyze his victim and place her within his grasp. Not quite, however. Before his jaws could close upon the coveted prize the bird would tear herself away, and, apparently faint and sobbing, retire to a higher branch. His reputed powers of fascination availed him little, though it is possible that a frailer and less combative bird might have been held by the fatal spell. Presently, as he came gliding down the slender body of a leaning alder, his attention was attracted by a slight movement of my arm; eying me an instant, with that crouching, utter, motionless gaze which I believe only snakes and devils can assume, he turned quickly, – a feat which necessitated something like crawling over his own body, – and glided off through the branches, evidently recognizing in me a representative of the ancient parties he once so cunningly ruined.

A few moments after, as he lay carelessly disposed in the top of a rank alder, trying to look as much like a crooked branch as his supple, shining form would admit, the old vengeance overtook him. I exercised my prerogative, and a well-directed missile, in the shape of a stone, brought him looping and writhing to the ground. After I had completed his downfall and quiet had been partially restored, a half-fledged member of the bereaved household came out from his hiding-place, and, jumping upon a decayed branch, chirped vigorously, no doubt in celebration of the victory.

Till the middle of July there is a general equilibrium; the tide stands poised; the holiday-spirit is unabated. But as the harvest ripens beneath the long, hot days, the melody gradually ceases. The young are out of the nest and must be cared for, and the moulting season is at hand. After the cricket has commenced to drone his monotonous refrain beneath your window, you will not, till another season, hear the wood-thrush in all his matchless eloquence. The bobolink has become careworn and fretful, and blurts out snatches of his song between his scolding and upbraiding, as you approach the vicinity of his nest, oscillating between anxiety for his brood and solicitude for his musical reputation. Some of the sparrows still sing, and occasionally across the hot fields, from a tall tree in the edge of the forest, comes the rich note of the scarlet tanager. This tropical-colored bird loves the hottest weather, and I hear him even in dog-days.

The remainder of the summer is the carnival of the swallows

and fly-catchers. Flies and insects, to any amount, are to be had for the catching; and the opportunity is well improved. See that sombre, ashen-colored pewee on yonder branch. A true sportsman he, who never takes his game at rest, but always on the wing. You vagrant fly, you purblind moth, beware how you come within his range! Observe his attitude, the curious movement of his head, his “eye in a fine frenzy rolling, glancing from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven.”

His sight is microscopic and his aim sure. Quick as thought he has seized his victim and is back to his perch. There is no strife, no pursuit, – one fell swoop and the matter is ended. That little sparrow, as you will observe, is less skilled. It is the *Socialis*, 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 fly-catcher 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 *Socialis* 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. *Socialis* 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.

In striking contrast to this serio-comic strife of the sparrow and the moth, is the pigeon-hawk's pursuit of the sparrow or the goldfinch. It is a race of surprising speed and agility. It is a test of wing and wind. Every muscle is taxed, and every nerve strained. Such cries of terror and consternation on the part of the bird, tacking to the right and left, and making the most desperate efforts to escape, and such silent determination on the part of the hawk, pressing the bird so closely, flashing and turning and timing his movements with those of the pursued as accurately and as inexorably as if the two constituted one body, excite feelings of the deepest concern. You mount the fence or rush out of your way to see the issue. The only salvation for the bird is to adopt the tactics of the moth, seeking instantly the cover of some tree, bush, or hedge, where its smaller size enables it to move about more rapidly. These pirates are aware of this, and therefore prefer to take their prey by one fell swoop. You may see one of them prowling through an orchard, with the yellow-birds hovering about him, crying, *Pi-ty, pi-ty*, in the most desponding tone; yet he seems not to regard them, knowing, as do they, that in the close branches they are as safe as if in a wall of adamant.

August is the month of the high sailing hawks. The hen-hawk is the most noticeable. He likes the haze and calm of these long,

warm days. He is a bird of leisure, and seems always at his ease. How beautiful and majestic are his movements! So self-poised and easy, such an entire absence of haste, such a magnificent amplitude of circles and spirals, such a haughty, imperial grace, and, occasionally, such daring aërial evolutions!

With slow, leisurely movement, rarely vibrating his pinions, he mounts and mounts in an ascending spiral till he appears a mere speck against the summer sky; then, if the mood seizes him, with wings half-closed, like a bent bow, he will cleave the air almost perpendicularly, as if intent on dashing himself to pieces against the earth; but on nearing the ground, he suddenly mounts again on broad, expanded wing, as if rebounding upon the air, and sails leisurely away. It is the sublimest feat of the season. One holds his breath till he sees him rise again.

If inclined to a more gradual and less precipitous descent, he fixes his eye on some distant point in the earth beneath him, and thither bends his course. He is still almost meteoric in his speed and boldness. You see his path down the heavens, straight as a line; if near, you hear the rush of his wings; his shadow hurtles across the fields, and in an instant you see him quietly perched upon some low tree or decayed stub in a swamp or meadow, with reminiscences of frogs and mice stirring in his maw.

When the south wind blows, it is a study to see three or four of these air-kings at the head of the valley far up toward the mountain, balancing and oscillating upon the strong current: now quite stationary, except a slight tremulous motion like the poise

of a rope-dancer, then rising and falling in long undulations, and seeming to resign themselves passively to the wind; or, again, sailing high and level far above the mountain's peak, no bluster and haste, but, as stated, occasionally a terrible earnestness and speed. Fire at one as he sails overhead, and, unless wounded badly he will not change his course or gait.

His flight is a perfect picture of repose in motion. It strikes the eye as more surprising than the flight of the pigeon and swallow even, in that the effort put forth is so uniform and delicate as to escape observation, giving to the movement an air of buoyancy and perpetuity, the effluence of power rather than the conscious application of it.

The calmness and dignity of this hawk, when attacked by crows or the king-bird, are well worthy of him. He seldom deigns to notice his noisy and furious antagonists, but deliberately wheels about in that ærial spiral, and mounts and mounts till his pursuers grow dizzy and return to earth again. It is quite original, this mode of getting rid of an unworthy opponent, rising to heights where the braggart is dazed and bewildered and loses his reckoning! I am not sure but it is worthy of imitation.

But summer wanes, and autumn approaches. The songsters of the seed-time are silent at the reaping of the harvest. Other minstrels take up the strain. It is the heyday of insect life. The day is canopied with musical sound. All the songs of the spring and summer appear to be floating, softened and refined, in the upper air. The birds in a new, but less holiday suit, turn their

faces southward. The swallows flock and go; the bobolinks flock and go; silently and unobserved, the thrushes go. Autumn arrives, bringing finches, warblers, sparrows and kinglets from the North. Silently the procession passes. Yonder hawk, sailing peacefully away till he is lost in the horizon, is a symbol of the closing season and the departing birds.

# IN THE HEMLOCKS

Most people receive with incredulity a statement of the number of birds that annually visit our climate. Very few even are aware of half the number that spend the summer in their own immediate vicinity. We little suspect, when we walk in the woods, whose privacy we are intruding upon, – what rare and elegant visitants from Mexico, from Central and South America, and from the islands of the sea, are holding their reunions in the branches over our heads, or pursuing their pleasure on the ground before us.

I recall the altogether admirable and shining family which Thoreau dreamed he saw in the upper chambers of Spaulding's woods, which Spaulding did not know lived there, and which were not put out when Spaulding, whistling, drove his team through their lower halls. They did not go into society in the village; they were quite well; they had sons and daughters; they neither wove nor spun; there was a sound as of suppressed hilarity.

I take it for granted that the forester was only saying a pretty thing of the birds, though I have observed that it does sometimes annoy them when Spaulding's cart rumbles through their house. Generally, however, they are as unconscious of Spaulding as Spaulding is of them.

Walking the other day in an old hemlock wood, I counted

over forty varieties of these summer visitants, many of them common to other woods in the vicinity, but quite a number peculiar to these ancient solitudes, and not a few that are rare in any locality. It is quite unusual to find so large a number abiding in one forest, – and that not a large one, – most of them nesting and spending the summer there. Many of those I observed commonly pass this season much farther north. But the geographical distribution of birds is rather a climatical one. The same temperature, though under different parallels, usually attracts the same birds; difference in altitude being equivalent to the difference in latitude. A given height above the sea level under the parallel of thirty degrees may have the same climate as places under that of thirty-five degrees, and similar Flora and Fauna. At the head-waters of the Delaware, where I write, the latitude is that of Boston, but the region has a much greater elevation, and hence a climate that compares better with the northern part of the State and of New England. Half a day's drive to the southeast brings me down into quite a different temperature, with an older geological formation, different forest-timber, and different birds; – even with different mammals. Neither the little gray rabbit nor the little gray fox is found in my locality, but the great northern hare and the red fox. In the last century a colony of beavers dwelt here, though the oldest inhabitant cannot now point to even the traditional site of their dams. The ancient hemlocks, whither I propose to take the reader, are rich in many things beside birds. Indeed, their wealth in this respect is owing mainly, no doubt,

to their rank vegetable growths, their fruitful swamps, and their dark, sheltered retreats.

Their history is of an heroic cast. Ravished and torn by the tanner in his thirst for bark, preyed upon by the lumberman, assaulted and beaten back by the settler, still their spirit has never been broken, their energies never paralyzed. Not many years ago a public highway passed through them, but it was at no time a tolerable road; trees fell across it, mud and limbs choked it up, till finally travelers took the hint and went around; and now, walking along its deserted course, I see only the foot-prints of coons, foxes, and squirrels.

Nature loves such woods, and places her own seal upon them. Here she shows me what can be done with ferns and mosses and lichens. The soil is marrowy and full of innumerable forests. Standing in these fragrant aisles, I feel the strength of the vegetable kingdom and am awed by the deep and inscrutable processes of life going on so silently about me.

No hostile forms with axe or spud now visit these solitudes. The cows have half-hidden ways through them, and know where the best browsing is to be had. In spring the farmer repairs to their bordering of maples to make sugar; in July and August women and boys from all the country about penetrate the old Bark-peelings for raspberries and blackberries; and I know a youth who wonderingly follows their languid stream casting for trout.

In like spirit, alert and buoyant, on this bright June morning go I also to reap my harvest, – pursuing a sweet more delectable

than sugar, fruit more savory than berries, and game for another palate than that tickled by trout.

June, of all the months, the student of ornithology can least afford to lose. Most birds are nesting then, and in full song and plumage. And what is a bird without its song? Do we not wait for the stranger to speak? It seems to me that I do not know a bird till I have heard its voice; then I come nearer it at once, and it possesses a human interest to me. I have met the gray-cheeked thrush (*Turdus aliciae*) in the woods, and held him in my hand; still I do not know him. The silence of the cedar-bird throws a mystery about him which neither his good looks nor his petty larcenies in cherry time can dispel. A bird's song contains a clew to its life, and establishes a sympathy, an understanding, between itself and the listener.

I descend a steep hill, and approach the hemlocks through a large sugar-bush. When twenty rods distant, I hear all along the line of the forest the incessant warble of the red-eyed fly-catcher (*Vireosylvia olivacea*), cheerful and happy as the merry whistle of a school-boy. He is one of our most common and widely distributed birds. Approach any forest at any hour of the day, in any kind of weather, from May to August, in any of the Middle or Eastern districts, and the chances are that the first note you hear will be his. Rain or shine, before noon or after, in the deep forest or in the village grove, – when it is too hot for the thrushes or too cold and windy for the warblers, – it is never out of time or place for this little minstrel to indulge his cheerful strain. In

the deep wilds of the Adirondac, where few birds are seen and fewer heard, his note was almost constantly in my ear. Always busy, making it a point never to suspend for one moment his occupation to indulge his musical taste, his lay is that of industry and contentment. There is nothing plaintive or especially musical in his performance, but the sentiment expressed is eminently that of cheerfulness. Indeed, the songs of most birds have some human significance, which, I think, is the source of the delight we take in them. The song of the bobolink to me expresses hilarity; the song-sparrow's, faith; the bluebird's, love; the cat-bird's, pride; the white-eyed fly-catcher's, self-consciousness; that of the hermit-thrush, spiritual-serenity; while there is something military in the call of the robin.

The vireosylvia is classed among the fly-catchers by some writers, but is much more of a worm-eater, and has few of the traits or habits of the *Muscicapa* or the true *Sylvia*. He resembles somewhat the warbling vireo (*Vireo gilvus*), and the two birds are often confounded by careless observers. Both warble in the same cheerful strain, but the latter more continuously and rapidly. The red-eye is a larger, slimmer bird, with a faint bluish crown, and a light line over the eye. His movements are peculiar. You may see him hopping among the limbs, exploring the under side of the leaves, peering to the right and left, now flitting a few feet, now hopping as many, and warbling incessantly, occasionally in a subdued tone, which sounds from a very indefinite distance. When he has found a worm to his liking, he turns lengthwise of

the limb, and bruises its head with his beak before devouring it.

As I enter the woods the slate-colored snow-bird (*Fringilla Hudsonia*) starts up before me and chirps sharply. His protest when thus disturbed is almost metallic in its sharpness. He breeds here, and is not esteemed a snow-bird at all, as he disappears at the near approach of winter, and returns again in spring, like the song-sparrow, and is not in any way associated with the cold and the snow. So different are the habits of birds in different localities. Even the crow does not winter here, and is seldom seen after December or before March.

The snow-bird, or “black chipping-bird,” as it is known among the farmers, is the finest architect of any of the ground-builders known to me. The site of its nest is usually some low bank by the roadside near a wood. In a slight excavation, with a partially concealed entrance, the exquisite structure is placed. Horse and cow hair are plentifully used, imparting to the interior of the nest great symmetry and firmness as well as softness.

Passing down through the maple arches, barely pausing to observe the antics of a trio of squirrels, – two gray ones and a black one, – I cross an ancient brush fence and am fairly within the old hemlocks, and in one of the most primitive, undisturbed nooks. In the deep moss I tread as with muffled feet, and the pupils of my eyes dilate in the dim, almost religious light. The irreverent red squirrels, however, run and snicker at my approach, or mock the solitude with their ridiculous chattering and frisking.

This nook is the chosen haunt of the winter-wren. This is

the only place and these the only woods in which I find him in this vicinity. His voice fills these dim aisles, as if aided by some marvelous sounding-board. Indeed, his song is very strong for so small a bird and unites in a remarkable degree brilliancy and plaintiveness. I think of a tremulous vibrating tongue of silver. You may know it is the song of a wren, from its gushing lyrical character: but you must needs look sharp to see the little minstrel, especially while in the act of singing. He is nearly the color of the ground and the leaves; he never ascends the tall trees, but keeps low, flitting from stump to stump and from root to root, dodging in and out of his hiding-places, and watching all intruders with a suspicious eye. He has a very pert, almost comical look. His tail stands more than perpendicular: it points straight toward his head. He is the least ostentatious singer I know of. He does not strike an attitude, and lift up his head in preparation, and, as it were, clear his throat; but sits there on a log and pours out his music, looking straight before him, or even down at the ground. As a songster, he has but few superiors. I do not hear him after the first week in July.

While sitting on this soft-cushioned log, tasting the pungent acidulous wood-sorrel (*Oxalis acetellosa*), the blossoms of which, large and pink-veined, rise everywhere above the moss, a rufous-colored bird flies quickly past, and, alighting on a low limb a few rods off, salutes me with "Whew! Whew!" or "Whoit! Whoit!" almost as you would whistle for your dog. I see by his impulsive, graceful movements, and his dimly speckled breast, that it is a

thrush. Presently he utters a few soft, mellow, flute-like notes, one of the most simple expressions of melody to be heard, and scuds away, and I see it is the veery, or Wilson's thrush. He is the least of the thrushes in size, being about that of the common bluebird, and he may be distinguished from his relatives by the dimness of the spots upon his breast. The wood-thrush has very clear, distinct oval spots on a white ground; in the hermit, the spots run more into lines, on a ground of a faint bluish-white; in veery, the marks are almost obsolete, and a few rods off his breast presents only a dull yellowish appearance. To get a good view of him you have only to sit down in his haunts, as in such cases he seems equally anxious to get a good view of you.

From those tall hemlocks proceeds a very fine insect-like warble, and occasionally I see a spray tremble, or catch the flit of a wing. I watch and watch till my head grows dizzy and my neck is in danger of permanent displacement, and still do not get a good view. Presently the bird darts, or, as it seems, falls down a few feet in pursuit of a fly or a moth, and I see the whole of it, but in the dim light am undecided. It is for such emergencies that I have brought my gun. A bird in the hand is worth half a dozen in the bush, even for ornithological purposes; and no sure and rapid progress can be made in the study without taking life, without procuring specimens. This bird is a warbler, plainly enough, from his habits and manner; but what kind of warbler? Look on him and name him: a deep orange or flame-colored throat and breast; the same color showing also in a line

over the eye and in his crown; back variegated black and white. The female is less marked and brilliant. The orange-throated warbler would seem to be his right name, his characteristic cognomen; but no, he is doomed to wear the name of some discoverer, perhaps the first who robbed his nest or rifled him of his mate, – Blackburn; hence, Blackburnian warbler. The *burn* seems appropriate enough, for in these dark evergreens his throat and breast show like flame. He has a very fine warble, suggesting that of the redstart, but not especially musical. I find him in no other woods in this vicinity.

I am attracted by another warble in the same locality, and experience a like difficulty in getting a good view of the author of it. It is quite a noticeable strain, sharp and sibilant, and sounds well amid the old trees. In the upland woods of beech and maple it is a more familiar sound than in these solitudes. On taking the bird in hand, one cannot help exclaiming, “How beautiful!” So tiny and elegant, the smallest of the warblers; a delicate blue-back, with a slight bronze-colored triangular spot between the shoulders; upper mandible black; lower mandible yellow as gold; throat yellow, becoming a dark bronze on the breast. Blue yellow-back he is called, though the yellow is much nearer a bronze. He is remarkably delicate and beautiful, – the handsomest as he is the smallest of the warblers known to me. It is never without surprise that I find amid these rugged, savage aspects of Nature creatures so fairy and delicate. But such is the law. Go to the sea or climb the mountain, and with the ruggedest

and the savagest you will find likewise the fairest and the most delicate. The greatness and the minuteness of Nature pass all understanding.

Ever since I entered the woods, even while listening to the lesser songsters, or contemplating the silent forms about me, a strain has reached my ears from out the depths of the forest that to me is the finest sound in nature, – the song of the hermit-thrush. I often hear him thus a long way off, sometimes over a quarter of a mile away, when only the stronger and more perfect parts of his music reach me; and through the general chorus of wrens and warblers I detect this sound rising pure and serene, as if a spirit from some remote height were slowly chanting a divine accompaniment. This song appeals to the sentiment of the beautiful in me, and suggests a serene religious beatitude as no other sound in nature does. It is perhaps more of an evening than a morning hymn, though I hear it at all hours of the day. It is very simple, and I can hardly tell the secret of its charm. “O spherul, spherul!” he seems to say; “O holy, holy! O clear away, clear away! O clear up, clear up!” interspersed with the finest trills and the most delicate preludes. It is not a proud, gorgeous strain, like the tanager’s or the grossbeak’s; suggests no passion or emotion, – nothing personal, – but seems to be the voice of that calm sweet solemnity one attains to in his best moments. It realizes a peace and a deep solemn joy that only the finest souls may know. A few nights ago I ascended a mountain to see the world by moonlight; and when near the summit the hermit

commenced his evening hymn a few rods from me. Listening to this strain on the lone mountain, with the full moon just rounded from the horizon, the pomp of your cities and the pride of your civilization seemed trivial and cheap.

I have seldom known two of these birds to be singing at the same time in the same locality, rivaling each other, like the wood-thrush or the veery. Shooting one from a tree, I have observed another take up the strain from almost the identical perch in less than ten minutes afterward. Later in the day when I had penetrated the heart of the old "Barkpeeling," I came suddenly upon one singing from a low stump, and for a wonder he did not seem alarmed, but lifted up his divine voice as if his privacy was undisturbed. I open his beak and find the inside yellow as gold. I was prepared to find it inlaid with pearls and diamonds, or to see an angel issue from it.

He is not much in the books. Indeed, I am acquainted with scarcely any writer on ornithology whose head is not muddled on the subject of our three prevailing song-thrushes, confounding either their figures or their songs. A writer in the "Atlantic"<sup>1</sup> gravely tells us the wood-thrush is sometimes called the hermit, and then, after describing the song of the hermit with great beauty and correctness, coolly ascribes it to the veery! The new Cyclopædia, fresh from the study of Audubon, says the hermit's song consists of a single plaintive note, and that the veery's resembles that of the wood-thrush! These observations

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<sup>1</sup> For December, 1858.

deserve to be preserved with that of the author of "Out-door Papers," who tells us the trill of the hair-bird (*Fringillia socialis*) is produced by the bird fluttering its wings upon its sides! The hermit-thrush may be easily identified by his color; his back being a clear olive-brown becoming rufous on his rump and tail. A quill from his wing placed beside one from his tail on a dark ground presents quite a marked contrast.

I walk along the old road, and note the tracks in the thin layer of mud. When do these creatures travel here? I have never yet chanced to meet one. Here a partridge has set its foot; there, a woodcock; here, a squirrel or mink: there, a skunk; there, a fox. What a clear, nervous track reynard makes! how easy to distinguish it from that of a little dog, – it is so sharply cut and defined! A dog's track is coarse and clumsy beside it. There is as much wildness in the track of an animal as in its voice. Is a deer's track like a sheep's or a goat's? What winged-footed fleetness and agility may be inferred from the sharp, braided track of the gray squirrel upon the new snow! Ah! in nature is the best discipline. How wood-life sharpens the senses, giving a new power to the eye, the ear, the nose! And are not the rarest and most exquisite songsters wood-birds?

Everywhere in these solitudes I am greeted with the pensive, almost pathetic note of the wood-pewee. The pewees are the true fly-catchers, and are easily identified. They are very characteristic birds, have strong family traits, and pugnacious dispositions. They are the least attractive or elegant birds of

our fields or forest. Sharp-shouldered, big-headed, short-legged, of no particular color, of little elegance in flight or movement, with a disagreeable flirt of the tail, always quarreling with their neighbors and with one another, no birds are so little calculated to excite pleasurable emotions in the beholder, or to become objects of human interest and affection. The king-bird is the best dressed member of the family, but he is a braggart; and, though always snubbing his neighbors, is an arrant coward, and shows the white feather at the slightest display of pluck in his antagonist. I have seen him turn tail to a swallow, and have known the little pewee in question to whip him beautifully. From the great-crested to the little green fly-catcher, their ways and general habits are the same. Slow in flying from point to point, they yet have a wonderful quickness, and snap up the fleetest insects with little apparent effort. There is a constant play of quick, nervous movements underneath their outer show of calmness and stolidity. They do not scour the limbs and trees like the warblers, but, perched upon the middle branches, wait, like true hunters, for the game to come along. There is often a very audible snap of the beak as they seize their prey.

The wood-pewee, the prevailing species in this locality, arrests your attention by his sweet, pathetic cry. There is room for it also in the deep woods, as well as for the more prolonged and elevated strains.

Its relative, the phoebe-bird, builds an exquisite nest of moss on the side of some shelving cliff or overhanging rock. The other

day, passing by a ledge near the top of a mountain in a singularly desolate locality, my eye rested upon one of these structures, looking precisely as if it grew there, so in keeping was it with the mossy character of the rock, and I have had a growing affection for the bird ever since. The rock seemed to love the nest and to claim it as its own. I said, what a lesson in architecture is here! Here is a house that was built, but with such loving care and such beautiful adaptation of the means to the end, that it looks like a product of nature. The same wise economy is noticeable in the nests of all birds. No bird would paint its house white or red, or add aught for show.

At one point in the grayest, most shaggy part of the woods, I come suddenly upon a brood of screech-owls, full grown, sitting together upon a dry, moss-draped limb, but a few feet from the ground. I pause within four or five yards of them and am looking about me, when my eye alights upon these gray, motionless figures. They sit perfectly upright, some with their backs and some with their breasts toward me, but every head turned squarely in my direction. Their eyes are closed to a mere black line; through this crack they are watching me, evidently thinking themselves unobserved. The spectacle is weird and grotesque, and suggests something impish and uncanny. It is a new effect, the night side of the woods by daylight. After observing them a moment I take a single step toward them, when, quick as thought, their eyes fly wide open, their attitude is changed, they bend, some this way, some that, and, instinct with

life and motion, stare wildly around them. Another step, and they all take flight but one, which stoops low on the branch, and with the look of a frightened cat regards me for a few seconds over its shoulder. They fly swiftly and softly, and disperse through the trees. I shoot one, which is of a tawny red tint, like that figured by Wilson, who mistook a young bird for an old one. The old birds are a beautiful ashen-gray mottled with black. In the present instance, they were sitting on the branch with the young.

Coming to a drier and less mossy place in the woods, I am amused with the golden-crowned thrush, – which, however, is no thrush at all, but a warbler, the *Sciurus aurocapillus*. He walks on the ground ahead of me with such an easy gliding motion, and with such an unconscious, preoccupied air, jerking his head like a hen or a partridge, now hurrying, now slackening his pace, that I pause to observe him. If I sit down, he pauses to observe me, and extends his pretty rumblings on all sides, apparently very much engrossed with his own affairs, but never losing sight of me. But few of the birds are walkers, most being hoppers, like the robin.

Satisfied that I have no hostile intentions, the pretty pedestrian mounts a limb a few feet from the ground, and gives me the benefit of one of his musical performances, a sort of accelerating chant. Commencing in a very low key, which makes him seem at a very uncertain distance, he grows louder and louder, till his body quakes and his chant runs into a shriek, ringing in my ear with a peculiar sharpness. This lay may be represented thus: “Teacher *teacher*, TEACHER, TEACHER, **TEACHER!**” – the

accent on the first syllable and each word uttered with increased force and shrillness. No writer with whom I am acquainted gives him credit for more musical ability than is displayed in this strain. Yet in this the half is not told. He has a far rarer song, which he reserves for some nymph whom he meets in the air. Mounting by easy flights to the top of the tallest tree, he launches into the air with a sort of suspended, hovering flight, like certain of the finches, and bursts into a perfect ecstasy of song, – clear, ringing, copious, rivaling the goldfinch's in vivacity, and the linnet's in melody. This strain is one of the rarest bits of bird-melody to be heard, and is oftenest indulged in late in the afternoon or after sundown. Over the woods, hid from view, the ecstatic singer warbles his finest strain. In this song you instantly detect his relationship to the water-wagtail (*Sciurus noveboracensis*) – erroneously called water-thrush, – whose song is likewise a sudden burst, full and ringing, and with a tone of youthful joyousness in it, as if the bird had just had some unexpected good fortune. For nearly two years this strain of the pretty walker was little more than a disembodied voice to me, and I was puzzled by it as Thoreau by his mysterious night-warbler, which, by the way, I suspect was no new bird at all, but one he was otherwise familiar with. The little bird himself seems disposed to keep the matter a secret, and improves every opportunity to repeat before you his shrill, accelerating lay, as if this were quite enough and all he laid claim to. Still, I trust I am betraying no confidence in making the matter public here.

I think this is preëminently his love-song, as I hear it oftenest about the mating season. I have caught half-suppressed bursts of it from two males chasing each other with fearful speed through the forest.

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