

SONGS OF AMERICAN BIRDS.

BY JOHN BURROUGHS.

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS FROM PHOTOGRAPHS OF BIRDS MOUNTED BY WILLIAM E. D. SCOTT.



SUSPECT it requires a special gift of grace to enable one to hear the bird-songs; some new power must be added to the ear, or some obstruction removed. There are not only scales upon our eyes so that we do not see; there are scales upon our ears so that we do not hear. A city woman who had spent much of her time in the country once asked a well-known ornithologist to take her where she could hear the bluebird. «What, never heard the bluebird!» said he. «I have not,» said the woman. «Then you will never hear it,» said the bird-lover. That is, never hear it with that inward ear that gives beauty and meaning to the note. He could probably have taken her in a few minutes where she could have heard the call or warble of the bluebird; but it would have fallen upon unresponsive ears—upon ears that were not sensitized by love for the birds or associations with them. Bird-songs are not music, properly speaking, but only suggestions of music. A great many people whose attention would be quickly arrested by the same volume of sound made by a musical instrument or by any artificial means never hear them at all. The sound of a boy's penny whistle there in the grove or the meadow would separate itself more from the background of nature, and be a greater challenge to the ear, than is the strain of the thrush or the song of the sparrow. There is something elusive, indefinite, neutral, about bird-songs that makes them strike obliquely, as it were, upon the ear; and we are very apt to miss them. They are a part of nature, and nature lies about us, entirely occupied with her own affairs, and quite regardless of our presence. Hence it is with bird-songs as it is with so many other things in nature—they are what we make them; the ear that hears them must be half creative. I am always disturbed when persons not especially observant of birds ask me to take them where they can hear some particular bird the song of which they have become interested in through a description of it

in some book. As I listen with them I feel like apologizing for the bird: it has a bad cold, or has just heard some depressing news; it will not let itself out. The song seems so casual and minor when you make a dead set at it. I have taken persons to hear the hermit-thrush, and I have fancied that they were all the time saying to themselves, «Is that all?» But when one hears the bird in his walk, when the mind is attuned to simple things and is open and receptive, when expectation is not aroused and the song comes as a surprise out of the dusky silence of the woods, one feels that it merits all the fine things that can be said of it.

As music, what is the little ditty of the first song-sparrow in spring, or the warble of the first robin, or the call of the first meadow-lark or highhole? Nothing. If we have no associations with these sounds they will mean very little to us. Their merit as musical performances is very slight. It is as signs of joy and love in nature, as heralds of spring, and the spirit of the woods and fields made audible, that they appeal to us. The drumming of the woodpeckers and of the ruffed grouse give great pleasure to a countryman, though they have not the quality of real music. It is the same with the call of the migrating geese or the voice of any wild thing: our pleasure in them is entirely apart from any considerations of music. Why does the wild flower, as we chance upon it in the woods or bogs, give us more pleasure than the more elaborate flower of the garden or lawn? Because it is a greater surprise, offers a greater contrast with its surroundings, and suggests a spirit in wild nature that seems to take thought of itself and to aspire to beautiful forms.

The songs of caged birds are always disappointing, because then they have nothing but their musical qualities to recommend them to us. We have separated them from that which gives quality and meaning to their songs. One recalls Emerson's lines:

I thought the sparrow's note from heaven,
Singing at dawn on the alder bough;
I brought him home, in his nest, at even;

He sings the song, but it pleases not now,
For I did not bring home the river and sky;—
He sang to my ear,—they sang to my eye.

I have never yet seen a caged bird that I wanted,—at least, not on account of its song,—nor a wild flower that I desired to transfer to my garden. A caged skylark will sing its song sitting on a bit of turf in the bottom of the cage; but you want to stop your ears, it is so harsh and sibilant and penetrating. But up there against the morning sky, and above the wide expanse of fields, what delight we have in it! It is not the concord of sweet sounds: it is the soaring spirit of gladness and ecstasy raining down upon us from «heaven's gate.» Then, to the time and the place, if one could only add the association, or hear the bird through the vista of the years, the song touched with the magic of youthful memories! A number of years ago a friend in England sent me a score of skylarks in a cage. I gave them their liberty in a field near my place. They drifted away, and I never heard them or saw them again. But one Sunday a Scotchman from a neighboring city called upon me, and declared with visible excitement that on his way along the road he had heard a skylark. He was not dreaming; he knew it was a skylark, though he had not heard one since he had left the banks of the Doon, a quarter of a century or more before. What pleasure it gave him! How much more the song meant to him than it would have meant to me! For the moment he was on his native heath again. Then I told him about the larks I had liberated, and he seemed to enjoy it all over again with renewed appreciation. Many years ago some skylarks were liberated on Long Island, and they became established there, and may now occasionally be heard in certain localities. One summer day a friend of mine was out there observing them; a lark was soaring and singing in the sky above him. An old Irishman came along, and suddenly stopped as if transfixed to the spot; a look of mingled delight and incredulity came into his face. Was he indeed hearing the bird of his youth? He took off his hat, turned his face skyward, and with moving lips and streaming eyes stood a long time regarding the bird. «Ah,» my friend thought, «if I could only hear that song with his ears!» How it brought back his youth and all those long-gone days on his native hills! The power of bird-songs over us is so much a matter of association. Hence it is that every traveler to other countries finds the feathered songsters of less merit

than those he left behind. The traveler does not hear the birds in the same receptive, uncritical frame of mind as does the native; they are not in the same way the voices of the place and the season. What music can there be in that long, piercing, far-heard note of the first meadow-lark in spring to any but a native, or in the «o-ka-lee» of the red-shouldered starling as he rests upon the willows in March? A stranger would probably recognize melody and a wild woodsy quality in the flutings of the veery thrush; but how much more they would mean to him after he had spent many successive Junes threading our Northern trout-streams and encamping on their banks! The veery will come early in the morning, and perch above your tent, and again at sundown, and blow his soft, reverberant note for minutes at a time. The strain repeats the echoes of the limpid stream in the halls and corridors of the leafy woods.

While in England in 1882, I rushed about two or three counties in late June and early July, bent on hearing the song of the nightingale, but missed it by a few days, and in some cases, as it seemed, only by a few hours. The nightingale seems to be wound up to go only so long, or till about the middle of June, and it is only by a rare chance that you hear one after that date. Then I came home to hear a nightingale in song in winter in a friend's house in the city. It was a curious let-down to my enthusiasm. A caged song in a city chamber in broad daylight, in lieu of the wild, free song in the gloaming of an English landscape! I closed my eyes, abstracted myself from my surroundings, and tried my best to fancy myself listening to the strain back there amid the scenes I had haunted about Hazelmere and Godalming, but with poor success, I suspect. The nightingale's song, like the lark's, wants vista, wants all the accessories of time and place. The song is not all in the singing, any more than the wit is all in the saying. It is in the occasion, the surroundings, the spirit of which it is the expression. My friend said that the bird did not fully let itself out. Its song was a brilliant medley of notes,—no theme that I could detect,—like the lark's song in this respect; all the notes of the field and forest appeared to be the gift of this bird, but what tone, what accent, like that of a great poet!

Nearly every May I am seized with an impulse to go back to the scenes of my youth, and hear the bobolinks in the home meadows once more. I am sure they sing there better than anywhere else. They probably drink

nothing but dew, and the dew distilled in those high pastoral regions has surprising virtues. It gives a clear, full, vibrant quality to the birds' voices that I have never heard elsewhere. The night of my arrival, I leave my southern window open, so that the meadow chorus may come pouring in before I am up in the morning. How it does transport me athwart the years, and make me a boy again, sheltered by the paternal wing! On one oc-

southern migrations; but within the last twenty years they have become regular summer residents in the hilly parts of many sections of New York and New England. They are genuine skylarks, and lack only the powers of song to make them as attractive as their famous cousins of Europe.

The larks are ground-birds when they perch, and sky-birds when they sing; from the turf to the clouds—nothing between.



CHICKADEES.

casation, the third morning after my arrival, a bobolink had appeared with a new note in his song. The note sounded like the word «baby» uttered with a peculiar, tender resonance; but it was clearly an interpolation; it did not belong there; it had no relation to the rest of the song. Yet the bird never failed to utter it with the same joy and confidence as the rest of his song. Maybe it was the beginning of a variation that may in time result in an entirely new bobolink song.

On my last spring visit to my native hills, my attention was attracted to another songster not seen or heard there in my youth—namely, the shore-lark, also called «horned lark» from the marked division of its crest. Flocks of these birds used to be seen in the Northern States in the late fall during their

Our shore-lark mounts upward on quivering wing in the true lark fashion, and, spread out against the sky at an altitude of two or three hundred feet, hovers and sings. The watcher and listener below holds him in his eye, but the ear catches only a faint, broken, half-articulate note now and then—mere splinters, as it were, of the song of the skylark. The song of the latter is continuous and is loud and humming; it is a fountain of jubilant song up there in the sky; but our shore-lark sings in snatches; at each repetition of its notes it dips forward and downward a few feet, and then rises again. One day I kept my eye upon one until it repeated its song one hundred and three times; then it closed its wings, and dropped toward the earth like a plummet, as does its European congener.

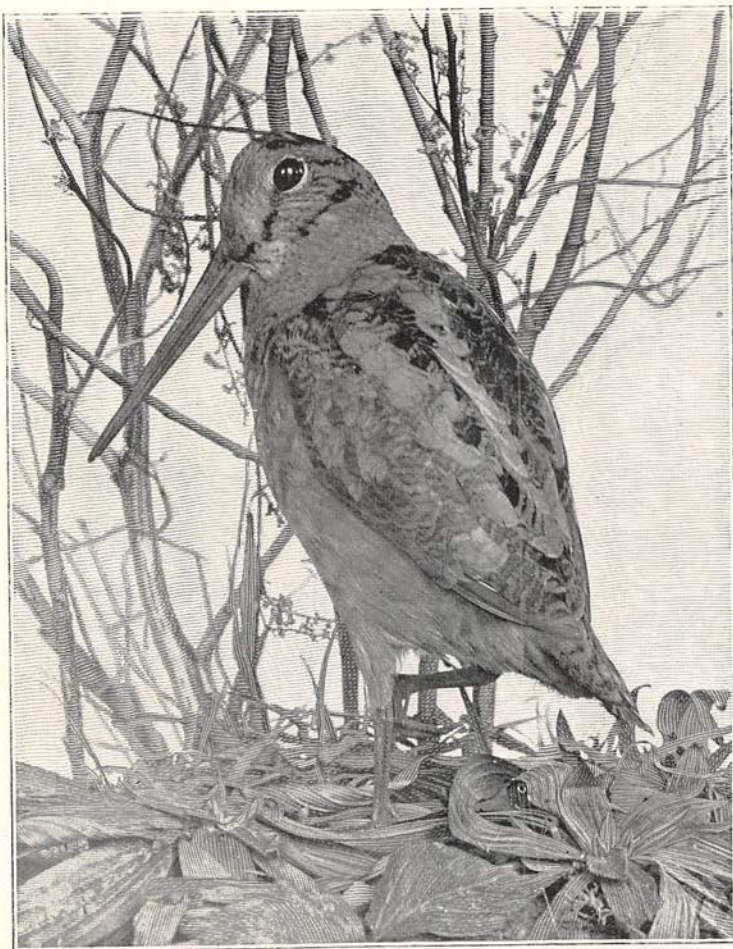
While I was watching the bird a bobolink flew over my head, between me and the lark, and poured out his voluble and copious strain. «What a contrast,» I thought, «between the spluttering, tongue-tied lark, and the free, liquid, and varied song of the bobolink!»

I heard of a curious fact in the life histories of these larks in the West. A Michigan woman once wrote me that her brother, who was an engineer on an express train that made daily trips between two Western cities, reported that many birds were struck by the engine every day, and killed—often as many

as thirty on a trip of sixty miles. Birds of many kinds were killed, but the most common was a bird that went in flocks, and the description of which answered to the shore-lark. Since then I have read in a Minnesota newspaper that many shore-larks are killed by railroad locomotives in that State. It was thought that the birds sat behind the rails to get out of the wind, and on starting up in front of the advancing train were struck down by the engine. The Michigan engineer referred to thought that the birds gathered upon the track to earth their wings, or else to



QUAIL.



WOODCOCK.

pick up the grain that leaks out of the wheat-trains, and sows the track from Dakota to the seaboard. Probably the wind which they might try to face in getting up is the prime cause of their being struck. One does not think of the locomotive as a bird-destroyer, though it is well known that many of the smaller animals often fall beneath it.

A very interesting feature of our bird-songs is the wing-song, or song of ecstasy. It is not the gift of many of our birds. Indeed, less than a dozen species are known to me as ever singing on the wing. It seems to spring from more intense excitement and self-abandonment than the ordinary song delivered from the perch. When the bird's joy reaches the point of rapture it is literally carried off its feet, and up it goes into the air, pouring out its song as a rocket pours its sparks. The skylark and the bobolink habitually do this, but a few others of our birds do it only on occasions. Last summer, up in

the Catskills, I added another name to my list of ecstatic singers—that of the vesper-sparrow. Several times I heard a new song in the air, and caught a glimpse of the bird as it dropped back to the earth. My attention would be attracted by a succession of hurried, chirping notes, followed by a brief burst of song, then by the vanishing form of the bird. One day I was lucky enough to see the bird as it was rising to its climax in the air, and identified it as the vesper-sparrow. The burst of song that crowned the upward flight of seventy-five or one hundred feet was brief; but it was brilliant and striking, and entirely unlike the leisurely chant of the bird while upon the ground. It suggested a lark, but was less buzzing or humming. The preliminary chirping notes, uttered faster and faster as the bird mounted in the air, were like the trail of sparks which a rocket emits before its grand burst of color at the top of its flight.

It is interesting to note that this bird is quite lark-like in its color and markings, having the two lateral white quills in the tail and the suggestion of a crest on its head. The solitary skylark that I discovered several years ago in a field near me was seen on several occasions paying his addresses to one of these birds, but the vesper-bird was shy, and eluded all his advances.

most screeching song of the oven-bird, as it perches on a limb a few feet from the ground, like the words, «preacher, preacher, preacher,» or «teacher, teacher, teacher,» uttered louder and louder, and repeated six or seven times, is also familiar to most ears; but its wild, ringing, rapturous burst of song in the air high above the tree-tops is not so well known. From a very prosy, tiresome,



HERMIT-THRUSH.

Probably the perch-songster among our ordinary birds that is most regularly seized with the fit of ecstasy that results in this lyric burst in the air is the oven-bird, or wood-accentor—the golden-crowned thrush of the old ornithologists. Every loiterer about the woods knows this pretty, speckled-breasted, olive-backed little bird, which walks along over the dry leaves a few yards from him, moving its head as it walks, like a miniature domestic fowl. Most birds are very stiff-necked, like the robin, and as they run or hop upon the ground carry the head as if it were riveted to the body. Not so the oven-bird, or the other birds that walk, as the cow-bunting or the quail or the crow. They move the head forward with the movement of the feet. The sharp, reiterated, al-

unmelodious singer, it is suddenly transformed for a brief moment into a lyric poet of great power. I have seen the bird when this skyward impulse first seized him. A marked excitement comes over him (I am tempted to say *her*, because the bird always suggests the feminine, and the two sexes are marked alike); he begins hurrying up through the trees from branch to branch, uttering a sharp, rapid chirp, till before the top is reached he can hold himself back no longer, when he starts into the air, and fifty or more feet above the tree-tops breaks out into a ringing, ecstatic song. You hardly have time to turn your head and find him with your eye before he has delivered himself, and with folded wings is pitching down toward the earth again. The bird does this many times

a day during early June, but oftenest at twilight. The song in quality and general cast is like that of its congener, the water-accentor, which, however, I believe is never delivered on the wing. From its habit of

they never seem to have suspected the identity of the singer.

Other birds that sing on the wing are the meadow-lark, goldfinch, purple finch, indigo-bird, Maryland yellowthroat, and woodcock.



ROBIN.

singing at twilight, and from the swift, darting motions of the bird, I am inclined to think that in it we have solved the mystery of Thoreau's "night-warbler," that puzzled and eluded him for years. Emerson told him he must beware of finding and booking it, lest life should have nothing more to show him. The older ornithologists must have heard this song many times, but

The flight-song of the woodcock I have never heard, but it is described as being very pleasing, delivered in the twilight of early spring. The meadow-lark sings in a level flight, half hovering in the air, giving voice to a rapid medley of lark-like notes. The goldfinch also sings in a level flight, beating the air slowly with its wings broadly open, and pouring out its jubilant, ecstatic



BROWN THRASHER.

strain. I think it indulges in this wing-song only in the early season. After the mother bird has begun sitting, the male circles about within ear-shot of her, in that curious undulating flight, uttering his «per-chic-o-pee, per-chic-o-pee,» while the female calls back to him in the tenderest tones, «Yes, lovie; I hear you.» The indigo-bird and the purple finch, when their happiness becomes too full and buoyant for them longer to control, launch into the air, and sing briefly, ecstatically, in a tremulous, hovering flight. The air-song of these birds does not differ essentially from the song delivered from the perch, except that it betrays more excitement, and hence is a more complete lyrical rapture.

The purple finch is our finest songster among the finches. Its strain is so soft and melodious, and touched with such a childlike gaiety and plaintiveness, that I think it might even sound well in a cage inside a room, if it would only sing with the same joyous abandonment, which, of course, it would not do.

It is not generally known that individual birds of the same species show different degrees of musical ability. This is often noticed in caged birds, among which the principle of variation seems more active; but an attentive observer notes the same fact in wild birds. Occasionally he hears one that in powers of song surpasses all its fellows. I have heard a sparrow, oriole, and wood-thrush, each

of which had a song of its own that far exceeded any other. I stood one day by a trout-stream, and suspended my fishing for several minutes to watch a song-sparrow that was singing on a dry limb before me. He had five distinct songs, each as markedly different from the others as any human songs, which he repeated one after the other. He may have had a sixth or a seventh, but he bethought himself of some business in the next field, and flew away before he had exhausted his repertory. I once had a letter from Robert Louis Stevenson, who said he had read some account I had written of the song of the English blackbird. He said I might as well talk of the song of man; that every blackbird had its own song; and then he told me of a remarkable singer he used to hear somewhere amid the Scottish hills. But his singer was, of course, an exception; twenty-four blackbirds out of every twenty-five probably sing the same song, with no appreciable variations: but the twenty-fifth may show extraordinary powers. I told Stevenson that his famous singer had probably been

to school to some nightingale on the Continent or in southern England. I might have told him of the robin I once heard here that sang with great spirit and accuracy the song of the brown thrasher. It had probably heard it and learned it while very young. In the Trossachs, in Scotland, I followed a song-thrush about for a long time, attracted by its peculiar song. It repeated over and over again three or four notes of a well-known air, which it might have caught from some shepherd-boy whistling to his flock or to his cow.

The songless birds—why has nature denied them this gift? But they nearly all have some musical call or impulse that serves them very well. The quail has his whistle, the woodpecker his drum, the pewee his plaintive cry, the chickadee his exquisitely sweet call, the highhole his long, repeated «wick, wick, wick,» which is one of the most welcome sounds of spring, the jay his musical gurgle, the hawk his scream, the crow his sturdy caw. Only one of our pretty birds of the orchard is reduced to an all but inaudible note, and that is the cedar-bird.



BLUEBIRD.