



An April Chronicle.

March is the month of hope, as poets declare, the birds of April chant the message of joy—joy in the

“ Ever fresh creation,  
The divine improvisation.”

The song-sparrow in the hedge, pouring out his soul in



BALTIMORE ORIOLE.

ecstatic trills and quavers, so full of happiness that his little form swells and sways, is but a symbol, a sign, of the deep joy of all created beings—even of man, if he will but open his soul to Nature.

Not that the birds are newly returned from their “ far traveling in the south plantations,” but the sharp winds of March must drift into the warm breezes and the spring showers of April before our feathered guests break into full and joyous song.

Our “ guests,” did I say? I should more truly say our hosts; for our guests we supply with food and entertainment, while, as a matter of fact, it is wholly owing to the work of the birds that we have food for ourselves.

In all seriousness, we scarcely begin to understand, and we utterly fail to appreciate, the importance to us of the service rendered by our winged fellow-creatures. We commonly regard them as an ornamental feature of the landscape, a charming addition to the summer enjoyment; and if one chances to interfere in any way with our pleasure or profit, to pull up our corn or taste our cherries, we take his life without compunction. Putting aside the

question of our right,—and it is a question,—we forget that in so doing we destroy one of our best friends, one of our most valuable servants, without whose labors we could not exist on the earth a day. So frightfully prolific, so utterly indestructible by our clumsy weapons, is the world of insects, that but for the sharp eyes and beaks of our indefatigable workmen, the birds, they would devour the vegetation of the earth, and finish their feast with man himself. Every bird that is killed insures the safety of thousands of our worst enemies. A profitable day may be spent in this fickle and fascinating month, studying our little laborers, and noting their usefulness to man.

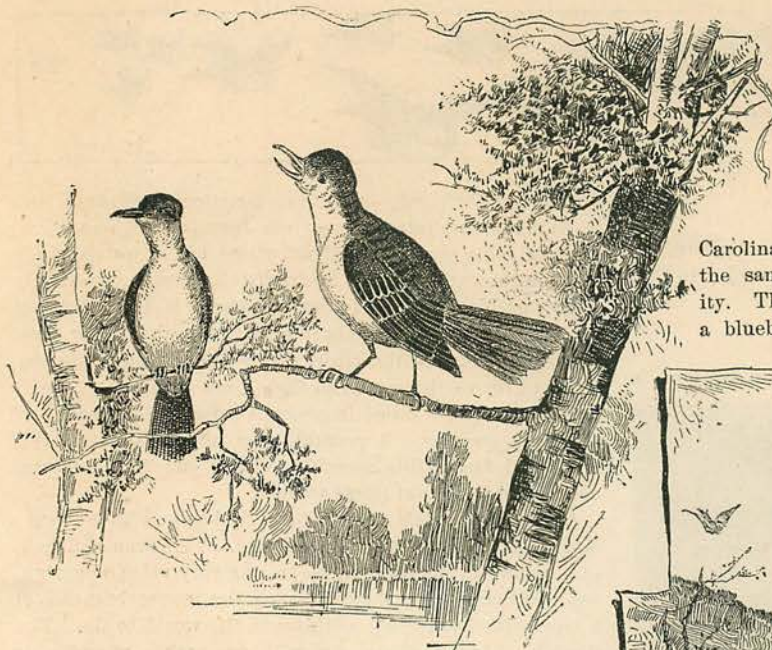
An April chronicle should properly begin with “ April’s bird,” as Emerson calls the bluebird. This beautiful creature, whose inimitable warble is the very voice of spring, you will find resting motionless on the lowest branches of a tree, with apparently nothing in the world to do. You think he is idle, perhaps, and with our notions of energetic movement he does look so. But do you note that every few moments he turns his wise-looking head downward, then drops to the ground, returns in a moment, and wipes his beak on the branch? He is no pensive dreamer; he is a busy worker for us. The smallest movement in the grass attracts his eye, and the sure little beak rarely fails to seize the insect working its mischief there.

Not far off, too, may perhaps be seen his demure little spouse similarly engaged; and a little later, when homes are set up and nestlings begin to peep, you will find the



PURPLE MARTIN.

pair busy from morning till night, beginning long before you are up, and ending only with the daylight, searching the fields, the gardens, the lawn, and every few moments popping some destructive insect into a yawning baby-mouth.



GREAT CRESTED FLY-CATCHER.

The father stops singing, and the mother grows ragged and rusty before these most winsome bluebird babies appear in their spotted bibs on the lawn, to hunt their own breakfast.

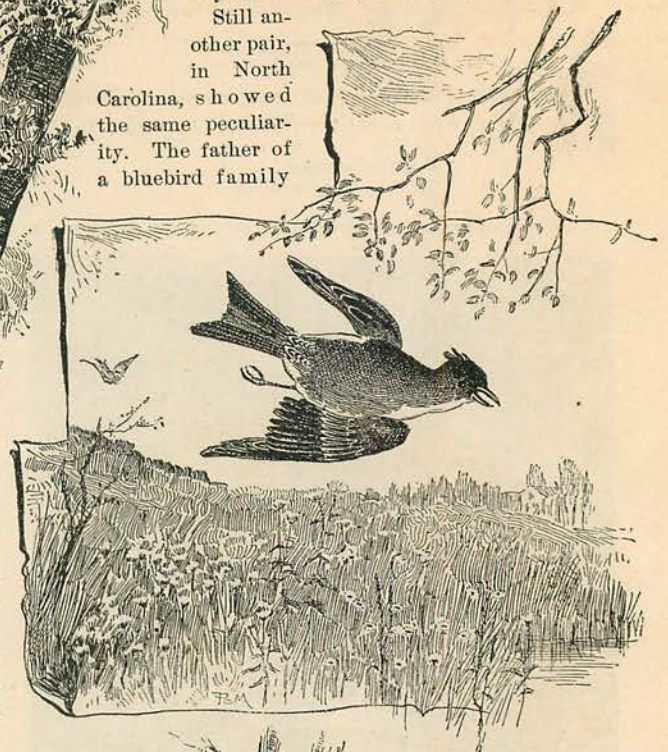
Who could bear to shut up one of those pretty mouths, so busily turning worms into warbles, even if the birds themselves were not interesting? But they are interesting; they are not mere fluffs of blue feathers; they have character and individuality, and will repay study.

Some curious facts that I have noticed in three different pairs seem to indicate that, contrary to tradition and expectation, Madam is the protector in this family. First I observed on the shore of Lake George, that when any trouble arose in the bluebird world,—and troubles come to nests as well as to nurseries,—it was the mother who assumed the defensive, hovering about the head of an intruder, threatening with shaking wings and bristling feathers, and warning him away from the scene. It was the same excited little mother who drove away the oriole that dared to alight near her homestead, who ran down the lowest branch and vigorously delivered her opinion about people's minding their own business and not meddling with their neighbor's; while the handsome head of the family remained placidly on the top twig of the home tree, uttering his sweet and plaintive cry of distress to whom it might concern.

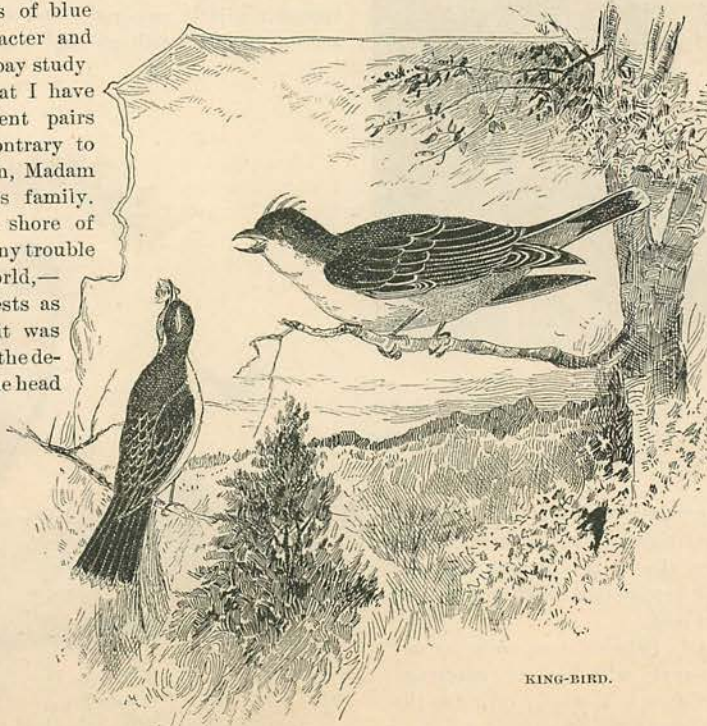
I thought this merely an idiosyncrasy of this particular individual. But the next year I had a pair in my bird-room, and to my surprise I found this female also the care-taker.

She called anxiously if her mate got out of her sight in the room, she defended the open cage-door against intrusion of the neighbors, she even stood guard while he bathed, and drove away with great wrath any bird who ventured too near.

Still another pair, in North Carolina, showed the same peculiarity. The father of a bluebird family



WOOD PEWEE.



KING-BIRD.

habitually made the lawn before my windows his hunting-place, till one morning a saucy mocking-bird, who had just set up a household and become very belligerent in consequence, drove him away from his usual post. In a short time Madam came down from her nest in the trunk of a neighboring pine-tree. She perched in plain sight on the protecting frame around the tree her mate usually occupied. After standing a few minutes and looking sharply around, she went to the grass, when instantly the mocker flung himself down before her. She did not

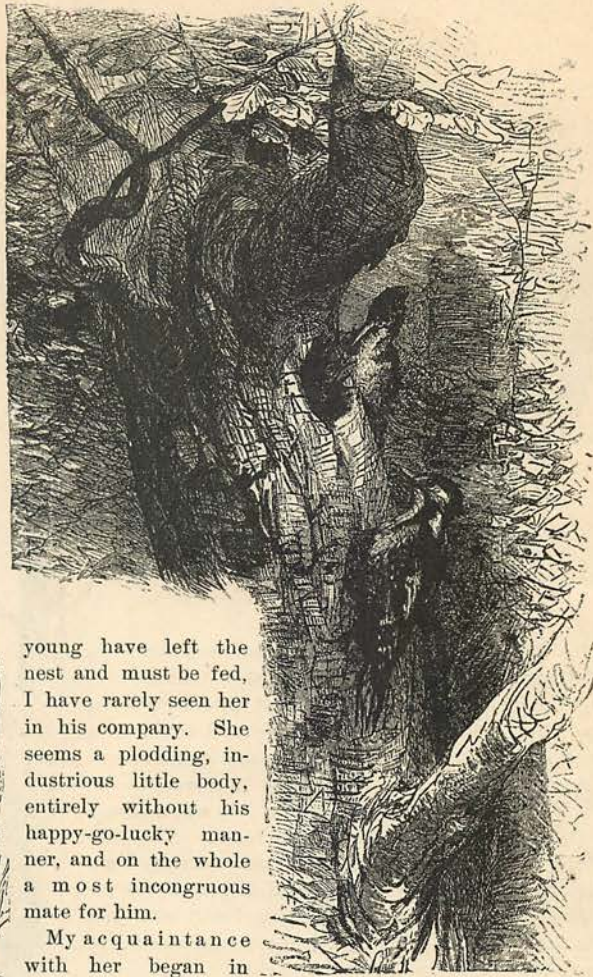
fly; she stood on the defensive and actually threatened her big foe so that in a moment he took his departure. She remained on the ground some time, then flew away, and before long came back with her mate. She alighted on the frame as before, while he took his place in a thick tree at a little distance, among the leaves and not in plain sight. She went to the ground, as if to show him the way was clear. He watched her closely, but, though no enemy

appeared, did not himself go down. In a moment he uttered a peculiar low call, flew away, and she followed. I never saw him there again.

I don't say this bird was a coward; he was not. I saw him somewhat later join his spouse in a vigorous attack upon a mocking-bird who had alighted near one of the nestlings; moreover, he was most tender and loving in his efforts at consolation when a week later the pair met with an affliction: but the facts were exactly as I have told them.

A careless observer might think the Baltimore oriole merely frolicking as he runs hurriedly over the branches of a fruit-tree, uttering every moment a sweet, rich note; but he, too, is hard at work for our comfort, hunting out the caterpillar babies, that if left to grow would easily destroy both fruit and leaves. Every delicious note heralds the death of one or more of our most threatening enemies, and so well done is his work, that, in June, when his swinging cradle is full of babies, he and his mate must forage far and wide for the insects with which to feed them.

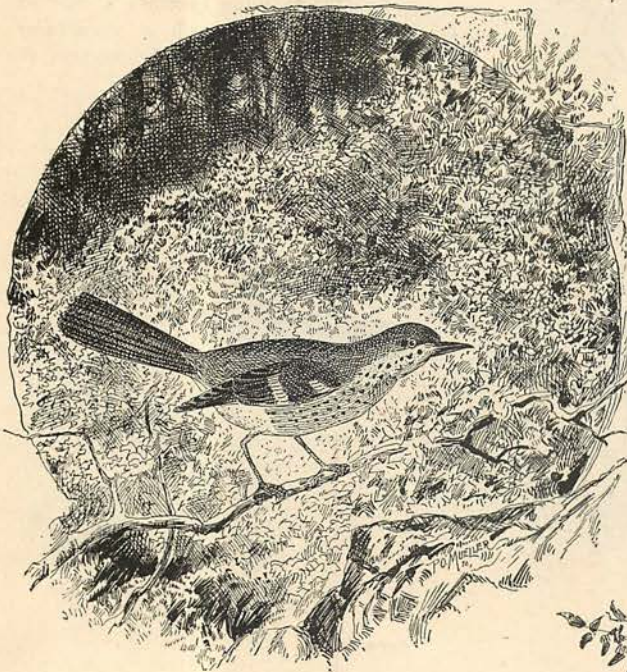
His cousin, too, the orchard oriole, tireless in singing, and



WOODPECKER.

young have left the nest and must be fed, I have rarely seen her in his company. She seems a plodding, industrious little body, entirely without his happy-go-lucky manner, and on the whole a most incongruous mate for him.

My acquaintance with her began in Massachusetts one pleasant June, when her little family were just ready to climb up from the nest near the ground. My presence on a neighboring bank annoyed her greatly; and, though I was as unob-



BROWN THRUSH.

without concealment in his domestic affairs, labors perhaps even harder, having so much more energetic life to sustain. His lively ways, the constant excitement in the family, the singing and scolding, the chasing and squabbling, would almost warrant one in thinking his life all play; but, though so full of song that he fairly bubbles over, he varies his music with solid mouthfuls, every one of which puts an end to a destroyer.

Busily hunting over the fields are the blackbirds, more particularly the redwings, which I have found to be a curiously interesting family. The domestic life of this gayly epauletted personage exhibits some peculiarities indicating, perhaps, a case of "incompatibility." The redwing himself is a born Bohemian, with no taste for the prim or the proper,—a jolly, rollicking fellow, living most of the year in a noisy crowd. His spouse resembles him in nothing except the voice. She is smaller, wears an inconspicuous black and brown streaked costume, and, excepting when the



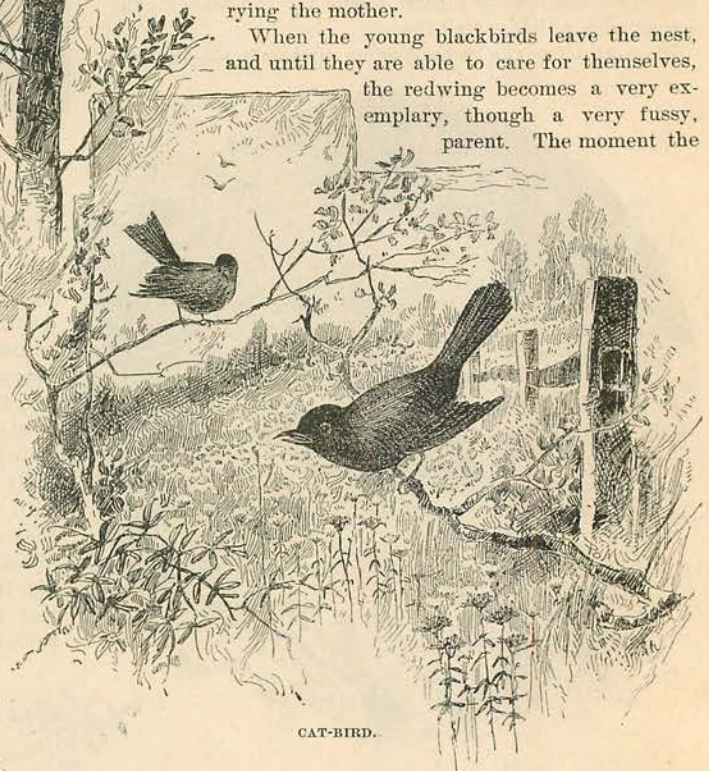
PURPLE FINCH.



REDSTART.

trusive as possible, she scolded me well for daring to watch her. I was much attracted by the little stranger who declined my society so emphatically, but, strange to say, I could not find out her name. Again and again I sought in my books a description that would fit the bird, but none was there. In vain, also, I asked every man and boy in the town. The difficulty of identification, however, only increased my interest. I went every day, and began to look for the youngsters to come in sight, for it was just in the witching baby-days, when peeps and chirps and baby calls came from every side.

Now it appeared that someone else was looking after the family. From the high land on the further side of the meadow came every day a redwing blackbird. I had often heard him sing over there, and I was glad to have him come nearer that I might see as well as hear. But little, indeed, did he care for me; he had eyes for nothing but

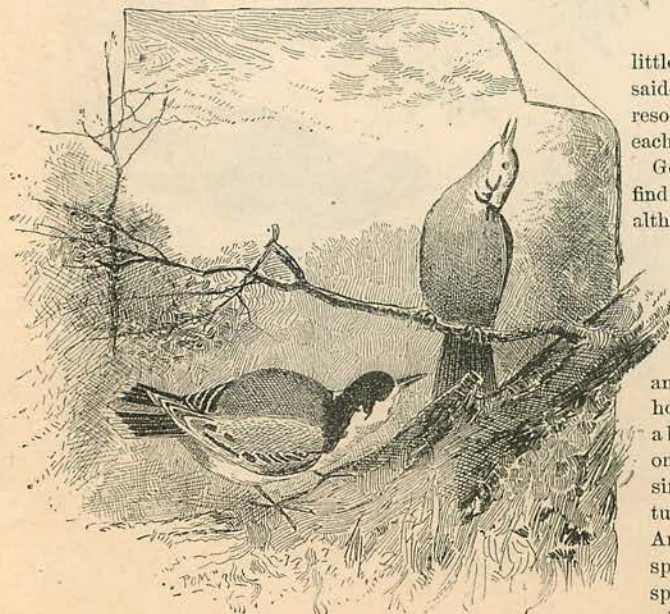


CAT-BIRD.

the insignificant little streaked bird in the grass. No sooner did its head appear above the grass than he was after it. Away they both flew, the smaller doubling and turning and apparently making frantic efforts to escape, the redwing ever close in the rear, until both were tired and alighted, one in a tree, and the other in the grass. So often and so long was this performance carried on, that I began to fear the poor babies in that nest would starve.

The behavior of the redwing was most captivating. He sang as he flew; he uttered his sweet, rich "tē-ū;" he flew high and descended with wings and tail spread, and singing delightfully. And after all it turned out that it was undoubtedly his own spouse and babies in the grass, and that was perhaps his unique way of looking after their welfare. In all the time I watched, he did not once go near the nest, or take the smallest part in feeding the infants; he simply devoted himself to worrying the mother.

When the young blackbirds leave the nest, and until they are able to care for themselves, the redwing becomes a very exemplary, though a very fussy, parent. The moment the



NUTHATCH.

little ones are independent of their parents, however, it is said—I don't know how truly—that the blackbird family resolves itself into three parts: father, mother, and young, each joining a flock of its peers.

Go where you will, if you keep near houses you will find the robin, mysterious and queer in some of his ways, although so familiarly known, maintaining his own independence and his own opinions, while apparently sharing the life of the people about him.

The robin, better than any bird I know, demonstrates the fact that there is communication of sentiments, if not of ideas between them. What a curious performance, for example, is this, often seen in robin neighborhoods: half a dozen or more will assemble within a space of a hundred feet, one on a fence, another on a tree, a third on a lattice or a bean-pole in the garden, and the rest in similar positions. One begins a low, significant "tut! tut! tut!" jerking wings and tail, evidently in great excitement. Another replies with similar "tut! tut! tut!" and corresponding gestures. So it goes on, every one making his little speech while the others listen, and it irresistibly suggests a band of conspirators plotting some mischief. Too much feeling is expressed to set it down as an ordinary discussion.



GOLDFINCH.

One of these birds, whose story was told me by a friend whom I consider a trustworthy observer, had a strange experience. He arrived in our latitude a little early one spring, and was overtaken by a cold wave that nearly froze him. A gentleman, finding him stiff and helpless, took him into the house, and by way of cage put him behind a wire grate-fender. He was soon thawed out, but he refused to be friendly, and, the weather having moderated, it was decided to let him go. When caught for the purpose, he resisted fiercely, and in wriggling out of the detaining hand he left the whole of his tail behind him.

Was he discouraged, and did he mope all summer till another moult should restore his proper proportions? By no means. He got him a mate, built a nest, and raised a fine family; and without the vestige of a tail! The amused household saw him around all summer.

Now, if this be true,—and I cannot doubt my informant,—the pertinent question is: Was the bird already mated “for better, for worse,” or are the wise men mistaken in asserting that the female bird selects her partner for his looks?

One of our best friends in feathers is the purple martin, a member of the swallow family, and he is extremely attractive because of his “talk.” In his loud, rich tones he utters a greater variety of calls and other notes than perhaps any other bird. What makes him specially dear to bird-lovers is his undying enmity to the house (or English) sparrow.

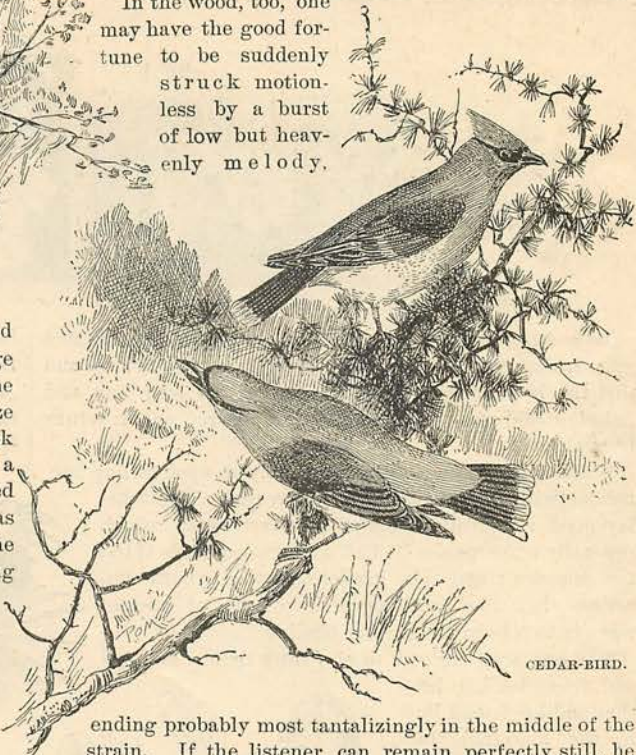
Another enemy to this impudent usurper of martin-houses and bluebird-boxes, is the great crested fly-catcher, who will come daily into a neighborhood apparently for the sole purpose of making war upon him. When this bird’s clear, loud, ringing call is heard, and he is seen with his mate in the top of some tall tree, one may have the pleasure of seeing the prince of squawkers put to rout.

None of the fly-catchers seem to be intimidated by this interloper: even the little wood pewee drives him away from her nesting-tree, and the king-bird maintains a close watch on his movements, ready for offensive action if he exceed his well-defined bounds. The other sparrows, so far as I have noticed, pay no attention at all to their foreign relative. The chipping-sparrow carries on his interminable

squabbles in the grass, and other sparrows attend strictly to their own affairs, appearing not to notice him.

Not all the April birds are about the house. Walk some mild morning into the grove. Before you reach it you will hear the voice of the flicker ring through the wood, as Thoreau says, “peopling and enriching all the woods and fields” with his loud “pe-auk! pe-auk!” or, drawing nearer, his most enchanting low “wick-a! wick-a!” Clumsy looking as are these woodpeckers, they get about very silently, and if one loiters about in the vicinity of their homestead while nestlings fill the snug nursery, he will rarely see or hear them. It is amusing to see how quickly they abandon their caution after the young have flown, calling and shouting through the grove, drumming on dead branches, and descending boldly to the ground to feast on legions of ants.

In the wood, too, one may have the good fortune to be suddenly struck motionless by a burst of low but heavenly melody,



CEDAR-BIRD.

ending probably most tantalizingly in the middle of the strain. If the listener can remain perfectly still, he may, after a while, get a glimpse of the singer—the brown thrush, an erratic and shy bird, of pronounced tastes and idiosyncrasies. Like the rest of the thrush family, he is one of our most intelligent birds; and while he has not the repose of manner so attractive in the wood-thrush, the childlike openness of the robin, or the witching ways of the cat-bird, he has his own unique and pleasing manners.

Around the branches flit the redstarts, tirelessly working for man; the purple finch, in “poke-berry” suit, searches the elm and varies work by an exquisite little song; the nuthatch travels over the trunk, head up or down, as happens, uttering his quaint “quauk! quauk!” and on the top twig of the maple swings and sings the cheery goldfinch.

The demure cedar-bird, in modest snuff-color and black spectacles, whispers to his neighbor on the next branch, and swallows wheel and dive and chatter all about. Each and every bird is using all its powers for the benefit of man; its song delights our ears; its colors and movements gratify our eyes; its untiring pursuit of the insect preserves to us our vegetation, and even without this constant service,

“Earth were not half so bright or fair  
Without these minstrels of the air.”

OLIVE THORNE MILLER.