

A BIRD TALK.

BY JOHN BURROUGHS.

I.

ONE of the good signs of the times is the interest our young people are taking in the birds, and the numerous clubs and societies that are being formed throughout the country for bird protection and cultivation. In my youth but little was heard about the birds. They were looked upon as of little account. Many of them were treated as the farmer's natural enemies. Crows and all kinds of hawks and owls were destroyed whenever chance offered. I knew a farmer who every summer caught and killed all the red-tailed hawks he could. He stood up poles in his meadows, upon the tops of which he would set steel traps. The hawks, looking for meadow-mice, would alight upon them and be caught. The farmer was thus slaying his best friends, as these large hawks live almost entirely upon mice and vermin. The redtail, or hen-hawk, is very wary of a man with a gun, but he has not yet learned of the danger that lurks in a steel trap on the top of a pole.

If a strict account could be kept with our crows and hawks for a year, it would be found at the end of that time that most of them had a balance to their credit. That is, they do us more good than injury. A few of them, like the fish-crow and the sharp-shinned hawk, Cooper's-hawk and the duck-hawk, are destructive to the birds and wild fowls; but the others live mainly upon insects and vermin.

One August, when I was a boy, I remember a great flight of sparrow-hawks—called sparrow-hawk, I suppose, because it never catches sparrows. They were seen by the dozen, hovering above and flitting about the meadows. On carefully observing them, I found they were catching grasshoppers—the large, fat ones found in the meadows in late summer. They would poise on the wing twenty or thirty feet above

the ground, after the manner of the larger hawks watching for mice, then suddenly drop down and seize their prey, which they devoured from a limb of a tree or a stake in the fence. They lingered about for several days and then drifted away.

Nearly every season a pair of broad-winged hawks—about a size smaller than the hen-hawk—build their nest in the woods not far from my cabin. You may know this hawk by its shrill, piercing cry, the smoothest, most ear-piercing note I know of in nature. It utters this cry when you come near its nest, and continues to utter it as long as you linger about. One season they built in a large pine-tree near which I frequently passed in my walk. Always, as I came near, I would hear this wild, shrill plaint, made, I think, by the mother bird. Often she would sit upon a branch in full view and utter her ear-dividing protest. There were never any signs about the nest that birds or poultry formed any part of the food of the young. It is said that this hawk subsists upon insects and frogs. When the young—two of them—were about two thirds grown they perched upon the edge of the nest, and upon one of the branches that held it in place.

One day I took a couple of bird lovers there to hear the cry of the mother hawk. We lingered about for nearly an hour, and not a sound was heard or a parent hawk seen. Then I tried to stir up the young, but without effect. They looked at us sharply, but made no move and uttered no cry. A smaller tree grew alongside the pine that held the nest. Up this I climbed till within probably twenty-five feet of the suspicious young; then I reached out my foot and planted it upon a limb of the larger tree. Instantly, as if the tree were a living part of themselves, the young hawks took the alarm and launched into the



SPARROW-HAWK EATING A GRASSHOPPER.

air. But the wings of one of them could not long sustain him, and he came to the ground within twenty yards of the foot of the tree. As we approached him his position of defense was striking—wings half spread, beak open, one talon raised, and a look of defiance in his eye. But we soon comforted him, and presently left him perched upon a branch in a much more composed state of mind. The parent hawks did not appear upon the scene during our stay.

II.

I do not share the alarm expressed in some quarters over the seeming decrease in the numbers of our birds. People are always more or less gloomy in regard to the present time and present things. As we grow older the number of beautiful things in the world seems to be fewer. "The Indian summer is not what it used to be; the winters are not so bracing;

the spring is more uncertain; and honest men are fewer." But there is not much change, after all. The change is mainly in us. I see no decrease in the great body of our common field, orchard, and wood birds. I do not see the cliff-swallows I used to see in my youth; they go farther north, to northern New England and Canada. At Rangeley Lake, in Maine, I saw the eaves of barns as crowded with their mud nests as I used to see the eaves of my father's barns amid the Catskills. In the cliffs along the Yukon in Alaska they are said to swarm in great numbers. Nearly all our game-birds are decreasing in numbers, because sportsmen are more and more numerous and skilful, and their guns more and more deadly. The bobolinks are fewer than they were a decade or two ago, because they are slaughtered more and more in the marshes and rice-fields of the South. The bluebirds and hermit-thrushes were threatened with extinction by a cold wave



A NEST OF YOUNG ROBINS FED BY A CHIPPING-SPARROW.

and a severe storm in the Southern States, a few years ago. These birds appear to have been slain by the hundred thousand. But they are slowly recovering lost ground, and in ten or more years will no doubt be as numerous as ever. I see along the Hudson River fewer eagles than I used to see fifteen years ago. The collectors and the riflemen are no doubt responsible for this decrease. But the robins, thrushes, finches, warblers, blackbirds, orioles, fly-catchers, vireos, and woodpeckers are quite as abundant as they were a quarter of a century ago, if not more so.

The English sparrows, no doubt, tend to run out our native birds in towns and smaller cities, but in the country their effect is not noticeable. They are town birds anyway, and naturally take their place with a thousand other town abominations. A friend of mine who lives in the heart of a city of twenty thousand people amused me by recounting his observation upon a downy woodpecker that had made up its

mind to pass the winter in town. In November it began to dig out a chamber for its winter quarters in the dead branch of a maple that stood on the curb in front of his window. The English sparrows sat about upon the branches, regarding the proceeding with evident interest, but showing no intention to interfere. "Let him work," they seemed to say; "something interesting may come of it." For two weeks or more Downy was busy carving out his retreat. At last it was finished; but when he returned at night he found it occupied, and the occupant refused to leave. This seemed to puzzle the woodpecker a good deal. Every night he was barred out of his own house. Then he took it into his head to come home earlier in the day. This scheme worked at first, but soon the sparrows clubbed together, attacked his castle, and literally dragged him out by sheer force. Then he gave up the fight, and no doubt returned to the country a sadder and a wiser bird. A new retreat had to be

drilled out, which must have caused him no little trouble. It would be interesting to know where, in the meantime, he passed the night. Probably in some old retreat of his or his friends'.

How to get rid of the English sparrows, or to keep them in check, is a question that is troubling many of our communities. A single effort here and there will have little effect; there must be agreed action over a wide area. The blow must be struck in attacking their nest-places.

In every town with a police force, let it be one of the duties of the police to spy out their nesting-places and report them to headquarters, as they would any nuisance or lawbreaking. Then let men be detailed to break them up. As long as the nest is untouched, killing the birds is of little avail. A friend of mine, a well-known ornithologist, told me that one summer he and his wife took for the season a house in a small town not far from Boston. There were two sparrows' nests in the cavities of two fruit-trees in the garden. At once he opened war

upon the parent birds; and he continued the shooting. Whenever a bird showed itself about either nest it was shot. The birds became very wild and shrewd, till he was compelled to fire from a crack in the door. But he kept up the warfare till he had killed sixty-two birds about those nests, and yet from each cavity a brood of young birds came forth. I suppose there were eggs or young in the nest when my friend appeared upon the scene, and that he did not in any one day kill both the parent birds. Had he done so, it is still a question whether the young would have been allowed to perish. Their cries probably would have attracted other birds.

The paternal instinct is strong in all creatures. Birds as well as animals will sometimes adopt the young of others. I have been told of a bluebird that took it upon himself to help feed some young vireos in a nest near his own, and of a house-wren that carried food to some young robins.

Last summer I witnessed a similar occur-



A BLUEBIRD THAT CARRIED FOOD TO YOUNG VIREOS.



John Audubon
— 99

A COLONY OF CLIFF-SWALLOWS.

rence, and made this note of it in my note-book: "A nest of young robins in the maple in front of the house being fed by a chipping-sparrow. The little sparrow was very attentive; seems very fond of her adopted babies. The old robins resent her services, and hustle her out of the tree whenever they find her near the nest." It was this hurried departure of chippy from the tree that first attracted my attention. "She watches her chances, and comes with food in their absence. The young birds are about ready to fly, and when the chippy feeds them her head fairly disappears in their capacious mouths. She jerks it back as if she was afraid of being swallowed. Then she lingers near them on the edge of the nest, and seems to admire them. When she sees the old robins coming, she spreads her wings in an attitude of defense and then flies away. I wonder if she has had the experience of rearing a cow-bunting?"

A day later. "The robins are out of the nest, and the little sparrow continues to feed them. She approaches them rather timidly and hesitatingly, as if she feared they might swallow her, then thrusts her titbit quickly into the distended mouth and jerks back."

III.

I AM glad to see that this growing interest in bird-life has reached our schools and is being promoted there. I often get letters from teachers touching these matters. A teacher in the State of Delaware writes me that he and his pupils are trying to know all the birds within a mile of their school-house. One bird has puzzled them much. The teacher frequently saw them feeding in the road in the evening as he walked home from school. Then, when the blizzard came, they approached the school-house for crumbs, sometimes in loose flocks of a dozen or more.

This is the teacher's description of the bird:

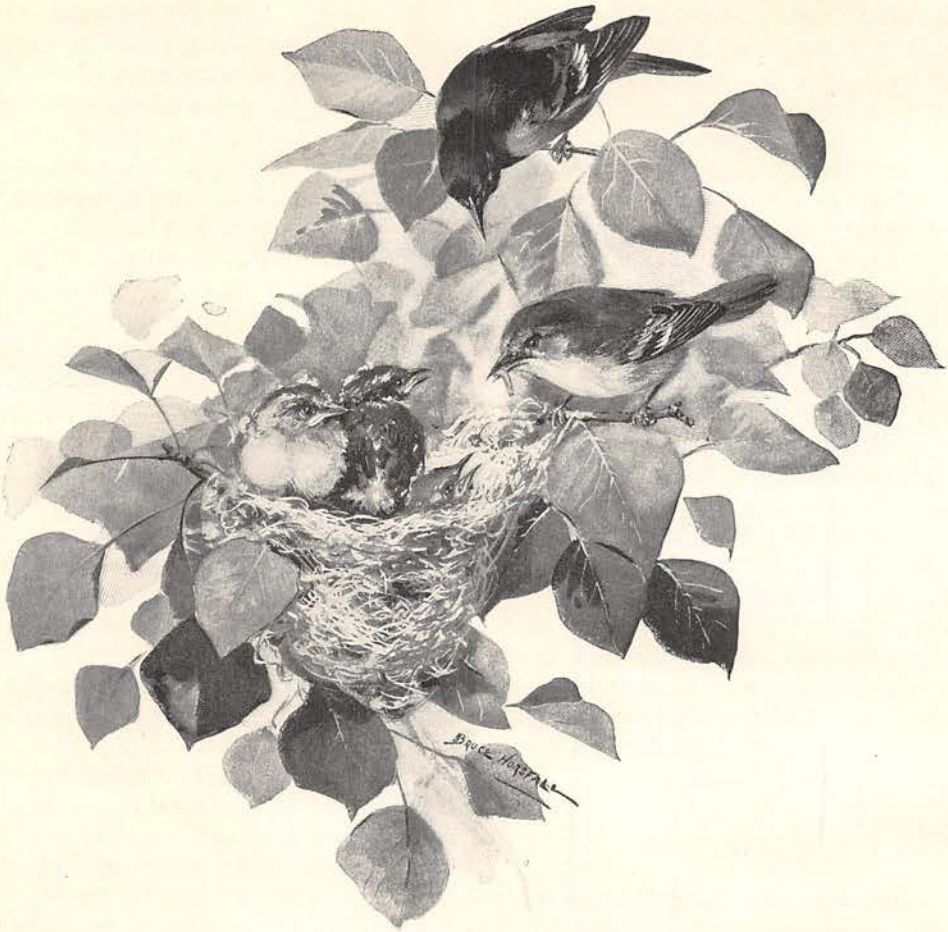
The upper half of its bill is dark, and about one third of the tip of the lower. The rest is light. The feathers are a greenish yellow below the bill, and the throat feathers are black with white tips. The belly is white, but the feathers are black underneath. In size it is a little smaller than the robin. It has a chirp, when flying, something like the cedar-bird. The back toe is certainly very long for so small a bird.

Had not this description been accompanied by a wing, leg, and tail of the bird in question, I should have been at a loss to name it. One of the birds was found dead in the snow beneath the telegraph wires, and this afforded the samples. It proved to be the shore-lark,—called also horned lark,—one of the migrating birds that passes the winter near the snow-line in the Southern States, and the summer in the hilly parts of New York, New England, and Canada.

The above description makes the bird much too large, as its size is nearer that of the bobolink and bluebird. All the larks have the hind toe very prominent. This species, like the true skylark, is entirely a bird of the earth, and never alights upon trees. In song it soars and hovers high in air like the skylark, but its song is a very crude, feeble affair in comparison with that of the latter. Its winter plumage is far less marked than that of its summer dress. One day I took note of one singing above my native hills, and it repeated its feeble, lisping song one hundred and three times before it closed its wings and dropped to the earth precisely as does the European skylark.

Another teacher writes me asking if the blue jay eats acorns. She is sure she has seen them flying away from oak-trees with acorns in their beaks, and yet some authority to whom she had appealed was doubtful about their eating them. I replied that I did not believe jays ate acorns, but that she had seen them with acorns in their beaks I had no doubt, and chestnuts, too. The thieving habit of the jay, which is a trait of his family, the *Corvidæ*, leads him to carry away chestnuts and acorns and hide them in the grass and under leaves, and thus makes him an instrument in the planting of forests, though he little suspects it. This is the reason why, when a pine or hemlock forest is cut away, oaks and chestnuts are so apt to spring up. These nuts can be planted in new places only by the aid of birds and squirrels.

A clergyman writes me from a New England town of something he found in his winter walks that puzzled him very much. It was an old cocoon of the *Cecropia* moth, in which he found two kernels of corn. What creature could have put them there, and for what purpose? Of course it was the blue jay; he had hidden the



THE ORCHARD ORIOLES' NEST.

corn in the same blind way that he hides the acorns. I have seen the jays in winter carry away corn and put it into an old worm's nest in a wild-cherry tree, and drop it into knot-holes in the tree-trunk. It is doubtful if the jay can digest corn swallowed whole. It is too hard a grist for its mill. It will peck out the chit or softer seed part—as will the chickadee—and devour that.

Another teacher wrote me that two pretty birds, strangers to her, had built their nest in a pear-tree near the kitchen door of her house.

They were small and slender, the male of a ruddy brown, his head, tail, and wings black, and the female yellowish green, with darker wings. The male brought worms and fed his mate while she was sitting, and seemed the happiest bird alive, save when the kittens

romped about the door; and then, even in the midst of his cries of alarm like a blackbird's, he would burst out with glad notes of rejoicing, a song to me like the sparrow's. Soon there were young in the nest, and the air was filled with the constant fluttering of wings and the rapturous song of the father. But alas! one morning found the nest rifled of its treasures, and only the silent, miserable male flitting in and out about the home in the most heartbroken fashion.

A red squirrel or a cat or an owl had done the mischief. The nest was woven of hemp and grasses and was suspended from the fork of a limb. The teacher guessed rightly that the bird was a near relative of the Baltimore oriole; it was the orchard oriole, a much rarer bird and a much finer songster. The song is not like the sparrow's, but much louder and stronger and more ecstatic. The male

does not get his full uniform of black and bay till the fourth summer.

IV.

LOVE the wood-rose, but leave it on its stalk, hints the poet. So, I say, find the bird's nest, but touch not the eggs. It seems to profane the nest even to touch its contents with the utmost care.

This is how, one June day, I found the nest of the little yellow-winged sparrow—the sparrow that one often hears in our fields and meadows, that has a song which suggests

a grasshopper. I was sitting on the fence beside a hill meadow, watching the shore-larks, and hoping that one of them would disclose the locality of its nest. A few yards from me was a little bush, from the top of which a yellow-winged sparrow was sending out its feeble, chirping song. Presently a little brown bird came out of the meadow and alighted in the grass but a few yards from the singer. Instantly he flew to the spot, and I knew it was his mate. They seemed to have some little conversation together there in the grass, when, in a moment or two, they separated, the male flitting to his perch on the little bush and



THE YELLOW-WINGED SPARROW.

continuing his song, while the female dropped quickly into the grass ten or more yards away. "The nest is there," I said, "and I must find it." So I walked straight to the spot where the bird had disappeared and scrutinized the ground closely. Not seeing the object of my search, I dropped my handkerchief upon the grass, and began walking cautiously about it in circles, covering more and more ground, and scanning every foot of the meadow-bottom closely. Suddenly, when four or five yards from my handkerchief, a little dark-brown bird fluttered out from almost under my feet, and the pretty secret was mine.

The nest, made of dry grass and a few hairs, was sunk into the ground,—into the great, brownish-gray, undistinguished meadow surface,—and held four speckled eggs. The mother bird fluttered through the grass, and tried, by pretending to be hurt, to lure me away from the spot. I had noticed that the male had ceased singing as soon as I began my search, and had shown much uneasiness. He now joined his mate, and two more agitated birds

I had never seen. The actions of this bird are quick and nervous at all times; now they verged upon frenzy. But I quickly withdrew and concealed myself behind the fence. After a brief consultation the birds withdrew also, and it was nearly a half-hour before the parent birds returned.

Then the mother bird, after much shamming and flitting nervously about, dropped into the grass several yards from the nest. I fancied her approaching it in a cautious, roundabout, indirect way.

In the afternoon I came again; also the next day; but at no time did I find the male in song on his old perch. He seemed to take the blame of my approach upon himself; he had betrayed the place of the nest; and now I found him upon the fence or upon an apple-tree far off, where his presence or his song would not reveal the precious secret.

The male bird of every species is very careful about being seen very near the nest. You will generally find him in song along the rim of a large circle of which the nest is the center.

THE BIRTHDAYS OF BETTINA AND BETTY.

When Bettina has a birthday,—
 Little Lady Millionaire,—
 Gifts come pouring in upon her,
 And the party in her honor,
 When Bettina has a birthday,
 Is a very grand affair.

When a birthday comes to Betty,—
 Little Lassie Penniless,—
 Mother makes her a new dolly,
 Father takes her on the trolley—
 When a birthday comes to Betty,
 In her little cotton dress.

When Bettina has a birthday,
 You should see the children stare
 At the costly things from Paris,
 Bought to please the little heiress—
 When Bettina has a birthday,
 In the mansion on the square.

When a birthday comes to Betty,
 She has nothing, more or less,
 But what loving hands have wrought her
 With a kiss for "little daughter"—
 When a birthday comes to Betty,
 In her cottage lowliness.

When Bettina has a birthday,
 She is gay beyond compare;
 Laughs to see the lavish portion
 Showered on her by smiling Fortune;
 When Bettina has a birthday—
 Little Lady Millionaire.

When a birthday comes to Betty,
 She has, too, her happiness;
 Though, indeed, few gifts to treasure,
 Love she has in heaping measure;
 When a birthday comes to Betty—
 Little Lassie Penniless.

Rose Mills Powers.