

A-T (Lorrey)  
Ruby-throat  
1891

(1891)

The male ruby-throat.

Lorrey, B.

HARVARD UNIVERSITY.



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BEQUEST OF

WALTER FAXON

*January 21, 1922.*

shall all be civilized into stirring Philistines, with no time to waste in friendly gossip; farms will be tilled by tenants who expect to make money as well as a livelihood, and could not shoot a wild turkey to save their lives; the saw will buzz away our grand old forests that have sheltered the mound-builders; we shall become a syndicate, or a corporation, or a trust; and the country will be so well drained that it cannot even summon an old-time chill over its changed conditions.

Yes, the new civilization will come. I am enough a child of my age to feel that it is best it should come, but I am glad to be here before it comes. I hope that it may not come too fast!

“Touch us gently, Time!

We've not proud nor soaring wings;  
Our ambition, our content,  
Lies in simple things.  
Humble voyagers are we  
O'er Life's dim, unbounded sea,  
Seeking only some calm clime; —  
Touch us gently, gentle Time!”

*Octave Thanet.*

58,503.

### THE MALE RUBY-THROAT.

“Your fathers, where are they?” — ZECARIAH i. 5.

WHILE keeping daily watch upon a nest of our common humming-bird, in the summer of 1890,<sup>1</sup> I was struck with the persistent absence of the head of the family. As week after week elapsed, this feature of the case excited more and more remark, and I turned to my out-of-door journal for such meagre notes as it contained of a similar nest found five years before. From these it appeared that at that time, also, the father bird was missing. Could such truancy be habitual with the male ruby-throat? I had never supposed that any of our land birds were given to behaving in this ill-mannered, unnatural way, and the matter seemed to call for investigation.

My first resort was, of course, to books. The language of Wilson and Audubon is somewhat ambiguous, but may fairly be taken as implying the male bird's presence throughout the period of nidification. Nuttall speaks explicitly to the same effect, though with no specification of the grounds on which his statement is based. The later systematic biographers — Brewer,

Samuels, Minot, and the authors of *New England Bird Life* — are silent in respect to the point. Mr. Burroughs, in *Wake-Robin*, mentions having found two nests, and gives us to understand that he saw only the female birds. Mrs. Treat, on the other hand, makes the father a conspicuous figure about the single nest concerning which she reports. Mr. James Russell Lowell, too, speaks of watching both parents as they fed the young ones: “The mother always alighted, while the father as uniformly remained upon the wing.”

So far, then, the evidence was decidedly, not to say decisively, in the masculine ruby-throat's favor. But while I had no desire to make out a case against him, and in fact was beginning to feel half ashamed of my uncomplimentary surmises, I was still greatly impressed with what my own eyes had seen, or rather had not seen, and thought it worth while to push the inquiry a little further.

I wrote first to Mr. E. S. Hoar, in whose garden Mr. Brewster had made the observations cited in my previous article. He replied with great kindness, and upon the point in question

<sup>1</sup> See *Atlantic Monthly* for June, 1891.

said: "I watched the nest two or three times a day, from a time before the young were hatched till they departed; and *now you mention it*, it occurs to me that I never did see the male, but only the white-breasted female."

Next I sought the testimony of professional ornithologists; and here my worst suspicions seemed in a fair way to be confirmed, although the greater number of my correspondents were unhappily compelled to plead a want of knowledge. Dr. A. K. Fisher had found, as he believed, not less than twenty-five nests, and to the best of his recollection had never seen a male bird near one of them after it was completed. He had watched the female feeding her young, and, when the nests contained eggs, had waited for hours on purpose to secure the male, but always without result.

Mr. William Brewster wrote: "I have found, or seen *in situ*, twelve hummers' nests, all in Massachusetts. Of these I took nine, after watching each a short time, probably not more than an hour or two in any case. Of the remaining three, I visited one three or four times at various hours of the day, another only twice, the third but once. Two of the three contained young when found. The third was supposed to have young, also, but could not be examined without danger to its contents. I have never seen a male hummer anywhere near a nest, either before or after the eggs were laid, but, as you will gather from the above brief data, my experience has not been extensive; and in the old days, when most of my nests were found, the methods of close watching now in vogue were unthought of. In the light of the testimony to which you refer, I should conclude, with you, that the male hummer must occasionally assist in the care of the young, but I am very sure that this is not usually, if indeed often, the case."

Mr. H. W. Henshaw reported a

similar experience. He had found four nests of the ruby-throat, but had seen no male about any of them after nidification was begun. "I confess," he says, "that I had never thought of his absence as being other than accidental, and hence have never made any observations directly upon the point; so that my testimony is of comparatively little value. In at least one instance, when the female was building her nest, I remember to have seen the male fly with her and perch near by, while she was shaping the nest, and then fly off with her after more material. I don't like to believe that the little villain leaves the entire task of nidification to his better half (we may well call her better, if he does); but my memory is a blank so far as testimony affirmative of his devotion is concerned." Mr. Henshaw recalls an experience with a nest of the Rivoli humming-bird (*Eugenes fulgens*), in Arizona, — a nest which he spent two hours in getting. "I was particularly anxious to secure the male, but did not obtain a glimpse of him, and I remember thinking that it was very strange." He adds that Mr. C. W. Richmond has told him of finding a nest and taking the eggs without seeing the father bird, and sums up his own view of the matter thus: —

"Had any one asked me offhand, 'Does the male hummer help the female feed the young?' I am quite sure I should have answered, 'Of course he does.' As the case now stands, however, I am inclined to believe him a depraved wretch."

• Up to this point the testimony of my correspondents had been unanimous, but the unanimity was broken by Dr. C. Hart Merriam, who remembers that on one occasion his attention was called to a nest (it proved to contain a set of fresh eggs) by the flying of both its owners about his head; and by Mr. W. A. Jeffries, who in one case saw the father bird in the vicinity of a

nest occupied by young ones, although he did not see him feed or visit them. This nest, Mr. Jeffries says, was one of five which he has found. In the four other instances no male birds were observed, notwithstanding three of the nests were taken,—a tragedy which might be expected to bring the father of the family upon the scene, if he were anywhere within call.

In view of the foregoing evidence, it appears to me reasonably certain that the male ruby-throat, as a rule, takes no considerable part in the care of eggs and young. The testimony covers not less than fifty nests. Some of them were watched assiduously, nearly all were examined, and the greater part were actually taken; yet of the fifty or more male proprietors, only two were seen; and concerning these exceptions, it is to be noticed that in one case the eggs were just laid, and in the other, while the hungry nestlings must have kept the mother bird extremely busy, her mate was not observed to do anything in the way of lightening her labors.

As against this preponderance of negative testimony, and in corroboration of Mr. Lowell's and Mrs. Treat's circumstantial narratives, there remain to be mentioned the fact communicated to me by Mr. Hoar, that a townsman of his had at different times had two hummers' nests in his grounds, the male owners of which were constant in their attentions, and the following very interesting and surprising story received from Mr. C. C. Darwin, of Washington, through the kindness of Mr. Henshaw. Some years ago, as it appears, a pair of ruby-throats built a nest within a few feet of Mr. Darwin's window and a little below it, so that they could be watched without fear of disturbing them. He remembers perfectly that the male fed the female during the entire period of incubation, "pumping the food down her throat." All this time, so far as

could be discovered, the mother did not once leave the nest (in wonderful contrast with my bird of a year ago), and of course the father was never seen to take her place. Mr. Darwin cannot say that the male ever fed the young ones, but is positive that he was frequently about the nest after they were hatched. While they were still too young to fly, a gardener, in pruning the tree, sawed off the limb on which the nest was built. Mr. Darwin's mother rescued the little ones and fed them with sweetened water, and on her son's return at night the branch was fixed in place again, as best it could be, by means of wires. Meanwhile the old birds had disappeared, having given up their children for lost; and it was not until the third day that they came back, — by chance, perhaps, or out of affection for the spot. At once they resumed the care of their offspring, who by this time, it is safe to say, had become more or less surfeited with sugar and water, and gladly returned to a diet of spiders and other such spicy and hearty comestibles.

Mr. Henshaw, with an evident satisfaction which does him honor, remarks upon the foregoing story as proving that, whatever may be true of male hummers in general, there are at least some faithful Benedicts among them. For myself, indeed, as I have already said, I hold no brief against the ruby-throat, and, notwithstanding the seemingly unfavorable result of my investigation into his habits as a husband and father, it is by no means clear to me that we must call him hard names. Before doing that, we ought to know not only that he stays away from his wife and children, but *why* he stays away; whether he is really a shirk, or absents himself unselfishly and for their better protection, at the risk of being misunderstood and traduced. My object in this paper is to raise that question about him, rather than to blacken his character; in a word, to call atten-

tion to him, not as a reprobate, but as a mystery. To that end I return to the story of my own observations.

In last month's article I set forth somewhat in detail (if the adverb seem inappropriate, as I fear it will, I can only commend it to the reader's mercy) the closeness of our watch upon the nest there described. For more than a month it was under the eye of one or other of two men almost from morning to night. We did not once detect the presence of the father, and yet I shall never feel absolutely sure that he did not one day pay us a visit. I mention the circumstance for what it may be worth, and because, whatever its import, it was at least a lively spectacle. It occurred upon this wise: On the 19th of July, the day when the first of the young birds bade good-by to its cradle, I had gone into the house, leaving my fellow-observer in the orchard, with a charge to call me if anything noteworthy should happen. I was hardly seated before he whistled loudly, and I hastened out again. Another hummer had been there, he said, and the mother had been chasing him (or her) about in a frantic manner; and even while we were talking, the scene was reënacted. The stranger had returned, and the two birds were shooting hither and thither through the trees, the widow squeaking and spreading her tail at a prodigious rate. The new-comer did not alight (it could n't), and there was no determining its sex. It may have been the recreant husband and father, unable longer to deny himself a look at his bairns, — who knows? Or it may have been some bachelor or widower who had come a-wooing. One thing is certain, — husband, lover, or inquisitive stranger, he had no encouragement to come again.

As if to heighten the dramatic interest of our studies (I come now to the promised mystery), we had already had the singular good fortune to find a

male humming-bird who seemed to be stationed permanently in a tall ash-tree, standing by itself in a recent clearing, at a distance of a mile or more from our widow's orchard. Day after day, for at least a fortnight (from the 2d to the 15th of July), he remained there. One or both of us went almost daily to call upon him, and, as far as we could make out, he seldom absented himself from his post for five minutes together! What was he doing? At first, in spite of his sex, it was hard not to believe that his nest was in the tree; and to satisfy himself, my companion "shinned" it, schoolboy fashion, — a frightful piece of work, which put me out of breath even to look at it, — while I surveyed the branches from all sides through an opera-glass. All was without avail. Nothing was to be seen, and it was as good as certain, the branches being well separated and easily overlooked, that there was nothing there.

Four days later I set out alone, to try my luck with the riddle. As I entered the clearing, the hummer was seen at his post, and my suspicions fastened upon a small wild apple-tree, perhaps twenty rods distant. I went to examine it, and presently the bird followed me. He perched in its top, but seemed not to be jealous of my proximity, and soon returned to his customary position; but when I came back to the apple-tree, after a visit to a clump of oaks at the top of the hill, he again came over. I could find no sign of a nest, however, nor did the female show herself, as she pretty confidently might have been expected to do had her nest been near by. After this I went to the edge of the wood, where I could keep an eye upon both trees without being myself conspicuous. The sentinel spent most of his time in the ash, visiting the apple-tree but once, and then for a few minutes only. I stayed an hour and a half, and came away no wiser than before. The nest,

if nest there was, must be elsewhere, I believed. But where? And what was the object of the male's watch?

My curiosity was fully roused. I had never seen or heard of such conduct on the part of any bird, and the next forenoon I spent another hour and a half in the clearing. The hummer was at his post, as he always was. We had never to wait for him. Soon after my arrival he flew to the apple-tree, the action seeming to have no connection with my presence. Presently he went back to the ash, and drove out of it two intruding birds. A moment later two humming-birds were there, and in another moment they flew away in a direction opposite to the apple-tree. Here, then, was a real clue. The birds were probably our sentinel and his mate. I made after them with all speed, pausing under such scattered trees as had been left standing in that quarter. Nothing was to be found, and on my return there sat the male, provokingly, at the top of the apple-tree, whence he soon returned to the ash. A warbler entered the tree, and after a while ventured upon the branch where the hummer was sitting. Instead of driving her away he took wing himself, and paid another visit to the apple-tree, — a visit of perhaps five minutes, — at the end of which he went back to the ash. Then two kingbirds happened to alight in the apple-tree. At once the hummer came dashing over and ordered them off, and in his excitement dropped for a moment into the leafy top of a birch sapling, — a most unnatural proceeding, — after which he resumed his station in the ash. What could I make of all this? Apparently he claimed the ownership of both trees, and yet his nest was in neither! He sat motionless for five minutes at a time upon certain dead twigs of the ash, precisely as our female was accustomed to sit in her apple-tree. For at least seven days he had been thus occupied. Where was

his mate? On the edge of the wood, perhaps. But, if so, why did I hear nothing from her, as I passed up and down? Again my hour and a half had been spent to no purpose.

Not yet discouraged, I returned the next morning. For the three quarters of an hour that I remained, the hummer was not once out of the ash-tree for five minutes. I am not sure that he left it for five minutes altogether. As usual, he perched almost without exception on one or other of two dead limbs, while a similar branch, on the opposite side of the trunk, he was never seen to touch. A Maryland yellow-throat alighted on one of his two branches and began to sing, but had repeated his strain only three or four times before the hummer, who had been absent for the moment, darted upon him and put him to flight. A little afterward, a red-eyed vireo alighted on his other favorite perch, and he showed no resentment. As I have said, a warbler had sat on the same branch which the yellow-throat now invaded, and the hummer not only did not offer to molest him, but flew away himself. These inconsistencies made it hard to draw any inference from his behavior. During my whole stay he did not once go to the apple-tree, although, for want of anything better to do, I again scrutinized its branches. This time I *was* discouraged, and gave over the search. His secret, whatever it might be, was "too dear for my possessing." But my fellow-observer kept up his visits, as I have said, and the hummer remained faithful to his task as late as July 15, at least.

Some reader may be prompted to ask, as one of my correspondents asked at the time, whether the mysterious sentry may not have been the mate of our home bird. I see no ground for such a suspicion. The two places were at least a mile apart, as I have already mentioned, and woods and hills, to say

nothing of the village, lay between. If he was our bird's mate, his choice of a picket station was indeed an enigma. He might almost as well have been on Mount Washington. Nor can I believe that he had any connection with a nest which I found two months afterward in a pitch-pine grove within a quarter of a mile, more or less, of his clearing. It was undoubtedly a nest of that season, and might have been his for aught I know, so far as the mere fact of distance was concerned; but here again an intervening wood must have cut off all visual communication. If his mate and nest were not within view from his ash-tree perch, what could be the meaning of his conduct? Without some specific constraining motive, no bird in his normal condition was likely to stay in one tree hour after hour, day after day, and week after week, so that one could never come in sight of it without see-

ing him. But even if his nest was in the immediate neighborhood, the closeness and persistency of his lookout are still, to my mind, an absolute mystery. Our female bird, whether she had eggs or offspring, made nothing of absenting herself by the half hour; but this male hardly gave himself time to eat his necessary food; indeed, I often wondered how he kept himself alive. Is such a course of action habitual with male hummers? If so, had our seemingly widowed or deserted mother a husband, who somewhere, unseen by us, was standing sentry after the same heroic, self-denying fashion? These and all similar questions I must leave to more fortunate observers, or postpone to a future summer. Meantime, my judgment as to the male ruby-throat's character remains in suspense. It is not plain to me whether we are to call him the worst or the best of husbands.

*Bradford Torrey.*

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“WHEN WITH THY LIFE THOU DIDST ENCOMPASS MINE.”

WHEN with thy life thou didst encompass mine,  
 And I beheld, as from an infinite height,  
 Thy love stretch pure and beautiful as light,  
 Through utmost joy I hardly could divine  
 Whether my love of thee it was, or thine,  
 Which so my heart astonished with its might.  
 But now at length familiar with the sight,  
 So I can bear to look where planets shine,  
 Ever more deep the wonder grows to be  
 That thou shouldst love me; while my love of thee  
 Does of my being seem a second part;  
 Still often now as from a dream I start,  
 To think that thou, even thou, — thou lovest me,  
 I being what I am, thou what thou art.

*Philip Bourke Marston.*



Syracuse, N. Y.  
PAT. JAN. 21. 1958



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