

Our winter birds.

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like wine held up to light. When the pod bursts, and the silver-winged seed first is set partly free, it instantly coils and twists around the stem, as if loath to depart. The lower half of the plant thus becomes tangled and draped with this fine curling silver plumage, rising above which stands the superb columnar red stem set with the narrow red pods. There are many wild clearings where this fire-weed grows solid by the acre; and on a breezy day in September every wind that sweeps across snatches whole fields of these silver plumes, and whirls them aloft, to separate and float, and drift as they may.

We saw on this day, in many a sky "offing," fleets of them, which had almost a preternatural look, as of shoals

of glittering pearl flies, or slow-floating snow, where no snow could be. At sunset, great masses of crimson and gold clouds hovered above the heights where we had been in the morning. Long after these had all faded into gray, there lingered at the highest peak, as if clinging to it, one long narrow thread of crimson. It seemed to float like a banner; and, recalling the weird valley and the weird waters, lying high, dark, and lonely at the foot of this peak, and the tone of voice in which the doctor's wife had asked, "What more could I want?" it seemed natural enough that a cloud should linger and float there, unseen and unknown of the strange recluses, but keeping "colors flying" for them till dark.

H. H.

JAN 23 1882

### OUR WINTER BIRDS.

AFTER several years' careful observation in Southern New Jersey, I find that winter gives us a phase in the life and character of birds quite unlike that displayed in summer by the same species, yet none the less interesting.

The permanent residents of this latitude which come about our house and grounds are the song sparrow, field sparrow, English sparrow, yellow-bird, pine linnet, bluebird, robin, meadow lark, quail, bluejay, crow, and several species of hawks and owls. The Northern birds which make this section their winter home are the white-throated sparrow, fox sparrow, tree sparrow, chickadee, and the dark slate-colored sparrow, or snow-bird, as it is more usually called. There are also several species restricted to the woods, with which I am unfamiliar.

Most of these birds will become quite tame with a little care on our part, and will soon come to look to us for their

daily food. Especially if the ground is covered with snow, they will learn to become clamorous for their food, even alighting on the window-sills and striking the glass, apparently to attract attention to their wants. In summer the same species are much more shy, so winter gives us a better opportunity to study the habits and dispositions of the various birds which remain with us.

With most species family ties are not broken in winter. Bluebirds, perhaps more so than most of our birds, maintain a strict family relation during the winter, — even while assembling in large flocks. Not only do the partners remain true to each other during their lives, but they continue their care over the young throughout the first fall and winter.

When a pair of bluebirds succeed in rearing three broods in a season, in the autumn these broods unite and stay with the parents, making a little flock of



about fourteen. All the autumn through they keep together, feeding from the same bushes, poke, ampelopsis, and other wild berries, and upon such stray insects as they may find.

The first cold days of December send them to the cedar swamps, where great numbers congregate. Here, too, large flocks of robins keep them company. But each mild day brings the bluebirds from their retreat back to their forgotten home. And there is nothing more fascinating in bird life than to see the frolics of the young birds and the grave demeanor of the parents. The young visit the various houses in which they were reared, sometimes two or three entering at the same time, and all the while keeping up their low sweet twittering, as if conversing.

But in the spring all is changed. The parents tell the young in a very peremptory manner that they must now seek new homes. Sometimes the young are quite persistent about remaining, when the parents at last seem to become exasperated, and drive them fiercely from the premises.

During the summer of 1880, I was particularly interested in a pair of bluebirds which had the misfortune to rear but one brood of three during the season. The young were hatched in a little house fastened to the railing of an upper piazza. They became quite tame, and remained with us until the first week in December. After this I saw them no more until the first day of January, 1881, when, to my surprise, the entire family came to my study window, — a bay window, fronting south, — and perched upon the sill. The mercury stood fifteen degrees below zero on this morning, an unusual temperature for our latitude.

I have found that an intensely cold day will drive both robins and bluebirds from their retreat in the cedars to our homes, as if they hoped for better protection against the cold.

Our little family had accompanied a sorry-looking flock of forty or fifty bluebirds, with ruffled feathers, which had halted in the vineyard near the house on this bitter morning.

By ten o'clock the sun shone brightly against the window glass, and the warm fire within helped to make the windowsill comfortable; and here all five of the birds perched, thus getting the full force of the sun's rays. After basking awhile in the sun, their feathers smoothed down, and they seemed quite bright and happy, and toward noon disappeared with the flock. Several times, on the coldest days, during this severe winter, this little family came to my window in the same manner.

I could mention several other instances which have come under my observation, in proof that the parent bluebirds, with their broods of the previous season, are a united family; but one more will suffice.

The past summer, 1881, a pair of bluebirds occupied a box placed on a projecting part of the cornice, in the rear of the house. After the first brood left the box, the parents soon commenced to tear out the old nest, preparatory for a second family in the same box. The second nest is usually built in some other place, in the vicinity of the first, and here was no lack of empty boxes for them to choose from; but for some reason, known only to themselves, they were determined to occupy the house of their first choice, notwithstanding the bad condition in which it was left.

Seeing their determination, we had the box emptied of its contents, and, as might be expected, found it swarming with vermin. We sprinkled it thoroughly with insect powder, and the birds commenced at once to build.

When the second brood were hatched the English sparrows annoyed the parent bluebirds exceedingly by going to the box and looking in, and one of the sparrows even had the audacity to attempt



to adopt and feed the young bluebirds. What could the parents do? They could not stay and watch the sparrows continuously, for the lusty young were clamorous for food. So these wise birds called together the elder brood, — elder brothers and sisters, whom I had not seen for weeks, — who were by this time as large as the parents, but readily distinguished from them by their curiously mottled breasts, which they wear the first summer. The parents instructed these young ones to keep guard over the house while they were away in search of food, which they did for several days. The house was scarcely left a moment. One or more of the family were almost constantly present, and would dart at the sparrows whenever they made an attempt to come near, until the young left the box; and now, at this present writing, — October, — this happy family are united; both broods, with the parents, eating poke-berries from a large bush which I have allowed to remain expressly for them.

When the ground is covered with snow, the various species of our native sparrows, so full of life and jollity, will doubly repay any lover of birds for the care bestowed upon them.

Last winter I kept a space of ground beneath my study window free from snow, where I scattered coarse Indian meal and millet seed, and this ground soon became a mimic stage for these bright actors. The names of the most noted were *Junco hyemalis*, *Zonotrichia albicollis*, *Spizella monticola*, and *Melospiza melodia*. The names of these actors are known throughout the civilized world. All nations recognize the family name, and often the specific name gives a clew to the character; as *hyemalis*, our winter or snow bird; *monticola*, a dweller in the mountains, where this species spends its summers and rears its young; *melodia*, the sweet songster, or song sparrow.

*Junco hyemalis* is excellent in dra-

matic performance. Two of these actors meet face to face on the stage, in their dark glossy coats, and each tries to make the other quail before his fixed gaze. Nearer and nearer they come, constantly chattering and bowing, until within a few inches of each other, when they elevate their heads and bodies to a perfectly upright position, and chatter vehemently with wide open mouths. Sometimes one of the actors leaves the stage at this juncture, and the other remains; but generally they both withdraw and have a trial of strength in the air.

And now *Zonotrichia albicollis* comes forward in another act. He is the most gorgeously attired and the largest actor in the drama. The crown of his head is black, bordered with white, and his full muffled throat is pure white, sharply contrasting with the dark ash of his breast. The back of his coat is striped with black, chestnut, and fulvous white. He excels *Junco* in tragi-comic performance. He opens the act with a prolonged musical note, and flattens himself in front of a brother actor, and spreads his tail fan-shaped. Faster and faster come the notes from the two actors, until they are so blended that we can scarcely distinguish one from the other. The birds approach each other squatted to the ground. Their feet have disappeared. When the climax is reached, like *Junco*, they leave the stage in a twinkling.

Usually the actors are of the same species, but occasionally *Junco* and *Zonotrichia* enliven the drama, — each acting his part with his own individual characteristics. *Junco* chatters and bows to *Zonotrichia*, who cowers apparently at his feet, meanwhile entertaining his audience with his long musical notes. And now, while *Junco* is straightened to his utmost height, hurling his rapid invectives, *Zonotrichia* leaps up like a flash, and strikes him in the breast, with sufficient force to hurl him across the stage.



But Junco is not always taken by surprise and kicked from the stage in this inglorious fashion. Although the smaller bird, he is occasionally victorious.

I would not have it understood that these small actors are entirely given to theatricals; there are times when they are quiet and orderly, and seem to be enjoying each other's society.

My favorite among them all is *Spizella monticola*. He comes to us toward the end of October, and remains until April. The crown of his head is a bright chestnut, and upon his shoulders are chestnut epaulets; his breast is a soft ashy color with a dark blotch in the centre; the back of his coat is streaked with black, chestnut, and flaxen, and two conspicuous white cross-bars are on his wings. He is the handsomest member of the genus, and considerably larger than the little chipping sparrow (*Spizella socialis*), that is always about our doors in summer, but goes South to winter.

Although *Spizella monticola* flock together in considerable numbers, yet they keep the family relation as strictly as the bluebirds, generally in groups of four or six, which indicates that the parents rear but one brood in a season, or, if more, each brood keeps by itself. The birds comprising these groups do not quarrel, but are so closely attached that one cannot fly away without the others following. The actors in the quarrels and trials of strength are made up of birds from different groups, — strangers trying for the championship. This species does not go through with many preliminaries before the final act. They commence chattering, and clinch at once. Up, up, they go, high in the air, striking, railing at each other as they ascend, until one is victorious.

The English sparrow merits notice, although I must confess he is not a favorite with me. He is not so graceful or beautiful as our indigenous species;

still I do not wish to be unjust toward him. I have uniformly found him to be the least quarrelsome of any bird that comes about the grounds. I have never seen him aggressive toward our own species, even when mixing thickly with them. He usually prefers to remain about the barn and stable, where an abundance of food is scattered for the fowls and pigeons, but occasionally quite a flock comes and mingles with our native species beneath my window, and here I can watch them at my leisure. Our indigenous birds know better than to attack him, for he is stronger and more heavily built than they are.

Only once since my observations commenced have I seen anything like a quarrel between the English sparrow and our native species, and in this instance the aggressor was the champion Junco, who was ruler over his own tribe, and had also whipped many white-throats and song sparrows.

A little group of English sparrows was quietly feeding beneath the window. Junco struts around them, and chatters; but they pay no attention, not even deigning to look at him. Failing in his attempts to elicit any notice, he flits to the window-sill, and looks down upon them. Finally he seems to single out one which has wandered a little apart from the rest, and in a twinkling he strikes him broadside, throwing him off his feet, and then flies several yards away. The English sparrow is on his feet in an instant, slowly turning his head all around in evident amazement, but is soon eating again. Junco does not renew the attack, but mingles with his kind, picking up seeds. The English sparrow, however, has his eye upon him, and now Junco has to keep at a safe distance.

The summer yellow-bird also mixes freely with the various sparrows. This charming little creature looks so different in his plain gray winter coat, which he puts on in September and wears



until April, that it is with difficulty we recognize him, so complete is the transformation. The brilliant yellow and black have disappeared, and only faint tracings of greenish-yellow about the head and throat remain. But he is apparently as happy in his sombre suit, picking up millet, as when more brilliantly attired, and rollicking amid the rounded globes of the dandelion, scattering the airy seeds, and capturing them as they start on their winged course.

Our little gymnast, the titmouse, or black-capped chickadee, must not be forgotten. He is not regarded as migratory, and yet he comes to us each winter, and seems to go northward in the spring. He is the most fearless bird of my acquaintance, frequently eating from my hand, and is almost omnivorous, taking anything that comes in his way, from a bone that we hang on a tree for his tiny lordship to pick, down to a plate of preserved berries which we have placed on the doorstep for the bluebirds. But he is quite exclusive in his society, and does not mingle freely with the other winter birds. The cold Northern snow-storms seem only to increase his jollity; now here, now there, clinging to a bough, head downward, chanting his chick-a-dee-dee. Emerson pictures him to the life in the following lines:—

“When piped a tiny voice hard by,  
Gay and polite, a cheerful cry,  
*Chic-chicadee!* saucy note  
Out of sound heart and merry throat,  
As if it said, Good-day, good sir!  
Fine afternoon, old passenger!  
Happy to meet you in these places,  
Where January brings few faces.

This poet, though he live apart,  
Moved by his hospitable heart,  
Sped, when I passed his sylvan fort,  
To do the honors of his court,  
As fits a feathered lord of land;  
Flew near, with soft wing grazed my hand,

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Hopped on the bough, then, darting low,  
Prints his small impress in the snow,  
Shows feats of his gymnastic play,  
Head downward, clinging to the spray.”

When the smaller birds have been driven from the fields and woodlands to our dwellings by the snow, the birds of prey are forced to follow them; so there is scarcely a day but we see various species of hawk or the day owl (*Surnia Hudsonica*) watching their opportunity for a meal. We vainly try to frighten them away; but hunger knows no law, and they are often successful in snatching a bird within a few feet of us.

This owl, *S. Hudsonica*, is less timid and much more persistent than the hawk in following his prey. Often, when I think I have frightened him from the neighborhood, he will noiselessly slip out of an evergreen, and with the coolest audacity take a sparrow in my near vicinity.

Sometimes one drops down from the roof of the house, among the feeding birds beneath my window, and, taking one of these beautiful creatures in his claws, proceeds to the nearest post, and crushes its life out. It is a mercy to my little favorite to let the owl alone after he has secured his prey, for he kills it much more quickly than when disturbed.

At sight of this apparent cruelty in nature comes the impulse to shoot these raptorial birds. But when we think of that other biped, whom it is not lawful to shoot, who often hunts and kills the beautiful denizens of our fields and woodlands, from mere wantonness and sport of the chase, the hawk, or owl, which takes a bird only to appease his hunger, towers above him in moral rectitude. So our gun leans idly against the wall.

*Mary Treat.*

## BEFORE THE CURFEW.

1829-1882.

NOT bed-time yet! The night-winds blow,  
 The stars are out, — full well we know  
     The nurse is on the stair,  
 With hand of ice and cheek of snow,  
 And frozen lips that whisper low,  
 “Come, children, it is time to go  
     My peaceful couch to share.”

No years a wakeful heart can tire;  
 Not bed-time yet! Come, stir the fire  
     And warm your dear old hands;  
 Kind mother earth we love so well  
 Has pleasant stories yet to tell  
 Before we hear the curfew bell;  
     Still glow the burning brands.

Not bed-time yet! We long to know  
 What wonders time has yet to show,  
     What unborn years shall bring;  
 What ship the Arctic pole shall reach,  
 What lessons Science waits to teach,  
 What sermons there are left to preach,  
     What poems yet to sing.

What next? we ask; and is it true  
 The sunshine falls on nothing new,  
     As Israel's king declared?  
 Was ocean ploughed with harnessed fire?  
 Were nations coupled with a wire?  
 Did Tarshish telegraph to Tyre?  
     How Hiram would have stared!

And what if Sheba's curious queen,  
 Who came to see, — and to be seen, —  
     Or something new to seek,  
 And swooned, as ladies sometimes do,  
 At sights that thrilled her through and through,  
 Had heard, as she was coming to,  
     A locomotive's shriek,

And seen a rushing railway train  
 As she looked out along the plain  
     From David's lofty tower, —  
 A mile of smoke that blots the sky



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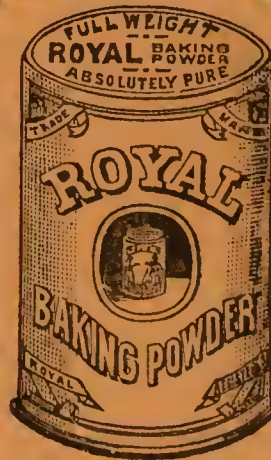
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