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1901

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CONCORD.

1901
June 16

At 9 A. M. started down river in the open canoe. Landed at Birch Island and walked to the Farm. To my great surprise, a Solitary Vireo was singing in the woods directly behind the barn. Where can he have come from at this late season? He sang steadily during the hour or more that I was within hearing and acted as if he were quite settled in this little isolated grove. Indeed when I entered it to look for him he came directly to me, hopping about in an oak within a few yards of me, scolding me with the chattering cry which is common to both solitarius and flavifrons, and uttering also some low, exquisitely liquid notes. Presently he resumed singing again. He was a fine old bird with deep bluish head.

The female Hummer was sitting quietly on her nest when I passed under it at 10 A. M.

The Bats are roosting in the shed again. I found a bunch of seven in the inner chamber and another of six in the outer one at the head of the stairs. They hang so closely clustered together that it is difficult to count them. They took absolutely no notice of me when I approached so near that my face was literally within six inches of them. Nor was there the slightest movement among them save that of the pulsations caused by their breathing. The bunch of seven seemed to be made up of two old ones and five young; at least, two were fully twice as large as the other five. The floor beneath them was covered with their dung which resembled that of rats.

In the dense pine woods to the northward of Pulpit Rock I heard a Blackburnian Warbler singing and saw two Hairy Woodpeckers. The latter seemed to be a pair of old birds and they acted as if they had young near by, for they flew excitedly around me, uttering the tchick call, the Kingfisher-like rattle, and a single abrupt staccato note almost exactly like that given by the Rose-breasted Grosbeak when it is anxious for the safety of its young. There are a number of large, dead white pines in these woods and the male Hairy Was pecking at the trunk of one when I first saw him.

In the afternoon I walked to Davis's Hill, seeing nothing there of any interest.

At evening I crossed the Barrett Meadow and strolled slowly through the oak and chestnut woods beyond. Twilight was falling and Veeries and Oven-birds were singing on every side. I started several large birds from the tops of the trees, but the light was so poor and the foliage so dense that I could not make out what they were, at first. Finally one returned and alighted directly over me, when I saw that it was a Crow. It hopped from branch to branch until it found a sheltered place under some dense leaves where it settled itself evidently for the night. I did not know before that Crows ever roosted in deciduous trees. There must have been at least half-a-dozen in these woods.

For a week or more we have heard Swifts rumbling at intervals in the cabin chimney. This morning I sent

Gilbert up to look down into it, but he reported that there was nothing there. Shortly afterwards I saw a pair of Swifts try to enter it repeatedly but there was a fire at the time and the smoke evidently repelled them. We put out the fire and they soon entered. By holding a small mirror in the fireplace, I found that I could easily see the whole interior of the chimney. The Swifts were clinging to one of its walls, one bird directly above the other. They remained there quietly through most of the forenoon, Gilbert tells me. I have also heard them this evening at short intervals between 8 and 9 o'clock, although the night is very dark. They have made the rumbling sound very many times and also have twittered occasionally.

I was mistaken about the Red-wings. As I passed around Holden's meadow this morning in the canoe, I saw at least a dozen birds. This is fully up to the usual number for this particular stretch of river. I saw one female come flying out over the water, bearing the excrement sack of her young in her bill. There were also several Grackles in these thickets.

The Bittern near Hobbs's Camp is also all right for he was pumping lustily in the usual place this morning.

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1901
June 23

Nests robbed
by Jays

I doubt if a single young bird of any kind has been reared on Ball's Hill this season. The Jays take all the eggs as soon as the sets are completed. Two of them made a raid through the woods immediately behind the cabins this morning, uttering a series of low hoc-hoc-hocs as they sailed from tree to tree or hopped through the branches, peering under the clusters of leaves. They were closely followed by a mob of indignant and excited little birds -- Redstarts, Red-eyed Vireos, Yellow Warblers, etc. All the nests that we have found have lost their eggs soon after they were laid. Among them have been two nests of the Redstart, three of the Robin and one of the Red-eyed Vireo.

A pair of Cat-birds who settled near the cabin were also despoiled of their eggs and went away for a week or more, but they have just returned. I have no doubt that the Jays are responsible for all this egg robbing. It was interesting to watch the smaller birds attack them this morning. They did not dare put themselves within reach of the Jays when they were in the trees, but they pursued them closely whenever they took wing and on overtaking them, which they did easily enough, pecked their heads viciously, evidently causing them much annoyance.

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July 10

I doubt if any of the birds which have nested on Ball's Hill this season (excepting, possibly, the Oven-birds whose nest, on the summit of the hill, had young nearly

Nests
robbed
by Jays

half-grown on June 15) have succeeded in rearing young. It is really pathetic to see the childless pairs of Tanagers, Grosbeaks, Red-eyes, Chestnut-sided Warblers, Cat-birds, etc. flitting listlessly about the cabin, unaccompanied by any progeny. Evidently they have become tired of supplying the Blue Jays with fresh eggs, at least for this summer. The Robins have left the Hill in disgust and I think the Wood Pewees have also departed. The Jays still come into the oaks above the cabin nearly every morning and I think that there must be a Red-eye's nest which they have not yet found and for which they are persistently seeking, for their presence invokes excited protests from one pair of the Vireos. All the other small birds now regard them with apparent indifference.

1901
July 22

Notes of
young
Blue Jays

Shortly after sunrise this morning a family of Blue Jays consisting of four or five young with at least one of their parents came into the oaks near the cabin. The young, as they followed their mother from tree to tree, kept up a succession of squealing cries very like those of a well-grown pig. They were fully grown and in flight and actions were undistinguishable from the old bird. The latter screamed once or twice. I did not see any of them obtain any kind of food.

CONCORD.

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July 14

The weather, although not oppressive, was warmer than it has been for several days, and the birds seemed to feel the change. At least they sang less often and with less vigor. I heard only the usual species. Only two [Veeries] Wilson's Thrushes and one Robin were singing at evening (the only this number of individuals of each species). I heard two Oven-birds, one of which sang on wing. At about 9 A. M. five Black Ducks dropped into the marsh nearly opposite the cabin and almost exactly where the flock of six alighted yesterday. No doubt it was the same flock but what has become of the sixth bird?

At evening the brood of young Screech Owls again appeared close about the cabins.

Herbert Holden, whom I saw this morning, tells me that a Long-billed Marsh Wren has a nest nearly completed on the river bank at the Holt. He also says that a Ring-necked Pheasant has been seen twice lately in West Acton.

During the past week the Bull Frogs have made the marshes resound every night with their heavy, sonorous bass voices. The Green Frogs have also tunged ceaselessly and the tiresome, irritating summer squawk of the Garden Toads has been at times almost unbearable. It is perhaps the only natural sound of our country meadows that is positively discordant as well as out-of-keeping with the surroundings.

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Chaetura pelagica [Chimney Swift]. On June 8th we heard a Swift in the chimney of the old cabin. On the 16th, 23rd, 29th and 30th of this month, two birds spent at least a portion of the day as well as the entire night in this chimney. No doubt they were there during the intervening days, also, but I was either at Lancaster or, if at the cabin, did not have an opportunity to observe them closely.

On the morning of July 1st, I examined the chimney carefully. It is about 16 feet in height with an almost perfectly straight 14 inch flue, lined rather smoothly with troweled mortar. From the fireplace in the lower cabin, which opens directly into it, one can see every part of the interior. The Swifts were clinging side by side to the middle of the face of the north wall, but there was not the slightest trace of a nest to be seen anywhere.

I spent the following week at Lancaster, returning to Ball's Hill on July 8. The Swifts had built a nest during the interim, attaching it to nearly the same spot where they were clinging on the 1st. Apparently the nest was still unfinished for we could see through it in many places. Nor did they do anything to amount to anything in the way of adding to the structure during the next seven days.

On the 8th, 9th, 10th, 11th and 12th, one or both of them spent more or less time in the chimney by day, and on several of these days they were there together, through the greater part of the day, sitting side by side in the nest, apparently doing nothing but rest and preen their feathers. During most of this period the weather was cool

7/4/51

and much of the time cloudy. On [the] 13th and 14th, clear, hot days, the Swifts left the chimney soon after daybreak and did not once return to it until nearly dark. On the evening of the 13th, one of them came in at 7.40, the other at 7.50; on that of the 14th they returned practically together at 7.50.

Their manner of entering and leaving the chimney varied. Sometimes the bird would descend to the nest or ascend from it by one continuous flight, during which it kept its body nearly horizontal and retarded the downward or accomplished the upward movement by rapidly beating its fully extended wings, the tips of which nearly touched the opposite sides of the narrow flue. Not infrequently, however, it would first alight just inside the mouth of the chimney and, after clinging there for a moment, begin descending by a succession of short flights while the ascent was often performed in the same manner. During some of the short flights the bird used not only its wings but its feet, running, as it were, either up or down the vertical surface, within foot-reach of which it maintained its body by constantly vibrating its wings.

Every such movement of the wings, whether ^{of} long or short continuance, was accompanied by the hollow (or rather muffled) rumbling sound which one always hears so frequently in summer in chimneys where Swifts are breeding. From some observations which I made when we were passing the summer of 1892 in the Tolman cottage in Concord, I concluded

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that this sound was sometimes produced intentionally rather than incidentally; or, to be more precise, that the birds sometimes extended and beat their wings for the express purpose of making the sound. I now doubt the accuracy of those earlier observations, for during the past week I have never seen the birds flutter their wings sufficiently to produce the rumbling without at the same time changing their positions or at least their foothold.

The bird which I took to be the female usually went directly or very quickly to the nest and alighted on its outer rim where she would sometimes sit for hours, with her bill nearly touching the walls of the chimney. The tips of her folded wings extended out behind, half way across the flue looking, when viewed from below, like two slender, curved, converging lines drawn on the field of bright light that entered the chimney from above. Her mate spent much of his idle time clinging to the chimney just above the nest, but sometimes during the day, and invariably at the near approach of night, he would crowd himself into the nest by his partner's side, taking exactly the same position which she habitually assumed. Long after dark, in fact usually up to the time when we went to bed, we heard the birds fluttering their wings or calling to one another at frequent intervals. Their vocal notes were the same as those which they use when flying about by day but their twittering, when heard at night in this chimney, seemed to me infinitely more tender and musical

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than it ever is by day. I must confess that I could not understand why they made the rumbling sound so much after they had settled themselves in the nest, since it is not likely that they were moving about the chimney in the darkness, but I finally concluded that one or the other was every now and then crowded off the nest and forced to use its wings, either to maintain or regain its position. They voided their excrement frequently at night. It was profuse in quantity and of the color and consistency of cream.

On the morning of the 9th, I saw one of the birds, presumably the female, work for several minutes on the nest. Clinging to its outer edge with her neck elongated to a surprising length, she rubbed her half-opened bill over ~~the~~ the ends and surfaces of the twigs, evidently coating them with her varnish which I could distinctly see glistening in the rather strong light that entered the chimney from above. This was the only occasion during the week when either Gilbert or I saw her do anything to the nest. Certainly no sticks were added to it during our stay, for the meshes of the slight framework were as open and numerous when we left the cabin on the morning of the 15th as when we reached it on the forenoon of the 8th.

Both Swifts when in the chimney spent much of their time preening their feathers in the manner of other birds. They also frequently used one foot to scratch their heads while the other was employed to retain their hold on the nest or the wall of the chimney. They

frequently twitched their folded wings, sometimes together but oftener alternately. Invariably and at all times when they were in the chimney they both kept their tails spread to the fullest possible extent. In clinging to the walls of the chimney, they used their tails as supports after the manner of Creepers or Woodpeckers, but when they perched on the edge of the nest their tails hung loosely down beneath their folded wings.

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CONCORD.

1901
October 4

When I arose this morning, a Pied-billed Grebe was swimming near the middle of the river opposite the cabin. Through the rose-tinted mist that was curling up from the calm water, it looked as large as a Black Duck. I launched a canoe and started out when the bird at once sank until only the top of its head was visible and then disappeared altogether, coming up for a moment at the edge of the reeds.

I spent most of the day in Pine Park. Small birds were less numerous there than yesterday. I saw a Palm Warbler which I could not fully identify but which I think was true palmarum, a Junco, several White-throats, a few Black-polls and ^{*Lulus*} Yellow-rumps, a Cat Bird and a Ruby-crowned Kinglet. There was a Hairy Woodpecker on the hillside behind the cabin just after breakfast. Jays were screaming in the woods all day long. At about 5 P. M. a flock of 8 Black Ducks passed over high in air towards the south-west. I took them to be migrating birds.

A little before sunset I paddled up river to Beaver Dam Lagoon to investigate the Blackbird roost. A good many Rusty Blackbirds had already arrived and others, as well as Cowbirds, were coming almost continuously from every direction (but chiefly from the west) in small flocks or singly. Both species are roosting together in the button bushes and low, dense willows near the head of the lagoon. Into these they pitched headlong, disappearing at once

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among the dense foliage. They seemed to have no fear or suspicion but sought their roosts without hesitation or loss of time. A few restless birds, however, flitted from thicket to thicket before they finally settled for the night. I counted upward of 175 of which about one half were Rusties and all the others apparently Cow-birds. They made a deafening clamor, keeping it up until nearly dark.

The Crow Blackbirds arrived just after sunset in three flocks which followed one another in quick succession. The first flock contained 19 birds, the second about 30, the third fully 75. They all alighted together in the dense white maples on the bank of the river. For several minutes they remained perched on the tops of the upright shoots where they clustered as thick as bees. They they began descending into the foliage and seeking their roosts. This took a long time -- fully twenty minutes. I paddled slowly past the trees and then floated back past them. Although the evening was perfectly calm, the foliage of the maples was constantly agitated by the movements of the restless birds. I could see many of them among the leaves against the bright light in the western sky. They were perched, as a rule, about 15 feet from the ground and 5 or 6 feet below the dome of foliage that covered the tops and ends of the branches. A few birds which were still outside the mass of foliage took alarm at my approach and flew to other trees but they soon returned. Every bird in the flock apparently was uttering its creaking notes.

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There was such an uproar that I felt at one time as if I must stop my ears. But before darkness fell, the Grackles as well as the Rusty Blackbirds and Cow-birds had become wholly silent.

Just as the sun was setting, a Great Horned Owl began hooting near at hand apparently in the woods on Holden's Hill. A Bittern passed high overhead and then descended on a long incline to the middle of the Great Meadow. A perfect swarm of Titlarks (fully 75) circled about, looking for a place to alight. As twilight gathered, ^{Small} Carolina Rails began calling and plashing among the reeds all around the lagoon. I heard at least 5 different birds and probably twice that number. They made all sorts of interesting sounds, the commonest a cup or kep, very variable in tone, at times exceedingly frog-like in quality, yet not really like the note of any of our New England frogs. They also gave the whinney frequently and occasionally the er-a, but the latter note lacked the sweet, plaintive quality it has in spring and was, indeed, rather harsh and displeasing.

Raymond Emerson tells me that about ten days ago he saw two flocks of Black Ducks and a flock of fully 50 very small ducks which he took to be Teal and which were flying high over Flint's Bridge.

CONCORD.

1901
October 11

There was a dense fog this morning. It had not begun to lift at 8 A. M. when I started down river in the open canoe, but when I reached Pad Island I could make out the line of woods that bordered the meadow all the way from Ball's Hill to Davis's Hill. The trees looked immensely tall and the shore wholly unfamiliar. The maples appeared like pillars of flame obscured by smoke. A Dipper was floating on the glassy water and Jays were screaming in the distance.

As I passed Davis's Hill, I saw four or five small birds in the top of a tall birch, hopping and flitting about among the terminal twigs. They acted so very like Warblers that I was surprised, on approaching nearer, to find that they were all White-throated Sparrows. The birches are infested with immense numbers of small greenish insects ("mealy bugs", Mrs. John Thayer tells me Charles Sargent calls them) and the Sparrows were apparently eating them. I get simply covered with them every time I pass through a thicket of birches for they shake down in showers whenever the stems are jolted.

I have never before seen Swamp Sparrows so numerous along Concord River as they were this morning. I could hear them chirping in the grass in every direction and I saw a dozen or more flying from place to place or perched on the taller reeds.

At the Farm, where I spent the day, there were
 [Yellow-rumps and a few Black-polls flitting about among the
 birches and oaks just behind the barn. Gilbert saw three
 Flickers in the orchard and I a Robin. At about 11 A. M.
 I heard a Solitary Vireo in full song apparently in an
 apple orchard not far from Mr. Lawrence's barn. Early in
 the afternoon a Quail gave the "scatter call" a few times
 somewhere in the distance to the westward of the house.]

Squirrels of all three species simply swarmed in
 the hickory grove. It was by no means unusual to see four
 or five at once. The Chipmunks outnumbered the other two
 kinds and the Red Squirrels were somewhat more numerous
 than the Grays. I watched a Chipmunk gathering hickory
 nuts and taking them to his underground storehouse. He
 could carry only two at a time, one in each cheek pouch.
 Before depositing them therein he first removed the four
 segments of the outer husk by four skilfully directed bites
 and then carefully gnawed off the sharp spur from each
 end of the nut. The Chipmunks have already taken possession
 of a new piece of stone wall which was laid only yesterday!

[The sun had set when I reached Birch Island and
 embarked in my canoe. As I entered the open oak woods on
 my way to the island from Green Field I heard the Jays
 making a great outcry and when I neared the spot a large
 bird which I took to be an Owl started from a tree some
 distance in advance and flew off in the direction of the
 river.]

On the way up river I heard two Rails which I took
to be ^[Soras] Carolinas(although their calls were somewhat peculiar)
and saw a flock of nine Black Ducks flying high at first
but afterwards descending and circling low over Great
Meadow where I think they finally alighted.

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CONCORD.

1901

October 13

Taking a short walk behind Bell's Hill this morning, I started a Hermit Thrush and saw several Yellow-rumps, three or four Jays, a Golden-crest and a Black-poll Warbler. Some freshly-thrown-out earth by the side of the path attracted my attention to a hole six or eight inches in width by about a foot in depth which a skunk had evidently excavated, for his footprints were plainly visible. Directly in front of this shallow burrow lay two large pieces and several small fragments of the comb of the Yellow Jacket Hornet. Although none of the cells were injured, they were all quite empty save one which contained a dead larva. Only a few days ago we dug out a nest of these Hornets and found all the cells stored with honey and in nearly all the plump whitish larvae. From this I infer that after pulling out the comb the skunk must have managed in some way to extract all the honey and larvae. If his nest was as well-stored as ours, he must have had a rich feast. No doubt his thick fur protected him from the stings of the adult Hornets or they may have been torpid at night when his raid was probably made. It is not likely that he would have dug out an old nest and the fresh appearance of the comb as well as the presence of the dead larvae showed conclusively that the nest was not an old one. Skunks have not been as common in this neighborhood this year as they usually are; at least I have seen but few of their signs, even during the season when the turtles were laying.

CONCORD.

1901
October 16

At sunrise this morning and for nearly two hours later a pair of Red-shouldered Hawks were screaming on the West Bedford edge of the meadows opposite Ball's Hill and at half-past eight I heard two others (they may have been the same) opposite Davis's Hill and saw one of them perched in a nearly leafless elm. As I paddled down river I saw numbers of Swamp Sparrows and heard one Song Sparrow sing once in full, finished tones quite as in spring.

In Birch Field I found two Yellow Red-poll Warblers. At the farm there were Robins and a Flicker in the orchard, a dozen Bluebirds accompanied by as many Chippies flitting about in Lawrence's field, a Nuthatch and a Creeper in the elms near the house, and ^[Myrtle Warblers] Yellow-rumps scattered about everywhere.

The men, while casting away a large pile of gravel that has not been disturbed since last spring, came on a chipmunk's store-house at a depth of about three feet below the surface. It was a nearly circular chamber about ten inches across by three inches in height and was crammed full of green sweet corn and shelled or rather husked kickory nuts.

When I reached the river this evening and started out in the canoe to paddle up to Ball's Hill, twilight was falling. I could hear Swamp Sparrows chirping far and near in every direction and every now and then one of them would give the full spring song. A Song Sparrow also sang twice but more feebly and brokenly than the one I heard this morning.

The noise of my paddle disturbed a Fish Hawk who gave his loud, mellow whistling call, evidently very near although I failed to get a sight at him.

Muskrats seem to be scarce this autumn. I saw two last evening and one to-night swimming across the river below Ball's Hill.

On the night of the 14th when the wind was roaring in the tree tops and rain falling in torrents, Gilbert and I heard a cry that was wholly new to us both. It began with a low, broken wail or whine and ended with a howl much like that of a dog. The creature, whatever it was, was apparently on the hillside east of the cabin and certainly not over thirty or forty yards off. It is most unlikely that a dog would have been in such a place at such a time (the hour was about 10 P. M. and the night as dark as possible). I suspect that it may have been a coon. Long tells me that he has heard coons cry and that their call resembles a screech owl's. The first part of the cry Gilbert and I heard was not at all unlike a screech owl's wail.