



THEODORE ROOSEVELT

English Singing Birds

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Like most Americans interested in birds and books, I know a good deal about English birds as they appear in books. I know the lark of Shakespeare and Shelley and the Ettrick Shepherd; I know the nightingale of Milton and Keats; I know Wordsworth's cuckoo; I know mavis and merle singing in the merry green wood of the old ballads; I know Jenny Wren and Cock Robin of the nursery books. Therefore I have always much desired to hear the birds in real life; and the opportunity offered last June. As I could snatch but a few hours from a very exacting round of pleasures and duties, it was necessary for me to be with some companion who could identify both song and singer. In Sir Edward Grey, a keen lover of outdoor life in all its phases, and a delightful companion, who knows the songs and ways of English birds as very few do know them, I found the best possible guide.

We left London on the morning of June 9, 24 hours before I sailed from Southampton. Getting off the train at Basingstoke, we drove to the pretty, smiling valley of the Itchen. Here we tramped for three or four hours, then again drove, this time to the edge of the New Forest, where we first took tea at an inn, and then tramped through the forest to an inn on its other side, at Brockenhurst. At the conclusion of our walk my companion made a list of the birds we had seen, putting an asterisk opposite those which we had heard sing. There were 41 of the former and 23 of the latter, as follows:

*Thrush, *Blackbird, *Lark, *Yellow Hammer, *Robin, *Wren, *Golden Crested Wren, *Goldfinch, *Greenfinch, *Pied Wagtail, *Sparrow, *Duncock (Hedge Accentor), *Missel Thrush, *Starling, *Rook, *Jackdaw, *Black Cap, *Garden Warbler, *Willow Warbler, *Chiff Chaff, *Wood Warbler, *Tree Creeper, *Reed Bunting, *Sedge Warbler, *Coot, *Water Hen, *Little Grebe (Dabchick), *Tufted Duck, *Wood Pigeon, *Stock Dove, *Turtle Dove, *Pewee, *Tit (?Coal Tit), *Cuckoo, *Nightjar, *Swallow, *Martin, *Swift, *Pheasant, *Partridge.

The bird that most impressed me on my walk was the blackbird. I had already heard nightingales in abundance near Lake Como, and had also listened to larks, but I had never heard either the blackbird, the song thrush, or the black cap warbler; and while I knew all three were good singers, I did not know what really beautiful singers they were. Blackbirds were very abundant, and they played a prominent part in the chorus which we heard throughout the day on every hand, though perhaps loudest the following morning at dawn. In its habits and manners, the blackbird strikingly resembles our American robin, and indeed looks exactly like a robin, with a yellow bill and coal-black plumage. It hops everywhere over the lawns, just as our robin does, and it lives in nests in the gardens in the same fashion. Its song has a general resemblance to that of our robin, but many of the notes are far more musical, more like those of our wood thrush. Indeed there were individuals among those we heard certain of whose notes seemed to me almost to equal in point of melody the chimings of the wood thrush; and the highest possible praise for any song bird is to liken its song to that of the wood thrush or hermit thrush. I certainly do not think that the blackbird has received full justice in the books. I knew that it was a singer, but I really had no idea how fine a singer he was. I suppose one of his troubles has been his name, just as with our own cat bird. When he appears in the ballads as the merle, bracketed with his cousin, the mavis, the song thrush, it is far easier to recognize him as the master singer that he is. It is a fine thing for England to have such an asset of the countryside, a bird so common, so much in evidence, so fearless, and such a really beautiful singer.

The most musical singer we heard was the black cap warbler. To my ear its song seemed more musical than that of the nightingale. It was astonishingly powerful for so small a bird; in volume and continuity it does not come up to the songs of the thrushes and of certain other birds, but in quality, as an isolated bit of melody, it can hardly be surpassed.

Among the minor singers the robin was noticeable. We all know this pretty little bird from the books, and I was prepared to find him as friendly and attractive as he proved to be, but I had not realized how well he sang.

It was not a loud song, but very musical and attractive, and the bird is said to sing practically all through the year. The song of the wren interested me much, because it was not in the least like that of our house wrens, but, on the contrary, like that of our winter wren. The theme is the same as the winter wren's, but the song did not seem to me to be so brilliantly musical as that of the tiny singer of the north woods. The sedge warbler sang in the thick reeds a mocking ventriloquial lay, which reminded me at times of the less pronounced parts of our yellow breasted chat's song. The cuckoo's cry was singularly attractive and musical, far more so than the rolling, many times repeated, note of our rain-crow.

Ten days later, at Sagamore Hill, I was among my own birds, and was much interested as I listened to and looked at them in remembering the notes and actions of the birds I had seen in England. On the evening of the first day I sat in my rocking chair on the broad veranda, looking across the sound towards the glory of the sunset. The thickly grassed hillside sloped down in front of me to a belt of forest from which rose the golden, leisurely chiming of the wood thrushes, chanting their vespers; through the still air came the warble of vireo and tanager; and after night-fall we heard the flight song of an oven bird from the same belt of timber. Overhead an oriole sang in the weeping elm, now and then breaking his song to scold like an overgrown wren. Song sparrows and cat birds sang in the shrubbery; one robin had built its nest over the front, and one over the back door, and there was a chipmunk's nest in the wisteria vine by the porch. During the next 24 hours I saw and heard, either right around the house or while walking down to bathe through the woods, the following 42 birds:

Little Green Heron, Quail, Red Tailed Hawk, Yellow Billed Cuckoo, Kingfisher, Flicker, Hummingbird, Swift, Meadow Lark, Red Winged Blackbird, Sharp Tailed Finch, Song Sparrow, Chipping Sparrow, Bush Sparrow, Purple Finch, Baltimore Oriole, Cowbird, Robin, Scarlet Thrush, Thrasher, Cat Bird, Scarlet Tanager, Red-Eyed Vireo, Yellow Warbler, Black-Throated Green Warbler, King Bird, Wood Pewee, Crow, Blue Jay, Cedar Bird, Maryland Yellow Throat, Chickadee, Black and White Creeper, Barn Swallow, White Breasted Swallow, Oven Bird, Thistlefinch, Vesperfinch, Indigo Bunting, Towhee, Grasshopper Sparrow and Screech Owl.

I sent the companion of my English walk John Burroughs' "Birds and Poets." John Burroughs' life work is beginning to have its full effect in many different lines. When he first wrote there were few men of letters in our country who knew nature at first hand. Now there are many who delight in our birds, who know their songs, who keenly love all that belongs to out-of-doors life. For instance, Madison Cawein and Ernest Goffey have for a number of years written of our woods and fields, of the birds and the flowers, as only those can write who join to love of nature the gift of observation and the gift of description. Mr. Cawein is a Kentuckian; and another Kentuckian, Miss Julia Stockton Dinsmore, in the little volume of poems which she has just published, includes many which describe with beauty and charm the sights and sounds so dear to all of us who know American country life. Miss Dinsmore knows Kentucky, and the gulf coast of Louisiana, and the great plains of North Dakota; and she knows also the regions that lie outside of what can be seen with material vision. For years in our family we have had some of her poems in the scrap book cut from newspapers when we knew nothing about her except the initials signed in the verses. Only one who sees with the eyes of the spirit as well as the eyes of the body could have written the "Threnody," curiously attractive in its simplicity and pathos, with which the little book opens. It contains many poems that make a similar appeal. The writer knows bluebird and robin, redbird and field lark and whippoorwill, just as she knows southern rivers and western plains; she knows rushing winds and running waters and the sights and sounds of lonely places; and moreover, she knows and almost tells those hidden things of the heart which never find complete utterance.

THEODORE ROOSEVELT

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