



The Redstart

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WEST VIRGINIA'S FIRST SWAINSON'S WARBLER NEST

by
Eleanor Sims

At the southern edge of the Kanawha City section of Charleston are the C. & O. Railroad tracks and about 100 feet beyond them and bordered by a dirt road are the hills, which run east and west and rise to a height of about 900 feet. They are densely wooded, the growth being mostly deciduous. The hills in this section are divided by three hollows, each of which has a road leading to the top of the ridge as well as numerous trails, through the woods. A creek flows through each hollow and there are many smaller ravines in the hills. The deep woods, streams and open fields make this area suitable for a larger variety of bird life and it's very popular with bird students.

On May 14th 1945, I was hunting for nests and observing birds, in the edge of the woods in Donnally Hollow when I noticed what appeared to be a small bunch of dry leaves in a spice bush. When I pushed the leaves aside to see if it was a nest, a small brown bird left it, dropped to the ground and disappeared. I could then see that the nest contained four white unmarked eggs. I did not visit it again until the 20th, when several other bird club members went with me. This time we saw the bird before she left the nest, and identified her as a Swainson's warbler (*Limnothlypis Swainsonii*). Three of the eggs hatched, presumably about the latter part of the week and when I again visited the nest on the 27th, it contained three small birds and an unhatched egg. This time the bird gave a little cry as she flew down and disappeared as before. On May 30th, Alston Shields visited the nest and reported the young birds still small and inactive. When I next visited the nest on June 4th, I found it empty and the unhatched egg on the ground, unbroken. The male bird was singing from his usual perch about 300 feet away.

The nest was constructed of coarse grass and dead leaves and lined with finer grasses, and was about half the size of a wood thrush nest. It was placed near the end of the branch, well concealed under the leaves, and was about six feet from the ground.

Spice bush is very common in the woods around Charleston, and is most abundant in ravines and low woods. It is my observation that these places are also the favorite haunts of Swainson's warbler, as they are not often found near the tops of the ridges and then, only where there are damp ravines. These birds are often observed in the edge of the woods near the city limits and near the roadsides and fields but I have never known one to leave the woods.

The most unusual circumstance regarding this find is the fact that the nest is located in deciduous woods. There are a few pines near the tops of the ridges, but these are scattered, and there is no rhododendron at all. This is decidedly different from other areas in which this warbler has been found in West Virginia. Donnally Hollow is a typical wooded ravine such as is found throughout the state of lower elevations, some common trees being oak, sycamore, yellow poplar, maple, locust and others.

-- Charleston, W. Va.

THE VOICE OF THE VEERY.

My real introduction to bird study began in 1928 and it was a year later when first I became acquainted with the veery, Hylocichla f. fuscescens. In June of 1929 I was one of a group of students of the second Oglebay Nature Leaders Training School during a three-day camp at Lake Terra Alta, Preston county. We had parked our cars near the woodland in which camp had been set and, with others, I was carrying luggage to the camp area when I heard a veery sing. It happened that Mr. A. B. Brooks, leader of the school, was walking near me and I still recall his smile as he answered my "What bird was that?" with the single word "Veery."

But it was not until several years later, and at the same location, that I believe I first appreciated the wildness, the appeal of a bird song which I like as well as any other sound in nature. On this occasion, the nature school camp "advance guard" of which I was leader, were delayed getting into active work by the late arrival of the big truck carrying all our tents, kitchen equipment, tools, etc. The truck arrived in late afternoon and, after two sleeping tents had been temporarily pitched for our use, the remainder of the material was stacked and covered with tarpaulins for attention the following day. In the meantime, I dispatched the others to Terra Alta for their evening meal and remained at

the camp site to watch over the equipment until the others returned.

By the time they left for town, it was early dusk and the veery chorus had begun from all around the spot where I reclined atop the stacked canvas. For more than an hour I listened to the finest veery choir I have ever heard. I shall never forget the experience. In the growing dark, the song seemed to come from a dozen points near at hand as well as from great distances. An occasional belated song sparrow or other lesser singer sounded "weak and pale" in contrast to the magnificent thrush concert.

It was in 1943, and again at Lake Terra Alta, that a friend and I came really to appreciate another magic quality of the veery's voice -- almost a ventriloquial characteristic. The occasion was during a Brecks Bird club foray in mid-June. Mr. I. B. Boggs, of Morgantown, and I had started to climb the steep road which begins near the foot of the lake and affords access to a few mountain ferns. As we began our walk we heard a veery, seemingly quite close to us and directly ahead. The song was frequently repeated, apparently from about the same point from which we first had heard it.

We had proceeded perhaps a third of a mile and still could hear the voice of a veery, now apparently, quite far away. It was then that Mr. Boggs saw the singer -- perched in a fire-killed tree almost directly above our heads! We heard and saw the bird sing repeatedly a virtual "whisper" song. If we had not been watching the singer we surely would have believed ourselves far from the source of the voice. The thrush continued to sing as we left the place and its voice seemed to gather resonance and carrying power the farther we got from the bird. We watched the veery as long as we could pick it up in our 7x35 binoculars and there was no doubt in our minds that the same individual was the sole source of the music we had heard throughout our walk. At least we heard no more than one veery at any one time. During our observation of the bird at its song perch, it gave every indication of singing with full power, its head thrown back, its whole body seeming to vibrate with the effort of song.

W. E. Clyde Todd (1) refers to the ventriloquial quality of the song when he writes: "It is a far-away, weird song, truly expressive of the spirit of the remote depths of the primeval forest. The acoustic quality of the notes was such that they always seemed to come from a distance."

One human voice, at least, has been raised in disparagement of the veery's song. Forbush (2) quotes Prof. O. W. Knight as saying that "the male sings (if you can call it singing) very frequently the song is a harsh, churning, grating, grinding 'fe-r-r-u-y' repeated several times in succession."

But others quoted by Forbush heard the voice of Wilson's thrush differently. William Brewster refers to its "clear, flute-like voice." Robert Ridgway is quoted as considering its song "superior, in some respects, to all others of its genus." Dr. Elliott Coues, as quoted by Forbush, referred to "clear, bell-like notes, resonant, distinct, yet soft and of indescribable sadness."

Forbush himself referred to the Veery's son as one of the sweetest ... of the woodland. To be fully appreciated, the song must be heard when he is all alone in the deep woods, among the shades of falling night."

In writing of the voice of the willow thrush H. f. salicicola, the western race of the veery, Dr. Thomas S. Roberts (3) says: "The evening chorus in the north woods, with the hermit in the tree tops and the veery below, are concerts replete with a never-ending thrill and strong appeal to the bird-lover."

Mathews (4) quotes from Biard, Brewer and Ridgway's North American Birds: "There is a solemn harmony and a beautiful expression which combines to make the song of this thrush (the veery) surpass that of all the other North American wood thrushes."

There are various references in ornithological literature to "over-tones" which accompany the song of the veery. To my ear, the bird voices its descending, clear notes to an accompaniment of "under-tones", which remind me of humming notes sounded along with the flute-like tones -- very much as if one whistled and hummed the song at the same time! I profess no knowledge of music and confess ignorance of its mechanics and very terminology, but to my ear the song of Wilson's thrush is one of the finest bits of bird music in the entire avian concert. Perhaps this opinion is influenced by associations, but "there I stand."

-- John W. Handlan
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- (1) 1940, Todd, W. E. Clyde, "Birds of Western Pennsylvania", pp. 451-452, University of Pittsburgh Press.
- (2) 1929, Forbush, Edward Howe, "Birds of Massachusetts and Other New England States, Vol. III, pp. 391-392, Commonwealth of Mass. Norwood Press, Norwood, Mass.
- (3) 1932, Roberts, Thomas S., "Birds of Minnesota," Vol. II, p. 134, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, Minn.
- (4) 1921, Mathews, F. Schuyler, "Field Book of Wild Birds and Their Music," p. 247, G.P. Putnam and Sons, The Knickerbocker Press, N.Y.C.

THE SOUTHWARD FLIGHT OF EVENING GROSBEAKS IN 1945-46

The winter of 1945-46 has witness perhaps the most extended southward flight of evening grosbeaks, Hesperiphona vespertina which

has yet been recorded. Beginning with Lunk's record in Fairmont, Marion County, West Virginia, there was recorded the almost continuous presence of the birds in various portions of the state until after May 1. At Shepherdstown, Jefferson County, West Virginia, (See Mrs. Schley's note in this issue of The Redstart) the birds lingered until mid-May.

During the past winter these northern finches were recorded for the first time from Tennessee, where they seem to have been common in East Tennessee, and from points in Kentucky as well. Handley (in correspondence) also reports the birds from Blacksburg, Virginia.

While box elder seems to be a preferred food for the species, Mrs. Schley found them eating hackberry, and other observers found them showing a liking for ash and maple seeds and buds.

-- Maurice Brooks
Morgantown, W. Va.

EVENING GROSBEAKS IN SHEPHERDSTOWN

The flock of evening grosbeaks appeared in Shepherdstown in this past December, at least, that was when they were first noticed here. There are eight or ten of the beautiful birds in this flock and at first they all stayed together. However, a single one was in my yard this past week, and last week I saw two, a male and female, in a yard across the street. They have seemed to stay right around the large hackberry, or sugar nut, tree, eating the small nuts all day long in one case, in another they leave about eight thirty in the morning, evidently returning to roost near the hackberries.

One of these big trees overhangs a flat porch roof and the birds have been feasting on the nuts now and then throughout the day. In fact when it was time to clean up the porch roof, there were no nuts left to sweep away. These birds seem unafraid-about like robins or catbirds. I noticed them one day in very early spring in a locust tree here. I did not know what they were, although it was hard to get a good look at them against the sky. Still, anyone could see at a glance that they were strange. They are not quite as large as a robin, bigger than a sparrow.

It was a real thrill last Monday to come upon two of them on the ground. The male bird looked almost as yellow as the small goldfinches that feed on sunflower seeds. He had plenty of tannish brown on him. My daughter told me one of these grosbeaks was here on the fence while I was away this past week. The grosbeaks were first noticed by Mrs. Brooks Lucas.

-- Anna Schley
Shepherdstown, W. Va.

SNOWY OWL

The following article was printed in The Monroe Watchman, in Union, West Virginia, in the issue of April 18, 1946.

/s/ J. M. Johnston
Publisher

" A snowy owl, *Nyctea scandiaca*, rarely found in this section, was shot by D. C. Martin on Saturday, April 13, 1946, on the farm of Charlie Walker near Union. The snowy owl, distinguished by its white plumage, flecked with gray or black, is a bird of northern climes and seldom is one seen this far south. The Encyclopaedia Britannica describes it as "circumpolar species" and says "it is the only one of its genus which disdains the shelter of forests and braves the most rigorous arctic climate, though compelled to migrate southward in winter when no sustenance is left for it."

Mr. Martin is having the bird mounted by Vernon Sibold of Greenville. It measures 56 inches from tip to tip of wing.

-- Charles O. Handley
Blacksburg, Virginia

BIRDS IN COMBAT

Birds are like humans in some respects. They have their fights and quarrels. I have seen a few unusual encounters and have heard of others from reputable friends. A few of these are related below.

Some time ago Alton McClung told me about two male English sparrows "meeting their doom" while fighting. The birds were fighting in a bush while a cat sat nearby eyeing the combatants. They fought for a few minutes in the shrub and, "locked" in combat, dropped to the ground where Mr. Tom Cat snatched them and ate them to the last feather. The moral is, I suppose, "No one wins in a fight!"

Mr. Greaser observed two red-headed woodpeckers fighting in a white oak. The, too, eventually fought their way to the ground at Mr. Greaser's feet. He picked both birds up, held them for a while, released them and each flew in a different direction, glad apparently to escape from the hands of man.

A few years ago in August, great numbers of hummingbirds migrated through this area. I know of three dead birds that were picked up near a rose bush where several hummers had been seen fussing and fighting. I can't say definitely how they were killed, but I did see this. My brother and I were in the orchard when we were attracted by two fighting hummers. Apparently they deliberately crashed into each other, making a thud which we could hear. One dropped to the ground. We examined it and pronounced it dead. The bird was only "knocked cold" however, for it revived and went on its way when released.

A friend was riding horseback through a forest when he was attracted by a noise in the dry leaves beside the path. There, beside the path, laid a hawk (probably a broad-winged) with a large blacksnake coiled around it. The friend investigated and believing the hawk dead, began beating the snake with a stick. The snake uncoiled itself, the hawk arose, flew to a branch of a tree, shook itself a few times and disappeared in the forest. The man said that the "dead" hawk's coming to life excited him so that he let it escape. Most of us have observed various hawks with snakes in their talons, so I assume that this hawk tackled one that was too much for it.

Last November I flushed a Wilson's Snipe which flew into a wire fence, bounced back and fell to the ground near a robin. The robin immediately attacked the snipe which soon gained its senses and flew around the fence the second attempt. As presumably this snipe had been recorded here on several previous days and has never been seen since, it is probable that it was fatally injured or left for other parts. The two previous winters a snipe had been recorded frequently along this stream, but none has been present since the above.

-- W. C. Legg
Mt. Lookout, W. Va.