



The Redstart

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ADVENTURES IN "WINDOW-SILL ORNITHOLOGY"

by
Polly and John Handlan

In common with many others whose avocational interest is ornithology, we've put ourselves to considerable inconvenience and physical effort in order to observe wild birds. We've waded in the cold muck of mountain swamps; climbed mountains under the blistering heat of a July sun; drawn into our lungs the frigid breath of winds over half-frozen lakes; and traveled literal thousands of miles by automobile and afoot in the pursuit of our hobby. In fact, we now are certain, we unconsciously passed through that stage of amateur bird study in which its devotees have the fixed opinion that ornithological observations in which Herculean effort is not involved simply aren't worth while!

But in the winter of 1938-39, we became confirmed "window-sill ornithologists" and discovered for the first time how much pleasure and how much ornithological information can be secured through the observation of birds at a window feeder. In other words, we had lots of fun and learned some things by looking through a window, from the vantage point of comfortable chairs in our warm living room, at birds which frequented our feeding shelf.

We'd still wade swamps, climb mountains, risk frost-bite and travel many miles to observe birds. That's part of the game. But we now know that, even if we weren't able to go afield, we could derive much satisfaction from "window-sill ornithology." Records were kept of our visitors, from day to day, and a compilation of these daily notes reveals some interesting things -- some of which are noted in this paper.

One window of the living room of our residence at Oglebay Park, Wheeling, W.Va., faces East and is protected by the house and by a wing of a neighbor's residence from the prevailing West and North winds of our Winter. At right angles to the window, immediately adjacent to it, and suspended from an iron rod is our feeding shelf. The shelf is a simple wooden tray, closed at either end, open at the sides and roofed with a wooden gable. Immediately beneath it is a foundation planting of Red Cedar and Arbor Vitae. Nearby is a thick clump of Rhododendron. Six feet from the feeder is a tall Plane Tree, and some 45 feet from it a row of Maples lines a state highway. Beyond the highway is a road bank, covered with Honeysuckle, a park drive, a second roadbank and a rolling lawn, plentifully dotted with trees.

The feeding shelf was regularly filled each morning and to the rod which supports it was fastened by cords lumps of suet which rested on the feeder roof. Into the feeder in the course of the winter went: 16 pounds of Sunflower seed, four pounds of chick-feed, a peck of cracked, Black Walnuts, and small amounts of dried oats, sliced apples, bread crumbs and corn flakes. Some 10 pounds of suet were supplied atop the feeder during the Winter.

To this bird cafeteria came 14 species of birds, so far as we can determine and two of these, Ring-necked Pheasant and Crow, actually did not come to the feeder but fed from overflow grains, etc., which smaller birds pushed over the edge of the shelf to the ground beneath. The tracks of a small covey of Bob-white were seen beneath the feeder on one occasion, also, but we did not actually observe birds of this species feeding and have not added them to the list. Two species, Carolina Wren and Song Sparrow, are represented on our list by just one visit each to the feeder itself, although we believe Song Sparrows frequently fed on the ground beneath it. Others on the list were more or less regular visitors.

The list includes: Ring-necked Pheasant, Red-bellied Woodpecker, Hairy Woodpecker, Downy Woodpecker, Crow, Chickadee, Tufted Titmouse, White-breasted Nuthatch, Carolina Wren, Starling, English Sparrow, Cardinal, Junco and Song Sparrow.

Observations of these birds and their behavior at the feeding shelf supplied some bits of interesting and challenging information.

Our best "customers" were the Chickadees. Presumably, we could expect the presence of Black-capped Chickadees in this area in the Winter months, rather than that of our native Carolina Chickadees exclusively. On sunny days in December and January, birds at and near our feeder sang the four-note song said to be typical of carolinensis. To whichever species our visitors belonged, certain it is that their small size in no wise prevented their "bossing" of the feed shelf. They were aggressive to a point at which even the few English Sparrows which hopefully awaited their turn in the feeder were thoroughly "bluffed" and discouraged. To one species, only, did the Chickadees consistently give way -- the White-breasted Nuthatch.

On mornings upon which the feeding shelf was empty -- that is to say, when the supply of feed from the previous day, did not "last" until our arising -- the Chickadees invariably awoke us. We have no inclination to "humanize" the actions of birds, but for all the world, the voices of those Chickadees on "food-less" mornings gave us the impression of short-tempered scolding! The raising of the front window, necessary to replenish the food shelf, actually attracted additional Chickadees to the vicinity, rather than frightening them away. They scarcely awaited the withdrawal of the hands which placed the food in the shelf. More than once our faces were brushed by the wings of Chickadees as they flew to the feeder, nearly a dozen at a time!

The Nuthatches which visited us, surprised us by their aggressiveness. Seldom were they content to feed while other birds remained on the shelf. They hurled their compact bodies at newcomers -- or even at birds which were present when they, themselves, arrived -- struck with their strong beaks, drove away the other birds and settled down to feed! Seldom did they remain to feed at the shelf, however, unless they happened to be confining their interest to suet. They carried Sunflower seeds to a nearby Horse Chestnut tree, inserted the seeds partly under bits of bark and there fed upon them.

We were not particularly surprised to note the single Red-bellied Woodpecker which patronized our feeding shelf, do the same. The Red-bellied and the Nuthatches soon had the Horse-Chestnut tree literally dotted with the remains of Sunflower seed, with almost every available bit of loose bark holding the remnants of an avian tid-bit. On the contrary, we never observed either Hairy Woodpecker or Downy Woodpecker indulging in this habit, nor, indeed, did we observe them consume anything other than suet.

Most of our visitors fed silently. Not so the Woodpeckers! The single, male Hairy Woodpecker which visited the feeder every day over a period of months was particularly vocal as he perched atop the box and attacked the suet fastened there. His sharp calls, noticeably "heavier" and more penetrating than those of Downy Woodpeckers, invariably signaled his presence at the feeding shelf.

The Red-bellied Woodpecker, we observed, demonstrated conclusively that the actions of birds in some cases, at least, may follow a fixed pattern. We grew to know him and his habits very well, indeed, partly, perhaps, because he was conspicuous in appearance and his call was distinctively different from that of any other of our bird visitors. When he visited us (usually about 10 a.m. for the first time each day) he called first from a row of Carolina Poplars some 25 yards in the rear of the house. His next call came from the Maples at the road-edge in front of the house, usually from the same tree. He flew thence to the Horse-Chestnut, from where he called again. Finally, he went direct to the feeder or, on rare occasions, to the Plane Tree within six feet of it and thence to the feeding shelf.

The Hairy Woodpecker, another conspicuous bird, appeared to be fully as regular a follower of routine as did his larger cousin. He, likewise, seldom deviated from a fixed series of goals which gradually diminished the distance to the feeder until he arrived there.

Of all our bird visitors, we found the Junco most plainly betraying its terrestrial origin. Juncos (and here, again, we are not sure whether our visitors were Slate-colored or Carolina Juncos) surely were our most wasteful guests. They invariably scratched vigorously when in the feeding shelf and sent small showers of food to the ground beneath it. They scratched with both feet at the same time and with a force which sent bits of grain and seed flying. Strangely enough, we seldom noted them feeding on the ground beneath the tray, but usually upon the feeding shelf itself. Crows, Ring-necked Pheasants and other birds profited by their scratching habits rather than they.

Our observation of Cardinals raised an interesting point to which we have no answer. Do Cardinals remain in pairs throughout the Winter? At least two pairs of Cardinals frequented our feeder all season. Seldom, however, did either a male or female bird make its appearance without the presence of an individual of the opposite sex. Male birds did not scruple to drive females from favored perches and often enough females drove males away under similar circumstances. Nevertheless, male and female birds usually appeared in company with one another. On February 15, 1939, we saw four pairs of Cardinals at and near the feeder at the same time, each apparently a pair, with the males becoming attentive to female birds.

There were "special days" on our observation calendar, of course. One of considerable interest occurred on January 19, 1939, when from five to six inches of snow covered the ground. From our window on that day we watched two splendid male Ring-necked Pheasants in desperate battle. They fought like colorful game cocks, ruffs raised, beaks lowered, biting and "spurring" as they rose in the air against one another. For long minutes they "spurred" with their beaks as a preliminary to closing with one another. The birds fought for a quarter-hour before an automobile, passing within a few yards of them, disturbed them and they moved quietly over a knoll above the road, perhaps to continue their duel.

We had one major disappointment during our observations. We failed to attract Blue Jays to the feeder, so far as we are aware. Nearly every morning the harsh calls of Jays (the first to winter in Oglebay Park for at least ten years) was heard. We learned, later, that Blue Jays regularly resorted to a window feeder operated by Mrs. W. H. Ramp at the Oglebay Park club house, but we were unable to bring them to ours.

One of the greatest pleasures we derived from our feeding shelf was the interest which it evoked in guests in our home who were without special knowledge of wild birds. Many people saw, through our living room window, and for the first time, birds which are so

familiar to the average observer as to escape comment. To our non-ornithological visitors, however, the "close-up" view of a Tufted Titmouse or a Chickadee was something to be remembered! The operation of our feeding shelf would have been worthwhile for this feature alone, even had we not ourselves enjoyed thoroughly, the opportunity to become accustomed to watching birds at arms-length from us.

We did not attempt, for want of time, the training of birds to feed from our hands, although the fearlessness of the Chickadees strongly tempted us to do so. We are looking forward to another season in which we hope to be able to carry out something of the sort so successfully accomplished at the French Creek residences of A. B. Brooks and Mrs. Fred Brooks.

Oglebay Park
Wheeling, W. Va.

FIELD NOTES

Large Flight of Canada Geese Over Brooke County, W.Va.:—A very unusual thing to me was the sight of a large flight of Canada Geese, Branta canadensis, over Bethany, Brooke County, W.Va., on February 19, 1939. There were probably about 2,000 birds in the flight which lasted for about 15 minutes. Most of the geese were in formation, some in the traditional "V" and others in a staggered formation. A few were in groups of three and there were some "singles." This is the largest flight of geese I have seen in the area.

-- Karl Haller
Bethany College
Bethany, W. Va.

Canada Geese and Mallards in Marshall County, W.Va.:—A flock of eight Canada Geese, Branta canadensis, were observed by me on March 3, 1939, on the waters of Big Wheeling Creek, in the general vicinity of Camp Elizabeth, in Marshall County, W.Va. So far as I am aware this is the first migration date for the species in Marshall county for this year.

On March 9, also on Big Wheeling Creek and in Marshall County, I saw three Mallards, Anas platyrhynchos, including a drake and two ducks.

-- W. E. Howard
Dist. Game Protector
Cameron, W. Va.

Waterfowl Observations in Putnam County, W.Va.:- The observations here reported all were made in the vicinity of Nitro, Putnam County, W.Va., where small ponds have been created by back-waters of the Great Kanawha River following the completion of the Marmet Dam, which is some two miles below the ponds.

Mr. Harold Hopkins and I noted a single Scaup Duck, Nyroca sp? swimming about in one of the larger ponds on November 11, 1938. Close to the shore of the pond, on the same day, we found a specimen of the Pied-billed Grebe, Podilymbus podiceps, and an examination revealed that the bird had been shot shortly before we found its body.

On November 13, 1938, the ponds again were visited, with a result that an interesting experience was enjoyed. A lone American Coot, Fulica americana, was noted in one of the smaller, shallow ponds, quite close to the automobile highway. As I stepped from the automobile in which my companions and I had journeyed to the spot, the Coot took cover in some tall weeds growing in the water. A cold heavy rain and high wind regardless, I waded into the pond and reached the weeds, but failed to flush the bird which must have been very close to me in the scant patch of cover. Those who shared in this observation were Miss Helen Leslie, Miss Helen Poindexter and Mr. Joseph Morton.

On November 24, 1938, I arrived at the ponds at 7:30 A.M. in the heart of a severe blizzard, and faced a cutting wind which drove the snow in such a manner as to reduce visibility to zero. The wind slackened after an hour and one-half and permitted observation and identification of numerous waterfowl which had been "half" visible at the height of the storm.

Two male and two female Mallards, Anas platyrhynchos, flew close above me as I watched the ponds. Three examples of the common Black Duck, Anas rubripes, were seen, two swimming about close to shore in one pond and a third perched atop a dead snag which rose about a foot above the surface of the water. Four Ring-necked Ducks, Nyroca collaris, were swimming in company with four Scaup, Nyroca sp?. The latter were, in my opinion, examples of the Lesser Scaup, N. affinis. A single American Golden-eye, Glaucionetta clangula americana, was noted. Four Ruddy Ducks, Erismatura jamaicensis, were seen, three on one pond and one on another.

It seems worthy of note that the weather was severe on the previous day (November 23, 1939) as well as on the day of observation. High winds, a sharp drop in temperature, and a chilling rain, which turned to snow during the night, may well have caused the migrants recorded to rest upon the ponds until storm conditions abated.

-- Clyde B. Upton
Hubbard Court
Charleston, W. Va.

Brown Thrasher Wintering at Morgantown, W.Va.:— I wish to submit some notes on a rather unusual Winter visitant:

During the winter of 1938-39 a Brown Thrasher, Toxostoma rufum, has been feeding near my home in Morgantown, W.Va. The bird was heard in November, but was not seen by us until December 21, since when it has been observed a number of times. I have provided bits of cornbread and the bird appears to accept this food readily.

So far as I am able to determine, this is the first winter occurrence of the Brown Thrasher in Northern West Virginia, where it normally leaves in October and returns in late April.

-- D. W. Parsons
Dept. Rural Organization
West Va. University
Morgantown, W.Va.

A Winter Myrtle Warbler at Fairmont, W.Va.:— On December 29, 1938, and on several occasions between that date and January 8, 1939, a single Myrtle Warbler, Dendroica coronata, presumably the same individual, has appeared at the back-yard feeding station in the suburbs of Fairmont, W.Va.

Apparently not interested in the cracked grain and Sunflower seeds regularly supplied at the feeder, the bird was observed to visit the suet supply several times. Here, it did not attempt to alight, but "hovered" before the suet as it fed, displaying its yellow rump-patch to excellent advantage.

Apparently an immature bird, this example seemed dull in color and showed no yellow upon the crown. However, the yellow wing patches were easily visible through binoculars at close range. The yellow rump was strikingly evident and the loud "chip" characteristic of the species, was uttered frequently by the bird.

-- William A. Lunk
Fairmont, W. Va.