



Chapter 4: Birds of a Morning

An early December bird student in northern Florida suffers from embarrassment of riches. Never elsewhere have I seen so many varieties of birds in such numbers. Never elsewhere have I seen such abundant opportunities for watched birds to hide themselves. The live-oaks range from shrubs to huge trees, their dense, glossy leaves reflecting the sunlight and making the spaces behind them vague with shadows. These may be full of birds; except for a twitter or the flirt of a wing you would never know it. One after another draws away the drapery of Spanish moss from an entrance and slips in, or a flock may whirl out and into another tree, portieres of gray lace opening to let them out, and closing behind them as they enter.

I have spent many mornings trying to determine which bird is the first up. During the hot spell of two weeks ago, when the thermometer danced in the shade with the eighties all day and sank to sweet slumber with the sixties at night I was quite convinced that it must be the mockingbird, just because I heard him first. Then quite a few mockers used to greet the coming of the sun with melody, rolling golden notes of delightful song over the dew-wet sands from some topmost twig. Just in front of the house on the river bank is a group of yuccas, fifteen feet tall or so, stabbing the soft air in all directions with their needle-pointed Spanish bayonets.

I fancy every Northerner has to learn the full stabbing power of these bayonets by experience. A thicket of them is beautiful in its dark green setting of slim-pointed rosettes and is impassable to a white man as the outer rim of a British square. It would take a Fuzzy-wuzzy of the Soudanese tribes to break through in the one case as in the other. I once read in a novel of a lover who followed the desire of his heart to Florida, and at the critical moment



forced his way to her “penetrating a thicket of Spanish bayonet.” I now realize that this lover was a man of steel, else the thicket had penetrated him inadvertently. I leaned a little closer to one of these yucca groups the other day, and went to the repair shop with nineteen punctures, being fortunate that I did not permanently remain “hung” in the larder of the butcher bird—of whom more anon.

The top of a yucca is crowned each summer with a most beautiful pyramid of waxy, pale yellow flowers, a spike several feet tall with drooping blooms most delightful to behold, followed by pods that are now approaching maturity, looking much like stubby green bananas ripening to a glossy brownish red. On the top of one of these pod-pyramids a mocking bird used to sit during the warm spell, greeting the dawn with golden uproar. He and his fellows were most lively then, filling the thickets with harsh chirps when not singing. The songs of different mockers vary much, but their chirps are alike and are certainly most unmusical. They are loud, harsh and guttural. The “mia-u-w” of a catbird is a burst of melody in comparison.

But that singing was all for the hot weather. Suddenly the other night the wind came up out of the north, the mercury fell in the thermometer to the late forties, and we all froze to death—not as to our bodies, which simply grew gooseflesh, but in our minds. Singular thing, the Northern mind. It comes down to Florida from a country where the winter mercury dandies the zero mark on its knee mornings. It finds the jasmine in bloom and butterflies flitting from flower to flower. A few mornings later it finds the mercury at thirty-eight and frost on the jasmine. This does not specially trouble the jasmine, but it so freezes the Northern mind that the Northern body has to sit over roaring fires and rub its goose-flesh until the temperature rises again. But that is Florida.

After a second or third forty-degrees-above cold snap the visitor from frozen climes gets his balance and forgets to shiver, finding the chill a tonic and the mid-day warmth delightful. So I fancy it is with the mocking birds. They seem livelier now that cool weather has come, they chirp and flutter about with much more energy, but not one of them has opened his mouth in song since the mercury hit fifty. My front-door friend still sits on his yucca pod part of the day, however, and still I am puzzled to know when he leaves it and his double comes on duty.

He is a rather interesting fellow, this double, whom I need not have mistaken for the mocker at all, he is so different a bird. Yet he is about the same size, white beneath and with a good deal of gray in his upper works. Bill and tail differ from those of the mocker; still, at a



distance of a hundred feet a casual glance did not enlighten me. I am still wondering if there is method in this quiet substitution. The double is a loggerhead shrike, the Southern butcher-bird. He feeds upon small birds, and he might well choose the perch which the mocker had just vacated as a most desirable hunting stand. Small birds flitting back and forth in the early morning would hear the mocker singing and know that he would never harm them. Then an hour or two later, flying by in perfect confidence, they would find themselves in the crooked beak of the loggerhead, to be impaled on one of the thorns of the yucca beneath the perch and there dissected at leisure, or left to wait while the loggerhead takes his ease, "hung" as we say of ducks and snipe.

Does the loggerhead take the knocking bird's perch with forethought, bearing the opportunity in mind and trusting to the resemblance, or is it just a case of a convenient perch with both birds? He who can read the loggerhead's mind may be able to tell me. So far I have failed to catch the butcher bird at his butchery, and though I look doubtfully at those convenient Spanish bayonet tips as I pass, I find I am the only innocent thus far impaled on them.

Of these small birds that the loggerhead might capture the very name is legion. All warblers seem to be here, and if they are difficult to keep track of in the North, here they are well nigh impossible. I find a live-oak tree full of uncountable flocks. I get the glass on one bird, and before I can begin to note his characteristics he has flitted like a shadow and another with far different markings is in his place. Birds that one knows at a glance may thus be noted at a glance, but the rarer varieties crowd in upon these until the mind in trying to distinguish and remember becomes inextricably confused and finally gives up in despair. I am beginning to believe that every small bird in Chapman's "Birds of Eastern North America" is in convention on the west bank of the St. Johns. Some wiser and more far-sighted man than I will have to tell how many varieties of warblers, finches, sparrows, and fly-catchers may be seen on one good day in early December on the lower banks of the big river of Florida.

It is a relief to cross the trails of some more easily seen songsters. Take the Florida crows, for instance. These are a relaxation rather than a study. They lack the sardonic virility of their Northern cousins, these fish crows. They are smaller, not so strong of flight, and their call has none of the deep "caw, caw, caw" of our bird of canny humor. Their flight is flappy and less certain, and their cries have a humorous gurgle in them that seems hardly grown up. They seem like boys that have just reached the age when the voice breaks with a queer croak in it that makes you laugh. *Corvus americana* seems most of the time to be on definite



business. In Massachusetts I have found him in the main forceful, dignified, and seemingly doing something worth while. *Corvus ossifragus* just straggles along with his fellows, having a mighty good time, and croaking hysterically about it.

It is a poor half-hour for birds when I do not find one of these flaming fellows, the cardinals, setting the thicket on fire. In the warm weather the cardinals were accustomed to whistle to me. The call, loud and clear, has a round cheeriness in it that should drive away all melancholy. The cardinal does not seem in the least afraid of me. If I approach him he may fly away at the last moment, but more often he simply sidles around the tree in a stiff, wooden sort of way that he has, remaining quiet if just a few strands of moss are between us. He seems to do this with deprecatory awkwardness, as if he knew he dazzled and tried to be humble about it. I do not think it can be to get out of sight altogether. If so it is a mistaken caution, for his flame will burn through quite a bit of gray moss, and where it is shielded by the deep, shiny green of live-oak leaves it flares only the brighter by the contrast.

His wife is even more beautifully clad, and though her olive green and ashy gray ought to make her less conspicuous the tell-tale cardinal blazes on crest, wings and tail, and I am likely to see her about as far as her flaming consort. I have not heard the female sing, though in defiance to the usual custom among song birds she is said to, a softer and even prettier song than that of her vivid mate. But even the male cardinal does not sing when it is cold, and I have not heard a note from any of them since the mercury got down to the forty neighborhood.

Passing from the puzzling opacity of live-oak groves and palmetto scrub I found myself later in a country far better fitted for hunting birds by sight. That was one of the interminable stretches of long-leaved pine forest of which this part of Florida is largely made. Here are trees that shoot up straight as arrows, sixty to a hundred feet high. Rarely is there a limb in the first fifty feet and the plumed tops seem to intercept the vivid sunlight but little. Under foot the carpet of twelve to fifteen inch needles is well called pine straw. It is a place of singular silence and a bewildering sameness. Along interminable levels you may look for what seem endless miles between these straight trunks till they draw together in the gray distance and, in kindness, shut off the view. One needs a compass and provisions to plunge, a wandering submarine, beneath this sea of similarity, and I skirted its edge only, lest I get lost and spend my days in an unending circuit.

Slipping along this polishing carpet of needles I heard what I at first took to be the familiar note of chickadees. Yet it was not that either. It was too throaty and lacked the



gleeful definiteness of the chickadee. In fact it was a poor attempt.

Soon I saw the birds, gleaning in a gray group, hanging this way and that just as chickadees do. They had decided crests and I quite readily recognized them for the tufted titmouse which in this country takes the place of the chickadee.

The flock passed busily on and for a moment the silence of the place was impressive. A gentle wind was slightly swaying the tops of these tall trees, but there was no song of the pines to be heard. Underfoot partridge berry and pipsissewa, pyrola and club moss, which by right should always grow under pines, were not to be seen. Only the rich brown of the pine straw and the dark mould of decaying fallen trunks was there. Here and there a tiny shrub, usually a scrub live-oak, put out a feeble green, but it was not enough to break the monotony of melancholy that seemed to pervade the place. It was broken, though, in another moment. There was a whirr of wings and half-a-dozen birds dived, seemingly out of heaven, each on his own route, whirled with a whirrup of wings and lighted lightly as an athlete each on his chosen tree trunk.

It was like a circus act. For a moment each bird remained motionless, his stiff tail feathers jammed into the trunk below him, his head drawn back as if awaiting a signal, and through the melancholy silence came a creaking “k-r-r-k, kr-r-r-k” It might have been a weather-vane swaying in the wind or it might have been tree toads. But it was neither. It was simply the voice of a flock of red-headed woodpeckers. These birds are rare in my locality North, but they seem here to be familiar spirits of the wood. Smaller and less beautiful than partridge woodpeckers, they seem much like them in their antics, which are always clown-like and amusing. They tap wood and pull grubs as if they knew I was looking at them and wanted to make the little farce as funny as possible.



The circus clown might well take the spirit of his antics from the actions of red-headed woodpeckers in a Southern pine forest. After scrambling in a jerky ludicrousness up a stub one would pause on the top of it motionless for a time, reminding me of an awkward boy trying to pose as Ajax defying the lightning. Then another would dive at him in full flight, driving him from his perch at the last moment, only to take it and assume the exact pose of the former, the whole thing done with the alert precision of a pair of good circus performers. Then the substitute, stilt motionless, would give his little tree-toad-like creak, as if saying in



humorous humility, "How's that for an act?" Taine, the historian, has written of the immense loneliness of the pine barrens. But it is to be supposed that Taine was never entertained there by a flock of red-headed woodpeckers. But then, there are people whom vaudeville makes lonely.

I have not named the half of the birds I can identify of a morning in this great aviary, nor have I named the two that pleased me most. One was just plain bluebird, a young bird of a silent flock that slipped through the trees of the town. This young bird had not yet his mature plumage, and he hung behind and peered about in an uncertain way as if much impressed with the wonders of this new place to which mother had brought him, but still a bit lonesome and unsettled. I was right glad to see bluebirds. I have looked in vain so far for robins. The other is a bird that came with the cold snap and hangs about the tip of the Orange Park dock almost a quarter of a mile out in the river, without visible means of support. He hides under the stringers when I approach him, but I have had several good views, and if I know a snow bunting when I see one, this is he. What business he has so far South is more than I can tell, and he seems to feel an alien by the way he clings to the seclusion of the dock. Perhaps he came on the wrong boat and is only waiting for a return ticket. At any rate I was glad to see him and I wish him a safe return.

