ABOUT THE COVER: AMERICAN ROBIN

The American Robin *(Turdus migratorius)* is perhaps the best known and most loved bird in North America. The robin is a familiar sight on lawns nearly everywhere in Canada and the United States, and as far south as southern Mexico. This widespread bird has been taxonomically divided into at least six forms, or subspecies, one of which, the San Lucas Robin of the far southwest, is considered by some to be a separate species. The American Robin has been placed in three different genera at one time or another, but the vagaries of taxonomy aside, it remains to most of us the red-breasted harbinger of spring usually portrayed in an earthworm tug-of-war. Misnamed "robin" by the early settlers because of its superficial resemblance to the European Robin, it is a thrush, most closely related to the European Blackbird. The sexes are similar in appearance, but females are grayer or paler, and the familiar juveniles of summer have speckled breasts with a rusty wash. By winter these young birds have molted their body feathers and resemble pale adults.

The northern part of the robin population is migratory, wintering mostly in the southern states, but some birds reach Bermuda and Guatemala. Most Massachusetts birds migrate, but a scattering overwinter and show up on Christmas counts, and large flocks, occasionally numbering in the thousands, sometimes winter on the coast, particularly on Cape Cod. Robins begin to arrive in mid- to late March, signaling to many of us that spring is really here.

Robins are found in a broad spectrum of habitats, from gardens and parks to forests and woodlots. In spring males establish territories and their melodious, persistent phrases are perhaps our most commonly heard bird song. Male courtship involves chases and strutting, with feathers puffed, tails spread, and wings vibrating. The nest has a foundation of twigs and coarse plant fiber, and a cup plastered with mud and lined with fine grass. The female does most of the nest building and shapes the mud cup with her body. Robins frequently incorporate man-made materials into their nests. One report described foot-long streamers of shredded computer paper dangling from a robin nest and fluttering in the wind. Most nests are located in shrubs or trees, but ground nesting has been reported, and robin's nests have been found on a broad spectrum of human-made structures. Nests are often conspicuous, but both birds defend the nest vigorously, and have been known to strike humans who wandered too close. Studies of marked birds suggest that robins are site-faithful, returning year after year to the same locality.

The usual clutch is four eggs, "robin's egg blue" in color. Incubation is mostly by the female and lasts about two weeks. After roughly the same period the young birds are ready to fledge. Typically, the male will tend the fledglings of the first brood, while the female incubates the eggs of the second. Occasionally they raise three broods. After nesting, robins characteristically roost communally in flocks that may number in the thousands.

The young are fed mostly insects and other invertebrates. The normal diet for robins is astonishingly varied, consisting of up to ninety percent berries and other plant foods in fall and winter to less than ten percent in spring. The earthworms and other invertebrate prey are located by sight, not sound, and are captured by a wide variety of foraging techniques, including gleaning leaves and active pursuit of flying insects. They forage from the treetops to the ground. It has been suggested that the robin's highly diversified diet and foraging techniques have helped make possible their high population levels and wide geographic distribution.

The spread of civilization has had both negative and positive aspects for robins. In the nineteenth century they were heavily hunted for food, and today their close proximity to human habitation subjects them to heavy predation from domestic cats. During the 1950s robins provided the first extensive documentation for the disastrous effects of DDT, when large numbers were found dead on a Michigan college campus following spraying for Dutch Elm disease-carrying beetles. Occasionally when they forage on fruit crops, such as cherries, robins become agricultural pests, and tens of thousands have been legally shot.

In general, however, they have adapted well to human settlement. Cowbirds, whose numbers have increased enormously with the spread of agriculture and deforestation, rarely lay eggs in robins' nests, and when they do, the robins remove them. Robins have expanded their range throughout the west, as irrigation and other human habitat alterations have created suitable environments. They are more common now than in colonial times. Most robins do not migrate to the neotropics, and hence are not threatened by persistent pesticides on their wintering grounds. And, unlike other bird species, they seem to tolerate, if not benefit from, forest fragmentation in the United States. Hence robins are likely to remain into the indefinite future one of our most common and enjoyable birds.

W. E. Davis, Jr.

MEET OUR COVER ARTIST

For the second consecutive month, Barry Van Dusen has provided artwork for *Bird Observer*'s cover. Barry has been an independent professional artist for nearly fifteen years. He recently returned from the opening of the important international show, "Birds in Art," at the Leigh Yawkey Woodson Art Museum in Wausau, Wisconsin. This year marks the second year in a row that Barry's artwork was included in the show. Barry will also have his Northern Saw-whet Owl portrait on the cover of the November/December issue of *Bird Watcher's Digest*. For scheduled exhibits or information, Barry can be reached at 13 Radford Road, Princeton, Massachusetts 01541.

M. Steele