

THE MIGRANT

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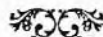
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USEFUL HINTS FOR FIELD WORK

By GEORGE R. MAYFIELD

The morning hour is the best time of day to study birds. At this time they are most active in getting food and most lively in song. A quick eye, a keen ear, a deal of patience and a love of nature make up the best equipment for successful field work. In addition to these personal requisites one should have a pair of field glasses, 8-power preferred, for the study of those species which are a bit shy or else feed in the tops of trees.

Color is the best and surest means of identification. If a bird is black, or blue, or red, he can be run down very quickly in Reed's Pocket Guide or Blanchan's Bird Neighbors. If he is brown or mottled the search is more difficult. If a small brown bird with a chestnut crown, look for the Chipping Sparrow; if larger, with white lines over the head and white on the throat, look for the Whitethroat. If brown, with white outer tail feathers, look for the Vesper Sparrow; if small and brown with a pink bill, see if it is a Field Sparrow. The vireos are olive and green with habits that make them somewhat difficult to study closely. But the two white wing bars usually show the White-eyed Vireo plainly to the amateur; the light line over the eye is a good way to spot the Red-eyed Vireo. In short, the more expert one becomes, the quicker he is in selecting that one feature which distinguishes one species from another. It may be a mark ever so small, a color ever so faint, or some characteristic movement, but he learns to look first for this one point and the decision is made. Once mastered, this glance will reveal more than long inspection by an untrained worker.

Next to color, note the exact size of the bird. A large brown bird is not likely to be one of the sparrows and a small brown one is not one of the thrushes. Practice soon enables one to tell to an inch how long a bird is, and this helps to eliminate many of the species similarly marked. Among the warblers, which are so nearly the same length and build, one must have to resort to colors and markings more than any other feature. The place where a bird is feeding usually reveals to an expert the probable identity of a bird. The tops and outer limbs of trees are the feeding grounds for the orioles, vireos and warblers. The trunk and the limbs of trees delight the heart of the Creeper, the Woodpecker and the Nuthatch; the Mocker, the Thrasher, the Catbird and the Sparrow prefer the bushes and the thickets for their nests and their feeding grounds; in the meadows and the fields are the Larks, the Bobolinks, the Bluebirds, the Doves and many of the sparrows, while many species are found only in the deep woods away from the eyes of men.

The flight of birds is also a good criterion. Some fly in almost a straight line, such as the Crow, the Grackle, the Oriole and the Vultures. The up and down motion of the Woodpecker is a family failing and is almost a sure sign of recognition. Some flap their wings a great deal in flight, such as the Jay, the Grackle, the sparrows and the Mocker. Some birds are high flyers, like the Red-tailed Hawk, the water birds and most birds on a long migration; still other birds skim along the ground, rarely getting but a few feet

above terra firma. The Cedar Waxwings fly around in compact flocks, with movements almost as perfect as the evolutions of a West Point cadet corps; the Creeper, the woodpeckers and other species prefer to be alone or else find that two make up company and the rest are undesirable citizens. Even the walk of birds is evidence enough to an expert in detecting the species. The stately step of the Grackle, the swift marathon rush of the Quail, the rapid two-step of the sparrows and the nervous walk of the Killdeer are just as characteristic as their coloring.

The quickest of all means of identification is the song of birds, but it takes longest to get this down to accurate results. To the practiced ear, however, the note of a bird becomes as much a test as the coloring of the bird. One increases his efficiency many times by this means, as he may detect the presence of a new bird or a rare bird by a different note. He can thus cover a much larger territory by using both eye and ear. But it must not be forgotten that it requires infinite patience to master the fifty-seven different varieties of the Robin's song, the many calls of the Wren, and the varied notes of the sparrows.

Let the student begin with a few common species and learn to recognize them instantly; add to these one by one the new species, taking care in each case to master the colors, the markings and the habits of the bird, so that he can identify the bird at once. When he has mastered twenty species in this way he is likely to become an enthusiastic student of bird life.

And lastly, by all means keep a notebook, one that you can carry in your pocket afield as well as kept readily accessible at home. In this book write down the birds as you find them, interesting things you have observed, data on nests you examine, etc., and don't forget to include the dates, for these will make your notes useful to others, as well as to yourself.

Nashville, Tenn., April, 1920.



A SUMMER VISITOR "DRIPPING ROCK" NOTES

One morning just before dawn while the light was so meager that moving objects could scarcely be seen, something in apparent distress was noticed in the deepest part of the fish pond. A rush for a dip net, that should have been within reach, but never is when needed most, gave the thing time to reach shore safely. While moving slowly toward it in the shadow of the shrubbery, the wet creature was seen to run its bill through its feathers, flutter its wings, stretch its neck, again flutter its wings and deliberately return to the water. It swam or rather paddled out two feet from the edge of the pool into the deepest part, where the water is three feet deep, fluttering its wings with the effort and slight distress that a small boy manifests when he first learns to swim, dog fashion. Once more it swam to shore, preened its feathers, fluttered, showered drops of water on the nearby ferns, stretched its neck as though exercising for high C, rested a moment, then back again to the water with its wings flapping water in a thick spray that wet every part of the body except the head. The head was held high in a strained position as though afraid a single drop of water would touch it. There was nothing but awkwardness in the movements of the bird; in fact, it acted as though doing something distasteful and unusual. After the third splashing it remained quietly at the side of the pool, where the shadows of an overhanging shale cliff made it impossible to see anything but a long down curved bill and some curious light and dark markings that were still too

wet to define. Without hurry it moved a few steps toward a Royal fern, where the ground is a little moist at all times. Here it stopped, turned its head slightly upward, then quickly jabbed its long bill in the wet ground for whatever it was that attracted it. This was repeated a dozen times, always within an inch or so of the last boring. By this time the light was strong enough and the feathers fluffy and dry enough so that the beautiful markings left no doubt that a Woodcock had come to visit us.

For three months this aristocrat lived with us. Lived in a closely built section of Nashville, in a city lot of less than half an acre, within a stone's throw of a street car line. For the Woodcock it was three months of night-feasts, before-dawn baths and loneliness. For me it was three months of genuine pleasure—pleasure, because being hostess to a true aristocrat is a joy not often brought to me. No bird on the ground ever quite reaches the poise and noble bearing of the Woodcock. The slow dignity of its movements when it skirted the shrubbery, moving from one moist spot to another, was exactly like the slow gracefulness of a bride in a middle aisle. The gentle pressure or pat of its foot as it tested the resistance of the damp ground before trusting its full weight to it, or the repressed eagerness with which it thrust its long bill was more like the slow motion movies than a hungry bird in search of food. Its actions were never hurried, not even when it took flight at the unexpected approach of a visitor. Usually the first knowledge a visitor had of its presence was the whistling of the short primaries as they sounded overhead. It rose gracefully and easily from the dense undergrowth, taking off from the ground without effort and with no apparent haste, swinging around to alight within the boundaries of the hedge-fenced garden, always going from back to front, from front to side, and again returning to the back underbrush when the need arose.

It became accustomed to me and allowed me, after a few weeks, to work within a few feet of it. Many times it closed its eyes and sank its head, evidently in sleep, yet pruning and weeding went on within arm's reach of it. After two months of daily companionship it could be picked up with both hands forming a basket-like nest, the wings examined and the tail spread, then, when set again on the ground, it would start boring immediately, paying no further attention to us. It could be carried from one place in the garden to another that had been freshly wet for it, and it never gave any manifestation of fear as long as I moved slowly and nervelessly. A quick motion or the chattering of guests brought the whistling wings into immediate play or sent it unhurriedly into the undergrowth, always moving its head and body around so that the offender was kept in full view.

Through June, July and August this friendship grew. Then, one morning during the last week in August, 1931, it made its last round of the garden, taking with it band No. A429378. Now that it is gone, memories of its dignity and gentleness are so great that it is hard not to believe that the curious bathing antics were intentionally set for an hour when no picture and few eyes could ever bear witness to its strange performance.

Nashville, Tenn., June, 1932.



FALL "MIGRANTS:" We regret to announce that two of our officers are leaving Tennessee and are therefore handing in their resignations. Miss Vera Kearby, our efficient Secretary, and a most loyal member for some years, is returning to Texas, her native State. Mr. Compton Crook, who has for several years served us as Treasurer, is located in Kentucky at present. The Society is much indebted to these offices for their work in its behalf, and we shall miss their good company on field days and at meetings.

