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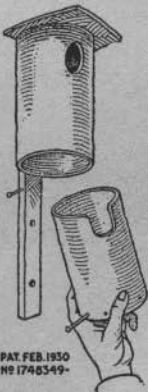


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# THE MIGRANT

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## THE MOCKINGBIRD'S IMITATION OF OTHER BIRDS

By GEORGE R. MAYFIELD.

For the past ten years I have been listening to the song of the Mockingbird throughout the entire year, and making notes on such of them as seemed of special interest. In this article I shall give some conclusions based on this study.

In the first place, I should like to say that these observations have convinced me that the Mockingbird inherits his repertory from many generations back and that, from time to time, each individual will pick up some new songs, or calls, from his environment. This can be seen when the mocker chirps like a young chicken, calls like a turkey, imitates the whistle of a human being, or gives an echo to some musical sound that he hears from his surroundings.

To make a complete study of the Mocker's powers of imitation, one would need to know: First, songs and calls of birds now extinct in this section of the world, which may have been imitated by the ancestors of the present Mocker; second, songs and calls of all contemporary species in this part of the United States; third, the songs and calls of all Mockingbirds now singing. The writer knows nothing of No. 1. He knows the songs and call of about 175 species, of which fewer than 100 may be strictly classified as song birds, and as for No. 3, he has listened to some 35 Mockers in different localities around Nashville and has tabulated some of the results. From these notes he has divided the songs of the Mockingbirds into three classes:

First: Songs unlike those of any species now extant. These songs may be original with the Mockingbird himself, or may be inherited imitation of birds now extinct. The power to inherit song has been demonstrated by young birds raised in isolation from others of their kind.

Second: Songs and imitations of species from other sections of the South. A striking example of this is found in the imitation by the Mocker of the Brown-headed Nuthatch. This latter species is not found within 100 miles of Nashville, so far as we know, and the question arises, how can the Mockingbirds we have here imitate so closely the songs and calls of this and other birds which are not in this section. Several theories have been advanced to explain this phenomenon. First, that this imitation is accidental. To this I would reply that too many Mockingbirds closely imitate this song of the Nuthatch for the imitation to be a mere accident. Another theory is that this Nuthatch was once to be found in this section. To this theory I would reply that since conditions in Middle Tennessee are probably as conducive to the presence of this species at present as in centuries past, it is absurd to maintain this idea. A third theory is that the Mockingbird migrates to the south of us and learned these notes by hearing the Nuthatch in his native haunts. Recent investigation by our Nashville observers indicates that the females and young do migrate southward into the territory of this Nuthatch and it is reasonable to suppose that the young males there learn the notes of that species. The fourth theory is in my judgment the best one of them all, namely, that the Mockingbirds in those sections of Mississippi, Alabama

and Georgia, where the Brown-headed Nuthatch is found, hear the calls of this bird and imitate them. The Mockingbirds adjacent to this group catch these notes, find them pleasing to their ears and imitate them, and so from Mockingbird to Mockingbird the signal calls are relayed until they reach this section of Tennessee.

Third: The Mockingbird has songs and calls imitating many of the species that are to be found breeding in Tennessee. Eighty per cent or more of the songs of most Mockers are imitations which may be recognized. In the case of others, as low as 30 per cent of their songs would be traceable to imitations of birds now existing in Middle Tennessee. It is significant that almost no winter birds are imitated as far as my records show, and also that few, if any, purely transient birds are imitated. This may be partially at least explained by the fact that Mockers do very little singing in the winter, and therefore do not take the opportunity to rehearse the winter notes of Northern visitants. We are then limited in our study of this mimicry to permanent residents and to summer residents.

Before taking up a list of the birds imitated, I should like to call attention to the differing songs of the Mocker at different seasons of the year. The most remarkable song from the standpoint of imitation is the spring song. It would require a good many adjectives to do justice to this song, and it is the one most often described by those who have named him the greatest of singers. Suffice it to say here then that this song is loud and ecstatic and is designed to win and hold a mate. Then comes in late summer a song which is less imitation and more improvisation. Usually the first week in September marks the beginning of this second period. Later in the autumn period we have a musing rhythmical song, low, sweet and expressive, in which practically no birds are imitated. He seems to be dreaming of the past or planning dimly for the future. This song can be heard in October and early November. The mating urge being no longer present, he apparently sings for his own pleasure alone, and frequently while hidden within the foliage. In midwinter the Mockingbird occasionally indulges in a song quite similar to that of late summer. It might be added in this connection that the night song of the Mockingbird is the most rapturous of them all and is marked by an unusual degree of imitation. This is most commonly heard in the month of June. In addition to the song of the Mockingbird, we should remember that he has certain calls which indicate various emotions, such as danger, protest, fighting, the presence of its young, and other feelings, the notes for which may be interpreted by those who know these calls.

We now come to a list of birds that are most imitated by the Mockingbird. I am placing the Carolina Wren, the Blue Jay, and the Cardinal at the head of the list. It might be said that the Mockingbird has stolen all the songs and many of the calls of the Carolina Wren and this is to a large extent true for the Blue Jay and the Cardinal. All of these birds are common in summer and may be heard frequently. In the next group I shall place the Bluebird, the Titmouse, the Purple Martin, the Red-headed Woodpecker, the Flicker and the Sparrow Hawk. Nearly all Mockingbirds imitate these species regularly and accurately. In the third group I shall include the Bob White, Towhee, Kildeer, Woodthrush, Maryland Yellow Throat and the Crested Flycatcher. Most Mockingbirds imitate these species regularly and accurately. In the fourth group I shall place the Wood Pewee, Red-eyed Vireo, Kingbird, Chat, Whippoorwill, Thrasher, Catbird, Baltimore Oriole, Summer Tanager, White-eyed Vireo and the Bewicks Wren. Many Mockingbirds imitate these species and do so fairly well. In the fifth group I would place the following species as represented in the repertory of many Mockingbirds, but not so frequently imitated, the Robin, Warbling Vireo, Red-winged Blackbird,



































