# IMPRESSIONS OF ENGLISH BIRDS.

BY CHARLES W. TOWNSEND.[1]

To spend the months of May and June in England when the birds are singing their best, and when bluebells, hawthorns and foxgloves come into bloom, has always been my ambition. We are all more or less familiar with English birds. It is part of a general education. Chaucer and Shakespeare, Burns and Shelley, Wordsworth and Tennyson contain passages about English birds which are household words.

The impression of one who is familiar with the calls and songs of American birds, when he hears for the first time the morning chorus of English birds, is one of confusion. Many of the calls and songs are similar to and yet different from those he has left behind. Some he can recognize at once. Thus the song of the Cuckoo, is, to turn things around, a perfect imitation of a Cuckoo clock. But when he sees the bird, he is struck with its resemblance to a Falcon with its long pointed wings and long tail, as well as its blue-gray color.

There are three English birds which are so abundant everywhere, even in gardens of large towns, and which are such persistent and good singers that every passer-by should know them. I refer to the Chaffinch, the Song Thrush and the Blackbird. All are confiding birds, and easily seen. The Chaffinch has a pink breast, a greenish brown back and conspicuous white patches on his wings. He is about the size of our Purple Finch and his song suggests the song of that bird, although he does not reach the heights of that cheerful and melodious singer. The song is generally short and lacking in variety. It ends abruptly with a *sweet-oh*, a *wee-chu* or the cheery English expression *right-oh*. He is commonly believed to say *ring, ring, rattle, chuck widow*, and even to command, *go quick, fetch me two bottles ginger beer*. Altogether he is a bird well worth knowing and his aquaintance is easily made.

The Song Thrush looks like our American Thrushes, especially the Olive-backed Thrush, but he is more closely allied to our

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Robin. Like him he hops and runs along the lawn, appears to listen for a worm, pounces on one and deftly extracts it from its burrow. The song, however, resembles very closely those of our Brown Thrasher and Catbird. Like them it rejoices in repetitions of notes, many of which are delightfully clear and musical. "The throstle, with his note so true," as Shakespeare says, is a great improvisor and is continually changing his theme. My note book contains a multitude of these, from which I select a few: *me-too, me-too; see-it-right, see-it-right; oh-phee-you, oh-phee-you; keep-her-to-it, keep-her-to-it.* Often, as with our birds, the Song Thrush happens on a theme that appears to please him and he repeats it a number of times. When several of these birds are singing at the same time, as is often the case, for they are surprisingly abundant, the air rings with their melody.

The Blackbird is deserving of more praise than is usually bestowed on him by the public, and I am inclined to think that the psychological effect of his somber plumage and his name is a handicap in his appreciation. After all there is a great deal in a name. It is a pity his old name, *merle,* is not preserved. He belongs to the same group as does our Robin, and, like him, has a yellow bill and similar lawn habits. His song is deep and melodious, full of sweet wild notes and flute-like tones and trills. It suggests at times the song of our Robin but is far more melodious. It also suggests the song of our Rose-breasted Grosbeak, but this again it surpasses in the purity and range of its notes.

> "The merle's note
> Melifluous, rich, deep-toned, fills all the vale,
> And charms the ravish'd ear."

It is a satisfying song. It is not hurried; there is a serenity about it which adds greatly to its charm and places the singer, to my mind, in the front rank of English song-birds, perhaps superior to them all.

I know it is rank heresy to say so, but I prefer the song of the Blackbird to that of the Nightingale, and I have had many excellent opportunities to hear the latter bird at its best. From a traditional and literary aspect, and from the fact that the Nightingale sings at night more than any other bird, its song has a prestige that easily overcomes all competitors. One may add as an aside here

that the poets are not to be depended on for biological accuracy, as it is not a fact that the Nightingale sings only at night, but, even if it were the case, I should not agree with Portia who said that

> "The nightingale, if she should sing by day,
> When every goose is cackling, would be thought
> No better a musician than the wren."

The song of the Nightingale is a beautiful song and a brilliant one, full of sweet trills, fluted notes and melodious phrases in surprising variety. The song is often ventriloquial in character, and the singer, who may be but a few yards overhead, concealed in the darkness and the thick foliage, often begins with low whistles, made as if by the drawing in of the breath, which appear to come from a distant tree, and follows them by loud clear notes, coming from near at hand. It always seems to me a cheerful and lively song, free from any strain of melancholy which is commonly attributed it by the poets. Thus Milton, in "Il Penseroso":—

> "Sweet bird that shunns't the noise of folly
> Most musical, most melancholy!"

and Shakespeare, who adopts the common explanation of the sadness, in "The Passionate Pilgrim" says:

> "Every thing did banish moan,
> Save the nightingale alone.
> She, poor bird, as all forlorn,
> Lean'd her breast up—till a thorn
> And there sung the dolefull'st ditty."

The poet's Nightingale is always "she," owing probably to the fable that Philomela, daughter of Pandion, was changed into a Nightingale.

The bird seems to be filled to the brim with song which he is in such a hurry to pour forth that his theme lacks the fine and restful charm of serenity. This holy charm of serenity is, I think, best illustrated by our Hermit Thrush, whose incomparable song heard in the depths of the northern forests, thrills me as does no other song.

English Warblers are very different from our Wood Warblers, who make up in the brightness and variety of their plumage for the general poor quality of their songs. The English Warblers

are, for the most part, plainly apparelled, but many of them are fine singers. The Blackcap, the Garden Warbler and the Greater Whitethroat have brilliant songs, abounding in sweet musical notes. The Chiff-chaff, the Wood Warbler and the Willow Warbler are nearly as alike in plumage as three peas, but by their songs one may know them. The Chiff-chaff recites his name very plainly over and over again, the Wood Warbler, after a preliminary note or two, trills like our Chipping Sparrow, while the Willow Warbler has a charmingly tender song, somewhat on a minor key with a sweet diminuendo ending.

The early New England colonists were not ornithologists and they made many mistakes in bestowing familiar names on our birds. The most flagrant mistake was in calling a large Thrush with a red breast, a Robin. The English Robin Redbreast is endeared to everyone by its confiding ways, its trig form and red breast, and by the sweetness of its song. Like our familiar and beloved Song Sparrow, it may be heard singing in every month in the year. It hops along the path with elevated tail, courtesies a bit when embarrassed, yet does not hesitate to come within a foot or two of the quiet bird watcher. Its song has great variety and compass. Sweet and musical, at times it becomes almost as shrill and high pitched as an insect's voice. It trills and it whistles and breaks out most unexpectedly with great vehemence, as if the dam that held it back had suddenly given way. In these respects its song resembles those of the Nightingale and the Wren.

The song of the Wren is of course Wren-like and easily recognized. It suggests to me much of the quality but not the wildness and beauty of the song of the Winter Wren. Like the Winter Wren, it slips a cog as it were, in its song from time to time, but then goes on as before.

England is blest in the numbers of the Titmouse family. While we in New England are practically limited to one species, the Chickadee, there are half a dozen different kinds in England, each with its distinctive plumage and its strong Titmouse character of restless activity in exploring the trees for food, and its pleasing fearlessness in the presence of man. In plumage and manners, the Marsh Tit, which is a bird of gardens and orchards more than of marshes, resembles most closely our own familiar

bird. The rare and beautiful Bearded Tit, very different from the rest, it was my fortune to be shown, together with its nest and eggs, in the region of the Norfolk Broads.

Another group which is entirely lacking in the new world is the Wagtail group. The Pied Wagtail is widespread throughout England, and may easily be recognized by its long wagging tail, its pied coat of black and white and its graceful walk. On the roads it is the boldest of birds, and waits till the last minute before fleeing the on-rushing motor-car. The Grey Wagtail has a lovely blue-grey back and yellow under parts, while the Yellow Wagtail fully comes up to its name and is unmistakable.

The bird that "sings at heaven's gate" is a delightfully common bird in many parts of England, and one that joyfully gives forth its song without stint. The Skylark often begins to sing on the ground but the ardor of its passion soon bears it up on quivering wings still singing. At last it becomes but a speck in the sky, where it alternately flutters and sails into the wind, pouring forth its enraptured soul in torrents and continuing to do so as it floats slowly back to earth. It is a joyful and melodious song and is most inspiring, especially when several are rising and singing thus together, whether it be over bleak wind-swept moors, peaceful pastures or seashore marshes. With us the Horned Lark rises and sings in a similar manner and at times his song suggests that of his famous relative, but it is generally far inferior. It is, however, well worthy of attention.

The Sand Martin of England is our own Bank Swallow, the Martin, which looks like our Tree Swallow but has a white rump, is allied to the Eave Swallow, while the Swallow resembles our Barn Swallow so closely in plumage, voice and habits that it is welcomed by the American bird lover as an old friend.

One could mention many more English birds whose names are familiar in our ears. The Hedge Sparrow is a confiding little bird that looks for all the world like a commonplace Sparrow, but is, in reality, allied to the Warblers. It has a simple little song. The Yellow Hammer is a Finch with a yellow head, who is supposed to sing "a little piece of bread and no cheese." It is of course a totally different bird from our Flicker, which is sometimes called by that name.

It is surprising that two such large and edible birds as the Lapwing and the Ring Dove or Wood Pigeon should be so common, even abundant. In our country they would long ago have been decimated by the farmer boy's gun. The Lapwing, a large and striking bird in its black and white plumage, has for a long time been a sufferer from those who desired to eat its eggs, and it is possible that on this very account it has been preserved from slaughter. The Ring Dove is a fine bird to see, larger than the domestic Pigeon and one fond of grain fields. The interesting Stone Curlew or Norfolk Plover is, alas, rare. It has a plaintive whistle and a song that suggests the word *bob-o-link.* Many shore-birds are surprisingly common.

One is impressed in England with the rarity of Hawks, owing, as Hudson laments, to the Pheasant and the game-keeper, and, one might add, the egg-collector. Our first settlers went far astray in naming the Hawks. The English Sparrow Hawk is a close relative of our Sharp-shinned Hawk which well deserves the name of Sparrow Hawk. Both are Accipiters and pirates among small birds. Unfortunately the name Sparrow Hawk was bestowed on an American Falcon that should have been called a Kestrel as it is nearly the same as the English Kestrel, and like it, it is a beneficial bird, being addicted to a diet of beetles and mice and not of birds. It is a pity that our Pigeon Hawk was not called by the poetical name of Merlin, for it closely resembles the English bird of that name. It is said to be never too late to mend, but I am afraid these names are fixed and past repair.

I was lucky in seeing the Marsh and the Montague's Harrier, near relatives of our Marsh Hawk, also in seeing the Buzzard, a fine large Buteo.

The Herring Gull is common on the English coasts, and it adopts there a habit that I wish might be imparted to the American branch, of following the plough and picking up injurious worms and grubs from the freshly turned soil. In this it is joined by the Black-headed Gull, a very abundant bird, and it is common to see a solitary ploughman followed by a long trail of pure white birds. Interspersed with these are scores in sable plumage, the ever present Rook, a fairly close counterpart of our Crow, although the less common Carrion Crow is somewhat nearer. Curiously

enough, the call of the Black-headed Gull suggests at times a Crow's *caw*. The Hooded Crow, with its black hood above its grey mantle is not often seen in summer south of Scotland, while the Jackdaw, a small Crow of sable hue except for the light gray nape and side of the neck, haunts all ruins and rejoices in building its nest behind the stone effigies of saints on cathedrals. Its playful and rapid flight and querulous *ook* are characteristic. The Jay and the Magpie have only to be mentioned for they are easily recognized.

England is blessed in the numbers of semi-domesticated and wild Mute Swans that are to be seen on all the little rivers and ponds. A group of six or seven grey cygnets, assiduously cared for by stately parents in pure white, forms a charming picture. Another splendid and common water bird is the Sheldrake, a strikingly white and black and chestnut bird, nearly as large as a Goose. Here both sexes are brightly plumaged, and both together preside over the family of gray ducklings. They nest in rabbit burrows which abound in England.

The Common Heron of England is practically the same as our Great Blue Heron, while the Bittern is similar to ours but somewhat larger. I was fortunate in seeing the Bittern near Hickling Broad, for it has become a very rare bird in England, and I was fortunate in hearing its voice. This, unlike the voice of our bird, does not sound like a wooden pump in action, nor like the driving of a stake in a bog, but suggests the distant boom of a fog-horn. By the poets, the voice is always called a "booming," and it was supposed to be produced with the bill emersed in mud or water.

A Gallinule, which one may see even in St. James' Park in the heart of London, and which is common in all ponds, is the Moorhen. It may be known by its dark plumage and bright red bill. The Great-crested Grebe is another English water-bird well worth seeing.

It is certainly a great pleasure to become familiar with birds that are famous in tradition and literature, and it is also a great pleasure to return to our own birds. Both English and American birds have their charms.

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