

THE MOCKINGBIRD'S WING-FLASHING *

BY FRANCIS H. ALLEN

A RECENT paper by Dr. Sutton (1946) on wing-flashing in the Mockingbird (*Mimus polyglottos*) interested me especially because I lived on rather intimate terms with a pair of Mockingbirds here in West Roxbury, near Boston, in the season of 1909 and then first witnessed the wing-flashing on my lawn. A male Mockingbird spent the winter of 1908-1909 on and about our place and was joined by a female about April 1. From then on the pair were constantly seen in the neighborhood and frequently fed on our lawn, but it was not till June 6, when they had young in the nest, that I saw the behavior in question. To quote from my notes (June 6, 1909): "I saw for the first time today the curious spreading of the wings by the bird as he hunts his food—or food for his young—on the lawn. The wings are lifted rather deliberately and thrust out from the shoulder, I should say, but are kept at an angle of about 90 degrees. It is a deliberate, not at all a nervous, motion, and I think it may well be for the purpose of flushing insects in the grass by a show of the white areas, as a correspondent of Mrs. Miller's suggests (*In Nesting Time*). My wife had seen the act three or four days ago. This is undoubtedly since the hatching of the young, and the habit may be correlated with the necessity of increased activity in hunting insects."

The four young left the nest June 12, and on June 22 I saw three of them running about on the lawn and feeding. They jetted their tails and acted like full-grown birds, though their tails were still short. The parents were still feeding them. On June 23 I "saw one of the young opening its wings and closing them as it stood on the lawn, after the fashion of the parent bird as described under date of June 6."

The passage from Mrs. Miller ** referred to in my notes reads as follows: "At the end of a run he lifts his wings, opening them wide, displaying their whole breadth, which makes him look like a gigantic butterfly, then instantly lowers his head and runs again, generally picking up something as he stops. A correspondent in South Carolina, familiar with the ways of the bird, suggests that his object is to startle

* We are particularly pleased to publish in connection with this article by Mr. Allen what is, we believe, the first published photograph of a Mockingbird flashing its wings. It is interesting to compare the photograph with the painting by George M. Sutton reproduced in the December 1946 *Bulletin* (Plate 8) and with the painting, apparently the first representation of the wing-flashing behavior, by Roger Tory Peterson, published in *Life* for April 8, 1946, page 74.—Ed.

** Mrs. Harriet Mann Miller, who wrote under the pen name of Olive Thorne Miller, is not so well known to the younger generation of ornithologists as she ought to be, but she was a careful observer and a conscientious recorder of her observations of the intimate life of many American birds.—F.H.A.



Mockingbird (Mimus polyglottos) flashing its wings. Photographed by Ralph E. Lawrence at Arlington, Virginia, March 22, 1947.

the grasshoppers, or, as he expresses it, to 'flush his game.' I watched very closely and could not fix upon any theory more plausible, though it seemed to be weakened by the fact that the nestlings, as mentioned above, did the same thing before they thought of looking for food. The custom is not invariable; sometimes it is done, and sometimes not" (Olive Thorne Miller, 1888:60). The reference to the "nestlings" is explained by an earlier description (p. 52) of the first movement of a young bird on the ground after fluttering out of the nest: "I saw his first movement, which was a hop, and, what surprised and delighted me, accompanied by a peculiar lifting of the wings. . . ." And again (p. 54), of another fledgling: "He raised himself upon his shaky little legs, cried out, and started off exactly as number one had done,—westward, hopping, and lifting his wings at every step."

Dr. Sutton's suggested explanation of the wing-flashing behavior of the Mockingbird is an interesting one and has some good evidence to back it. Perhaps my own observation of a single pair and their young, far beyond the species' normal range, does not justify the doubts I own to, but nevertheless I have them—and for these reasons: (a) The behavior, as I noted at the time, appeared to be a deliberate, not a nervous, motion, such as would be expected if it indicated "wariness, suspicion, distrust." (b) I noticed nothing at the time to suggest that there was any ground for suspicion on the bird's part. (c) Though the pair had haunted our lawn ever since it became a good feeding ground in the spring, it was not till the young were hatched in June that this behavior was seen. (d) The necessity for increased insect-gathering activity after the hatching of the young might well have prompted a change of behavior.

This brings us back to the theory that this behavior is of use in getting food, but I have another suggestion to make on how it may operate. Dr. Joseph Grinnell (1924) showed how the white of the under parts of birds might be useful in lighting up the crevices where food was to be found. And everyone knows how the reflection of light from a sheet of white paper or even the open hand can help to illuminate a dark spot. Why could not the flash of white from the Mockingbird's wings serve that purpose in the grass of a lawn or field? In that way, sluggish prey could be detected and captured, while the more active prey would be startled into betraying themselves by motion. Some of Mrs. Laskey's observations, as reported by Dr. Sutton, seem to show that the wing-flashing was used especially in dark situations and when the bird was scrutinizing its surroundings carefully—that is, in circumstances where additional light would be of service.

The young bird that I saw flashing was of an age to feed itself and may have acquired the habit through imitation of its parents, but the behavior, whatever end it may serve, is more probably instinctive.

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