

Untimely Snow: Woeful weather for Birds

MARION NIXON, Wauchope, Sask.

Snow after the migration of warblers has begun may spell disaster for many, and discomfort for all such minute scraps of bird life. This is especially true of the migrants that depend on a meat diet to keep up their energy and warmth, so sorely taxed by excessive cold, for the cold keeps insects sluggish also. Mosquitoes that were plentiful during the three hot days which tempted the birds back here, were suddenly no longer visible. Flies and small beetles hid in crevices again, waiting for more sun.

It is not surprising if a bird's strength is depleted during a cold, wet, blustery spell of weather that keeps on too long. How grateful the birds are for the shelter provided by planted windbreaks at such a time on their migration! They find rest from the wind's buffeting, and suffer less wind-chill; and on the bark of the trees they may find enough scale insects to tide them over till insects fly again.

In spring, 1953, after one week-end inch of rain, the snow lay white on the ground again. It proved to be the background against which we saw several unfamiliar birds, who sought refuge within the forty-year-old, twenty-row-deep windbreak about our farm home. The most noticeable of these was a tiny Redstart, which came into the verandah several times after flies that had dropped from the screen to the sill because of cold weather. The Redstart was less timid than many birds, perhaps because it was unused to people, and so had not learned fear; perhaps because it was too hungry and weak to care. At any rate, later in the day it seemed to be suffering badly from cold, hardly able to fly, and easily tipped by the wind as it hopped from one snowy twig on the ground to another, hunting food. The Redstart has a habit of holding its wings out a little from its body, as though flaunting its beautiful red and jet plumage. This must make it even more liable to get chilled in such weather, and certainly gave the wind gusts more chance to buffet it about. We could keep within reach of it

with a makeshift net, but attempts to catch it proved unsuccessful. It seemed all too likely it must succumb before another morning, without protection within doors.

During the morning, our attention was called to a thrush beneath the trees, foraging among the robins. While stalking it, to try to identify its species, our eyes were caught by a glimpse of grey and yellow against the snow. This proved to be a Myrtle warbler, and we soon realized that the shelterbelt was swarming with its fellow migrants. In fact, since that day, we have learned that many people in the district also have become acquainted with this pretty little bird. We seemed to be in the midst of the Myrtle warbler movement north. Slaty grey on the back, it has yellow patches on the top of the head, on the rump and at each side of the breast, but separated from the white breast by a broad dark bar. Tail and wings are brownish, the wings with two white bars. The females are less colorful and have broken lines of spotting on the flanks instead of the dark bars.

Another unfamiliar bird we found, busily scratching among the leaves on the ground under the trees, was a Towhee, which we had seen here only once before . . . one other snowy spell in spring. In color, it was almost as red and black as the Redstart, though nearly as large as a robin, and its bib made sharp contrast to the white underparts. There was a flirt of white outer tail feathers each time it retreated down the corridor between trees.

More familiar birds abounded. It seemed as though the robins from acres around had come for a feast of earthworms on the lawn, and the grackles shuffled about amongst them with their beaks uptilted in the direction of more threatened rain. From the trees came the clear melody of the White-throat sparrow, "Oh, sweet, Canada, Canada, Canada," and many of these flitted from one quarter of the shelterbelt to another. Among the spruce that flank the northern side, a band of Harris sparrows moved shyly about, sounding

their plaintive, pure couplets, each on its own individual key of a harmonious minor scale. Yet each two notes, sweet and drawn well out, never interrupted the repeated note of another of the flock. When disturbed they moved on from branch to branch, with little sipping call notes in a worried tone.

Toward evening, other birds sought shelter from the wind. Even a handsome Mallard and his mate waddled across the lawn, pausing to preen their wings; and a Killdeer slanted down and ran along the driveway . . . a thing we seldom see in the house yard though they commonly frequent the open ground near the barn.

A flock of swallows materialized out of the sky and took refuge on the powerline wires leading to the house. Here they fluffed up their plumage and tucked in their heads, companionably snuggled together in twos and threes and fours along the wire. They seemed very weary. We could watch them from ring-side seats, by going to the south window upstairs, and found that there were four species among the little band. Most of them were Tree swallows, iridescent green-on-navy backs with white underparts and blunt V-tails. There were two Barn swallows, with reddish-brown breasts and the long "swallow tail" feathers. One Cliff swallow was clearly identified by his broad white forehead patch, and there were two softly brown Bank swallows with creamy breasts outlined at the throat by a darkish bar. These two also had blunt V-tails. As evening drew on, they cuddled closer together, till they all crowded about a foot of each line, close to the house wall, thankful for the oasis of quiet out of the wind.

Endlessly reiterated, the mourning dove's dismal plaint seemed particularly suitable to the weather, and to the feelings of all the migrants snowbound here.

Did you know that chickadees like dead honeybees, but they never eat the part with the stinger in it? Our bees died and we cleaned the frames up and put them where we could watch the birds eat, but they dropped the stinger part on the snow.

—Edith Hanson, Viking, Alta.
(Submitted by Marion Nixon)

Wee Things

This earth is full with tiny things,
Everywhere, always present;
Each little mite in its own right
Is beautiful and pleasant.

In all the world there's never a
breeze

But makes some bird wing fleeter;
There's not a leaf among the trees
But makes the scene much sweeter.

There's not one ray of the great,
great sun

But makes the day look brighter;
There isn't a song but makes some-
one

Gayer, gladder, lighter.

And never is there a busy bee
But helps to give the notion
Its work's of prime necessity
To keep this world in motion.

A trickling stream there never was
But fed some green grass tender,
And ne'er was there a sparkling drop
But helped some sapling slender.

There never was in the wide, wide
world

One glorious sunset splendour
But made the heart of some sweet
one

Flutter in expectation:

Each gift of every wee, wee thing
Helps beautify this great Creation.

John Anton Popoff,
Yorkton, April, 1917

From the first week in January for over a month we had a flock of about three dozen Pine Grosbeaks, in a bluff by the house. They seemed to be eating rose berries. There were quite a few males, almost all a bright rosy red. This is the first I've really seen them close up. They are really beautiful.

Mrs. Thomas Lowes,
Wimmer, Sask.

Among enemies of the ideals of conservation are the thoughtless, the reckless and the wrongheaded. But I think the one that gives you the cold shudders is the almost completely immoral type, who with no conception of the social consequences of his actions — who doesn't care anyway, and who is governed by his knowledge of what he can get away with.

A. J. Hudson, Mortlach