

# BIRD WATCHING — Indoors

BY THELMA PEPPER\*

*Oh, every year hath its winter,  
And every year hath its rain —  
But a day is always coming  
When the birds go north again.*

*When the Birds Go North Again  
By Ella Higginson*

Ella Higginson undoubtedly spoke for the countless thousands of bird watchers who eagerly await the coming of spring and with it the inevitable migration to the north.

Nothing has brought so much joy to our family over the past 10 years as the excitement each spring of the first sighting of a Baltimore Oriole, a Gray-cheeked Thrush, a Harris' Sparrow or any of the other 73 species of birds that we have seen resting momentarily in our yard.

Looking back now, we can recall the spring of 1963 when a bird was but a bird. One day we mentioned to Dr. C. Stuart Houston that several "big black" birds had been in our yard. Characteristically, it wasn't long before Stuart had placed his bird cages there and encouraged us to catch the grackles so that he could band them. Nothing can stimulate one's interest more than seeing a live bird in the hand and it wasn't long before we, too, were converted and had entered into the wonderful world of bird watching. Since then it seems that nearly every day has brought a new and different experience.

What can match the fascination of seeing several hundred Bohemian Waxwings strip the berries from a large mountain-ash right before your eyes within a few minutes on a bitterly cold January day! Or those same waxwings in the early spring apparently in a drunken stupor after gorging themselves with over-ripe berries! Can you imagine seeing Common Grackles soaking hard crusts in a birdbath to soften them before eating, or Cedar Waxwings

stealing the lining from a Robin's nest to use in their own? It is exciting to see grosbeaks, waxwings and sparrows suddenly scatter at the appearance of a Loggerhead Shrike. And one day in May we were thrilled by a pair of Baltimore Orioles that returned every 10 minutes to get stuffing from an old mattress for a nest they were building three blocks away. These are some of the many exciting activities that occur in the vicinity of our backyard.

We are fortunate to live in one of the older, treed districts of Saskatoon where the boulevards are lined with elms. In our front yard there are two large mountain-ash trees. Manitoba Maple, Black and White Spruce are growing along the east side of the yard while White Birch and a large White Spruce occupy the west side. Most of our bird watching is done from our large picture window in the kitchen through which we can view the entire back yard, unknown to the birds. Beginning on the left, the part of our lot has Choke Cherry, Apple and Pear trees, French Lilac, Highbush Cranberry, sunflowers, a Green Ash, two large willows and an elm tree; the end of our lot is completely enclosed by trees. Then to the right, there are Black Spruce, cotoneasters, an ornamental crab and another mountain-ash. To complete the picture, directly below our window is a triangular flower bed, with a running-water birdbath in the centre.

Attracting birds by planting appropriate trees, flowers and shrubs has been a special interest of ours. It was in October, 1963, that the sunflowers brought the first Red Crossbills. Since then both Red and White-winged Crossbills have been fairly common visitors. The fruit of the Choke Cherries, which brings a profusion of birds in late August, disappears all too quickly. The Green Ash seems to have special attraction for grosbeaks and Purple Finches and the lilies always bring a Ruby-throated Hummingbird.

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In addition to natural food, large cones stuffed with chickadee pudding hang from the willow and spruce. Woodpeckers, nuthatches, juncos, chickadees and redpolls are commonly seen stabbing at the swinging food or clinging to the cone while they sample the delicacy inside. The chickadee pudding recipe came from Nova Scotia and for those who might like to try it, it is made of ground suet, flour, sugar, corn meal, old cake, bread and doughnuts, millet seed, peanut butter, ground apples, kitchen seeds (apple, squash, pumpkin, etc.) nuts and raisins. This is all mixed well with bacon fat. Food in a hanging cone has the big advantage of always being available to the birds in the winter, even if heavy snows blanket the ground and feeding trays.

It's October again and we know that some morning soon we'll look out our kitchen window and see a small brown bird creeping up the willow trunk. When it reaches the top it will fly to the bottom of the next willow. No binoculars are needed to identify this visitor, for surely it is a Brown Creeper, which never fails to visit our yard in the fall. This ability to identify a bird through an intriguing habit has added greatly to our bird watching pleasure. It's the trunks of these same willows that Black-and-White Warblers creep along. Again in the early fall when we see a bird literally *walking* beside our back fence, identification is assured. It is the Ovenbird. The Yellow-shafted Flicker rarely visits our yard until September, but then he's there almost every day all day long digging for ants. The steady dropping of cones from the Black spruce is a sure sign that we can find crossbills high up in the branches.

As our awareness of the many species increased, we began to appreciate their songs and through them a whole new world opened to us. An unfamiliar melody is enough to get one up at break of day, as the song of a Fox Sparrow did at 6 o'clock one morning early in May. At that hour the richness of their song is particularly noticeable and one is tempted to believe that this pre-breakfast recital is a reward reserved for those willing to get up and listen at that hour.

Each year continues to bring some new species into the yard. Memorable were the days when we recorded a Golden-crowned Kinglet, a Canada Warbler and such unexpected guests as Wilson's Snipe and Ring-necked Pheasant. The stony stare of a Great-Horned Owl greeted us one Sunday morning and nearly kept us home from church. Brown Thrasher, Rufous-sided Towhee and Rose-breasted Grosbeak have become favourites with the children and always bring excited cries of "Come and see!"

Our daily family life has been enriched abundantly during the past decade, not so much, perhaps, by the knowledge that has been gained but even more by the experiences involved in gaining it. We are inclined to believe as Walt Whitman, "You must not know too much, or be too precise or scientific about birds . . . ; a certain free margin, and even vagueness — perhaps ignorance, credulity — helps your enjoyment of these things."

#### CHECK-LIST OF BIRDS AT 1015 TEMPERANCE ST., SASKATOON

Marsh Hawk, Pigeon Hawk, Ring-necked Pheasant, Wilson's Snipe, Rock Dove, Mourning Dove, Great Horned Owl, Common Nighthawk, Ruby-throated Hummingbird, Yellow-shafted Flicker, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Hairy Woodpecker, Downy Woodpecker, Eastern Kingbird, Least Flycatcher, Black-billed Magpie, Common Raven, Common Crow, Black-capped Chickadee, Boreal Chickadee, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Brown Creeper, House Wren, Catbird, Brown Thrasher, Robin, Hermit Thrush, Swainson's Thrush, Gray-cheeked Thrush, Golden-crowned Kinglet, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Bohemian Waxwing, Cedar Waxwing, Northern Shrike, Red-eyed Vireo, Warbling Vireo, Black-and-White Warbler, Tennessee Warbler, Orange-crowned Warbler, Yellow Warbler, Magnolia Warbler, Myrtle Warbler, Black-throated Green Warbler, Blackpoll Warbler, Palm Warbler, Ovenbird, Northern Waterthrush, Mourning Warbler, Wilson's Warbler, Canada Warbler, American Redstart, House Sparrow, Baltimore Oriole, Common Grackle, Brown-headed Cowbird, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Evening Grosbeak, Purple Finch, Pine Grosbeak, Common Red-

poll, Pine Siskin, American Goldfinch, Red Crossbill, White-winged Crossbill, Rufous-sided Towhee, Baird's Sparrow, Slate-colored Junco, Tree Sparrow, Chipping

Sparrow, Clay-colored Sparrow, Harris Sparrow, White-crowned Sparrow, White-throated Sparrow, Fox Sparrow, Lincoln Sparrow, Song Sparrow.

## FEEDING The Hungry

BY LAURA HOYTE\*

I have always been interested in birds. Sometimes I used to throw out a few crumbs for them on a cold day, feeling that a full stomach would keep them warm the following night. I never ceased to marvel that a bird as small as a chickadee could survive 40-below weather, yet its cheerful song and acrobatic antics would make me think he was enjoying it.

In 1964, after we moved into a cottage on the edge of Pike Lake, I had more time to notice how many different types of birds there were around. Of course, the friendly little chickadees were present in numbers. I began feeding them, at first by hanging pieces of suet on branches of trees just outside the kitchen window, and putting little bits of bread or left-over pie, tarts, etc, in the crotch of a maple. (It wasn't a very good place, as the food kept falling in the snow.)

I especially remember having a piece of peach pie, along with a butter tart, completely consumed by one Robin. Being first up on the morning of January 2, I went to the window to see how many of our feathered friends were having breakfast. Just below the window on the walk was a robin which seemed to drag one wing a little. It looked so miserable I was sure it was hungry. Sure that it would never find the pie in the

tree, I tried to decide, while putting the kettle on for coffee, how I could get some food out to it without frightening it away. But by the time I was free to look again, I was surprised to see it in the tree eating the pie.

That day began sunny but cold. All day long the Robin ate, then flew to sit in the sunny doorway of the unoccupied doghouse which faced the south and was protected from the wind by a chokecherry bush. It was still eating there in the evening when it was almost too dark for me to see. It was there again the next morning. How early it had started, I didn't know but it seemed unable to stop eating. The weather turned bad later in the day and a blizzard was forecast. I called Janice, our daughter, home for holiday and I began to worry. Where could the Robin sleep out of the storm? We made a makeshift house out of an orange box and filled it with straw. Putting on our warm coats, we went out in the storm and fastened it to the chokecherry bush just above the doghouse where the Robin had perched when he wasn't eating or sitting in the doghouse. From what I know now, I am sure it was a waste of time. I don't think a Robin would ever go into a place like that. We even checked later with a flashlight, but we did not see the bird. The next morning it was not at the food tray, nor did it show up during the day. We did not see it again, and I always felt that it had eaten itself to death, although it could, of course, have perished in the storm. Since that time we have had as many as four Robins at our feed tray in January.

I had to find something better to hold the food. When we emptied the Christmas box of oranges, I took half the boards off one side, and nailed the other side to the trunk of the tree about 4 feet from the ground and just 6 feet from the kitchen window. From there I could

\*Mrs. Laura Hoyte lives at Pike Lake, a small resort community 18 miles south-west of Saskatoon. Now a Provincial Park, Pike Lake is an oxbow, part of the ancient bed of the South Saskatchewan River. Set in sandy country, the lake is heavily treed on the north and west sides. Rich in bird life, it is probably the best single birding area adjacent to the city.