

THE MIGRANT

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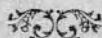
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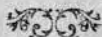
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A WINTER'S DAY

By ALBERT F. GANIER.

Yesterday had cleared with the ground whitening under flurries of snow, a leaden sky and a cutting north wind which gave poor promise of a hike afield on the morrow. Feathered denizens of the woods and fields had retired early and even the little Screech Owl, after foraging a bit, decided that more calories of heat might be retained in his small body if he would return to his hollow tree and forego an attempt to catch a luckless White-throat among the cedars.

But weather is fickle, even in winter, and Sunday dawned under a blue sky. Dazzlingly, the sun arises, from behind the hill and up through the trees as yesterday's snowflakes turn into fields of diamonds. Yesterday, scarcely a living bird could have been seen abroad, but now, what a change! Here, yonder and there, are flitting wings and cheerful voices to greet the warming sun and prospects of breakfast from under the thawing snow. My own breakfast over, I don a snug sweater, an old coat that laughs at briars, a slouch hat, wool sox, knit gloves and heavy high-top shoes which disdain such things as mud, mush and water, and motor my way out to Otter Creek, a favorite hiking ground. The gate is not convenient, but what of a barbed wire fence? It's done in a jiffy. As my feet touch the ground of this wooded pasture a sharp call ahead of me and there arises a flock of five Killdeer. They circle a bit and light again, a little further up the "wet weather brook," by which they have been feeding and "deer" at me as I pass them by. A patch of buck-bushes ahead stirs with feathered movement and as I come closer, one, two, three—eight buffy Field Sparrows arise and make for the next patch of brush. I pass along and presently am greeted with a hoarse "croak," looking near me in the thick crab-apple tree, I perceive that king of summer songsters—a Mockingbird. There is no need for song now, for mating days are far ahead—too far, indeed, to even be about practice, and then an insectivorous bird on a cold winter day must hustle so briskly for food there's little time for song. Those Starlings, too, of late years, have been greedily stripping the berries that formerly kept him fit. I pass on to the creek bank, always a center of avian activity. There goes a bolt of brilliant blue and a rattling call drifts back to tell me a Kingfisher is trying to "stick out" the winter to avoid tiring his short, stubby wings with further flight southward. Straight up the creek he goes, to the next pool, where he will patiently await the chance to drop like a plummet on some luckless little fish. A warbling call overhead arrests my attention and, casting eyes upward, I view four Bluebirds flying about erratically. They decide the thawing pasture soil will afford good feeding, so down they tumble, alighting on dry mullein stalks to make a further survey. Two brilliant males are near me, the azure back of the one and the russet red breast of the other contrast beautifully with the white snow and the emerald cedars beyond. And, happy coincidence, here comes the last of that trinity of winter birds

clad in blue—a Blue Jay—noisily winging his way over to the haystack, where the pigs are crunching a breakfast of corn on the cob. As long as the pigs get their daily ration he will get his as well, and be as happy-go-lucky an evil spirit as in the good old summer time.

My path leads me on up the creek and from the brush at the water's edge there flits ahead a little brown bird which disappears into the tangled roots of an old sycamore. He is too good for me at hide and seek, so I sit quietly, on a stump nearby, as though to say, "I give up." Presently he steps into view to look me over and then I recognize him as that cheerful sprite of the streams, a Song Sparrow. A handsome fellow is he, with neatly spotted breast and small black batwing tie. Others join him and as I pass on there are one or more in sight at every few paces. A dark brown member of the group, with shorter tail, I identify as a Swamp Sparrow. In a willow I perceive a small dusky bird in nervous motion, and as I come closed the steady flicking of its tail reveals the fact that it is a Phoebe. He, too, is a weak-billed insectivorous bird, which partakes but sparingly of wild fruits and berries, so I am forced to conclude that there are more insects abroad in winter than we might realize.

A tenant's cabin lies near my path, and over the rickety fence lean ragweed and sunflowers. There is movement about the sunflower heads and as I focus my binoculars for a better view I find a bevy of Goldfinches in olive garb, hanging head down and forked tail up, drawing forth the little black seed. I move closer and off they go with a "chittering" call and undulating flight. There is a thicket ahead; briars, weeds and buck-bushes red with fruit that look tempting, but which only the White-footed Mice deem a delicacy. A White-throated Sparrow arises and dives again a few paces ahead; in a moment a half dozen of his fellows follow. A larger bird cautiously climbs the far side of a vine-clad stump and announces himself—"joree." Where there's one there's more, and a moment later three other Towhees stealthily slink away and join the White-throats. A flash of red and a Cardinal mounts a brier before he joins two somber females in the canes by the creek. But surely there's a familiar friend missing from this motley throng, so I look about for a Chickadee and presently find him and two of his kind among the withered goldenrods. They were too busy to notice my intrusion for they were digging into the tops of the goldenrod stem galls, knowing that a fat grub lay dormant within. Over a mossy old stone wall I find myself in an open pasture, beyond which lie rough and heavily wooded hillsides. A small flock of Mourning Doves pass overhead, with whistling flight, to join the Jays, where the pigs were fed, and looking on beyond them I perceive a Turkey Vulture, gracefully soaring this way and that, systematically scanning the ground for some hapless creature which may have given up the battle of life. I've been this way before, and know that here a flock of Prairie Horned Larks may usually be found in winter, so I set about to look them up. The grass is closely cropped and I look for a dark grey "patch" upon it. In a few moments I find them—a flock of threescore, busily and silently walking along like a small army of infantry. I approach them cautiously and they allow me to come within fifty feet. Suddenly they arise en masse and after wide, sweeping circles, return and alight in the same spot, to permit my further study. A Red-tailed Hawk lifts himself on buoyant wings above the woodland, so I turn my steps that way, thinking perchance I may find his old nest now, so as to revisit it after the spring remodeling. As I enter the woods, a flock of Cedar Waxwings leave a mass of vines overhead, where they have been breakfasting off fox grapes. They fly compactly and erratically, but wheel and dive into a nearby hackberry tree, where another delicacy awaits them. A whining note a

bit further on arrests my attention, and I perceive a small Woodpecker playing hide and seek with me from behind a crab-apple tree. I stalk him from behind another, however, and soon make out the small topknot and tell-tale white stripe down his side which brand him as a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker. Approaching nearer, I find that he has ringed the bark with little holes from which he will daily drink the sap as it gathers.

I survey the winter scene about me and am impressed with its beauty. Splendid white oaks show their strong bare limbs as though defiant of the winter cold; broad beeches, with lowering branches and smooth silvered trunks contrast with hickories, tall and shaggy barked. The green foliage of the cross-vine and the reptilian drapes of a huge wild grape lend further variety. Underfoot, spurge and ferns raise their fresh foliage above the carpet of fallen leaves, and the rocky ledge nearby is green with mosses and saxifrage. There's interest at every turn, and I am inclined to feel downright sorry for those friends of mine who hover about their hearthstones and think of winter, out of doors, as but a drear and lifeless thing.

An old rotten log ahead has been riven into splinters and bits of the soft wood lie all about. I listen for a Pileated Woodpecker, for none but he could have done this job. Within these old logs and in rotten stumps he finds large grubs for his winter's fare. I sit upon the log to eat my lunch and presently am aware that a Winter Wren is fidgeting his small, bobtailed self about the further end. Overhead, a coterie of Myrtle Warblers are busily flitting about and feeding on the seed-tipped branches of poison ivy. Further on through the woodland I hear the familiar whistle of the Tufted Titmouse, calling to the mate who is his constant companion the whole year through.

The sky has again become overcast, the brisk wind of yesterday has reappeared, low clouds move by, presaging more snow before nightfall, and a chilly night. The Crows are already winging their way southward, by twos and threes, to their big roost in the cedar glades some fifteen miles away. Grackles, too, are flocking by, from the Harpeth valley corn fields to the Mount Olivet magnolias and pines, and a sprinkling of Starlings and Cowbirds may be seen among them. A flock of Robins move westward with uncertain flight, toward the buckthorn thicket roost in the Charlotte Hills. I wend my way toward the car, a mile away, and keep tab on how other birds are preparing for this winter's night. A Flicker dives into his last year's nest hole in the top of an ancient sycamore, and presently he is joined by another. As I pass through a clump of cedars, I tap on the trunks and there is a stirring of White-throated Sparrows overhead. Along the creek, the Juncos and Song Sparrows are tucking themselves among the roots where the bank overhangs. In a mass of bronze-green honeysuckle, on an old stump, a solitary Mockingbird and several Juncos have ensconced themselves. I tap a fence post in which I perceive a newly-excavated hole, and a Downy Woodpecker pokes his head out before flying to a nearby limb to scold at my intrusion. A belated Cardinal hurries across the path to join his clan in a briar patch.

The dusk has gathered rapidly and now no more birds are abroad. Before entering my car I check over my card list for the day and find I have recorded 34 species. "Not so bad," say I, "but 35 would have been better. Well, there's number 35 now;" a Great Horned Owl begins to call from the woodland, his deep "whoo-whoo" note carries far and I know that many a small wild creature draws further within its shelter as this ominous call of the night goes forth.

Nashville, Tenn., December, 1931.

