

THE TOWHEES, WINDOW FRIENDS

The towhee is no great shakes in the bird world, either for size, song, or dramatics. He wouldn't be mentioned in the same breath with the glorious soaring eagle that pierces the upper sky with his wild scream of power and freedom. Nor would he be mentioned with the scintillating, gauzy-winged, squeaky hummingbird, so little and so lovely that once seen is never forgotten. But the humble towhee, he of the black cap and bib, rich red-brown back, and snowy breast has something that none of these others have. He is the shy, never failing winter and summer window companion of the homes in the district where he lives. And that is something worth mentioning in a part of the world that drizzles and glowers for the better part of the twelve months, or may at times freeze up.

But I have a little bone to pick with him, this showy male with the bright red intriguing eye, visiting my window day in and day out, but never bringing his demure, hard working wife with him to share some of the easy tid-bits. Where faithful Gretchen all I can guess. is ~~she~~ all the time he is away from the home nest? ^ In summer time bird children come along as surely as the sun in the sky, and and there is no doubt that she is busy hunting insects and larvae to fill the crying mouths. She has no time to frequent the public lunch table.

Birds are more like people in the care of the home that one would think. In some birds' homes the work is divided carefully.

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thing that none of the ^{others} have. He is the ~~gentle~~, shy window-companion ^{never failing winter and summer}
~~of the homes in the district where he lives. Open the kitchen window and listen.~~ ^{He likes his chosen home & he likes the home folks who feed him all year around.}
There is a rustling of leaves under the shrubbery and a querulous, questioning voice asks plainly for breakfast. And that is something ^{worth} to be mentioned.

in a part of the world that ~~drips and~~ drizzles and glowers for the better part of the twelve months, or may at times freeze up. ^{An unannounced} ~~That~~ brings tragedy. ^{freeze}

It is coming time for you to remember the towhee ^{and depend upon you.} as he will remember you. ~~And towhee has a premonition.~~ All summer he has scratched about under the plants around the house and down the hill, but he has also ^{spent hours under the sink and up in the tray} had regular meal times when he came to the window and ate plentifully of bread crumbs and scraps in the feeding tray. If the tray was empty, his voice was very pleading and persistent, accusing you of forgetting him entirely. How could you? You ^{actually} promised to keep the ~~feeding~~ tray full of crumbs for him, and he would starve if you didn't remember.

Actually he was plump and glossy-coated, full feathered for the coming cold and dreariness of winter. ^{but he couldn't help playing on your sympathies} At this time of the year he has joined a goodly group of his fellow towhees ^{they are} and ~~is~~ to be found down the hillside hunting and ~~so~~ scratching ^{like little hens} industriously, tossing the leaves into the air, or sitting in a bunch ^{talking listlessly} ~~joining~~ in a half nude tree yellowed by a weakening sun.

~~The towhees~~ are not bustling and excited like the robins, and other dooryard birds who are soon to ^{begin} take their journey south. The ~~violet-green~~ swallows left long ago. The towhees, chickadees, juncos, white-crowned sparrows and ~~some others~~ ^{little Gairdner woodpecker} are ~~half-sadly~~ ^{they are} demurely resigning themselves to be stay-at-homes, and they also expect that their feeding trays will repay them for this and tide them over till spring. ^{at this season} The violet-green swallows left long ago with no other ^{will} fuss & feathers than strutting out like ^{before the take-off} ~~like~~ ^{like} ~~parade~~ of cloth-pins on the electric wires just

But the robins are like noisy street gamins, congregating in great flocks on the lawn, or crowding into a tree to discuss ^{plans} & argue in shrieking tones. The pool is always full and there are continuous bunts and pushings as this or that one wants a last bath. And how they work for worms in the wet lawn, or pounce upon a dogwood tree and fill up with red berries. Certainly it is a great event, this migrating of bird families.

But sometimes these travelers misjudge the weather signs, and don't start early enough. Then there are tragedies and the weak drop by the way. And sometimes the home-loving birds who never plan to migrate may wish they had when ~~they got caught~~ in a blizzard drops down upon their dooryard.

Male Towhee here winter & summer, day after day. Where is his demure brown mate? I never see her nor the youngsters. This male now, does he take some of my food home to his mate & children? I think not, and I think less of him for loitering around my easy hand-outs instead of playing house & hunting for his family and leaving all the home work & family responsibilities to his plain mate.

There was that never-to-be-forgotten winter some years ago when the country was frozen up. ~~It was a cold far snow~~ It had been a mild pleasant fall with plenty of food, ^{by} Numbers of the smaller birds were fooled and ^{lingered} staid beyond their time for starting south. ^{gentle} The bluebirds especially were hard hit.

One night.

by morning

Break -

The towhee family has several species and also several colloquial names. It is called "towhee" and "chewink" to represent its call note, but anybody's interpretation of a bird note is as good as the next one's. The name towhee, however, seems to satisfy the greatest number of critics and has been adopted officially by the American Ornithologists' Union. To one who sees and hears the bird every day under his window, ^{he} the bird has two distinguishing call notes. One is the "towhee" drawled out, the whining note. The other is the so-called trill, sounding like scz-z-z-z-z, a woodsy, musical note.

birds were cold and hungry.

The towhees cried plaintively under the windows, swinging on the skeleton plants. Above on the tray they knew there were warm ~~baked~~ corn bread with cracklings baked in it, plenty of oatmeal and common bread crumbs, and also a big chunk of fresh suet tied up. But the ~~marauding~~ wheezy-voiced invaders prevented them from getting enough ~~food~~ during the day to keep them half warm through the cold night. Food was scattered on the gravel driveway and by dashing in now and then the little birds gleaned barely enough to exist.

The bluebirds had been caught squarely by the early storm. There was a goodly number of them that had gathered about the yard from the regions around. They were gentle helpless things that had no show at all with the ^{wf} squaling fighting mob ~~in the yard~~ about the trees and the trays. The cold wind ruffled their feathers as they sat and cheeped dolefully in the limbs above the melee. At night they went to bed in the bird boxes nailed up to the trees and also tacked against the house in a corner. The towhees, sparrows and others crept into the thick center of a ~~thick~~ bunch of bamboo half sheltered by the porch.

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There was that never-to-be-forgotten winter some years ago when the country was frozen up. ~~It was too cold for snow~~ It had been a mild pleasant fall with plenty of food, ^{but} Numbers of the smaller birds were fooled and ^{lingered} ~~staid~~ beyond their time for starting south. ^{gentle} ~~The bluebirds especially were hard hit.~~ ^{One night} A light flurry of snow fell and ^{by morning} ~~during the night~~ a terrific drop in temperature held everything in a vice. The land lay thinly glazed with glittering ice, the old apple trees ^{with their frozen fruit} stood gaunt against a dull gray sky with the wind rattling their brittle limbs. But the whole orchard was filled with a noisy, excited population. ^{various thrushes} The ~~Alaska~~ robins had appeared suddenly from ^{somewhere} ~~nowhere~~, and were squabbling and shouting with the ~~other~~ robins, the fox sparrows, the juncos, and others. The big orange and black bullies were ousting the native residents and gobbling up all of the apples, which though frozen and shriveled, made good food for any and all. Even the feeding trays on the window sill and also extras put up on stakes in the yard were seized by the big and strong, while the little birds went cold and hungry.

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Star in winter story

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Around ten o'clock a slight noise was heard at the study door. Opening it, an icy breath struck one in the face. The light shown out into the dull whiteness. At first nothing was to be seen, ~~but~~ until glancing down, there on the cold concrete step sat a little huddled ball of feathers. ^{the bird} It was too chilled to move or even feel when it was picked up and brought into the warm room. It was put on a piece of woolen cloth in a box and placed near the fireplace- but not too near, for ~~too~~ sudden a change of temperature would be disastrous. After some time it revived enough to move a little and show signs of life, but so little that it paid no attention to some crumbs of hard-boiled egg. At bedtime an electric reading lamp was placed over the box at a proper height for an even warmth. Morning found him dead, a little round form with his head tucked under his wing. This was, ^{the sweet-voiced hermit thrush,} a wayfarer from the thick woods of a higher altitude, ^{his} struggling through the night and the storm on ~~its~~ way south.

Morning also found other tragedies. Searching the bushes and the ground under the kitchen window, one of the regular boarders, a towhee, was found. The cold and the competition for food had been too much for him. He had died on his own doorstep. Searching the yard, other dead birds were found, a white-crowned sparrow among them who had been a nearby dweller. Putting up ^{and} a ladder against the house, a bird house ~~was~~ inspected. Reaching ⁱⁿ a hand, one after another eleven bluebirds were brought out, all dead, but apparently not from the cold. They had pushed in and jammed the tiny space till they smothered,- the irony of fate.