

John L. Journal May 29, 43
4 negatives - Robins

BRINGING UP A BABY BIRD

by

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How would you like to be a champion worm digger? If you ever play "mother robin," you will learn what it means. If I know anything, you would say pleasantly but promptly, "No, thankyou!" But you can't say it. You are looking down at a lumpy, half-naked baby bird frozen with fear. Synthetic motherhood is sometimes forced on you.

In May and June, almost every suitable tree and thick tangle of bushes is a maternity ward for birds. Baby birds are fairly spilling out into the leafy corridors. In the off and on rainy days of spring, we found six robin nests in the thick jungle of rosebushes climbing over our tennis court. There were probably more, judging by the busy parent birds pulling rubbery angle-worms out of our lawn. Take in the ten acres, and there must have been a community of robins, to say nothing of the vireos, towhees, swallows, yellow warblers, nuthatches, thrushes, flickers, and a number of kinds of sparrows.

One misty day, looking out of the kitchen window, I saw a half-naked, dejected robin sitting propped on his tail, his head sunk between his shoulders, his eyes closed. He was square on the graveled driveway where the first car - which would be the milkman - would run over him. A mother robin was busy going and coming with food for a brood high up in the ivy on the garage, but she paid no more attention to the pathetic mite on the ground than if it was a stone. Although there ^{are} many instances of good Samaritan deeds by mother birds feeding stranded waifs of other families than their own, this old robin was either too busy or indifferent to let it bother her. Since no mother claimed him, I finally went out and brought him in the house, put him in a big wire cage with perches in it, a cup of water, and my best intentions to bring him up in the way a robin should go.

Then I went out at the edge of the vegetable garden, got the shovel and commenced to turn over big sods and moist dirt, a veritable mining oper-

action which lasted over two weeks. Three times a day the worm shovel was worked, and I collected each time a half filled two-pound coffee can of wigglers. You may say, "Pooh, that isn't many," but you want to try it yourself. Meals were served every fifteen or twenty minutes all day from seven-thirty to nine-thirty in the evening. That means four meals an hour for fourteen hours, or fifty-six meals. Ten worms a meal means five hundred and sixty worms. If each worm is three inches long, it means 1680 inches of worms, or forty-six and two-thirds yards. One estimator puts it at a hundred yards of worms a day. Add to this deserts of apple and other fruit. After all this, the bird seemed always hungry - and I was out of breath. He had the knack of antitipating the clock by setting up a vociferous begging, so we named him Chirpy, because his mouth was seldom shut.

Twice during Chirpy's bringing-up, I had to make trips to town. There was no other way except to take the baby with me. His cage and the can of angle-worms were put on the floor in the back of the car, and we ambled into town to the incessant talking behind us. We parked him at a meter, plugged in a nickel, and went off about our business. Twice in the hour, I went back to feed him. About five-thirty in the afternoon, I was standing on the curb in front of the open car door, fishing worms out of the can, when I became aware that some one was looking over my shoulder. Chirpy was hungry, so he was tuning up.

"What have you got there?" said a voice.

I looked up and saw a ship-yard worker in bluejeans, boots, and a dinner pail.

"I've got an infant on my hands," I said. I live ten miles out of town and so had to bring the baby with me. He has to be fed pretty often, and gobbles up a plenty of worms."

"Yes, I know that. I used to take a great deal of interest in the birds, and feed them around my place," he said, "but lately since I've got a vegetable garden, they have been a nuisance. We have to keep scaring them away."

"Maybe you are laying these depredations to the wrong fellows," I said. Most of us have found that the snails, cut-worms, and other crawlers are doing the most damage to our gardens. The small birds feed their young on insects

and eat a lot themselves. They hunt all day through the gardens, but don't do much damage to the plants."

As soon as he was out of the pinfeather stage, Chirpy had his first lesson in picking up a worm instead of waiting for it to be poked into his gaping, yellow mouth. It was put down on the floor of his cage, and after eyeing it for a minute or two, he hopped down and stood in front of it, opened his mouth and expected the worm to crawl into it. If it didn't wiggle, he paid no attention to it. Mostly in these early attempts, the worm crawled away through the wired because he was too slow to catch on. After he did get the idea, he was clumsy at picking it up. He stabbed awkwardly here and there and made a good many fumbles before he finally pinned it down. But after he got it once started, the escalator apparatus pulled the muddy worm down in a hurry to accompaniment of glugeglugs and sharp squealings over the delicacy. After a robin is grown up, no red berries of autumn can ever compete with the gustatory satisfaction of juicy angle-worms of his babyhood.

The next step in Chirpy's education was to disillusion him of the idea that angle-worms grew in a tin can. He was old enough now to take flight in the big study and go sailing about the ceiling, landing sometimes with a crash against a windowpane. When taken outdoors, he grew timid and settled down on my shoulder as his only safe perch. But he soon caught the exhilaration of winging about in the air and landing on an apple limb. Hunger brought him back to me, the only source of food he knew. And I let him get hungry so he would put his mind on his next lesson.

I sat down on the lawn with him, bored a hole in the sod and tucked an angle-worm in it. It's tail - or it's head - soon wiggled up to the surface. Chirpy cocked his head and his eye this way and that, nonplused at the phenomenon, and a little afraid. It took him some time and hopping about excitedly before that gnawing inside of him got the upper hand. Then he pounced at the squirming thing, sat back on his haunches in true robin style, and oozled it down his throat. After that he showed great joy at being taken out on the grass to stand rigid

and cock his head listening, then dramatically pull up his bait. After that, too, he wasn't contented in his cage in the study any more. He had graduated. But fearing cats hunting in the shrubs both day and night, we kept him in the house for a few nights until he got more worldly-wise. He also became aware of the robin clan in the yard that sung, and scolded, and bathed in the pool, marshalling the young of the season and training them for the great migration event in the fall. Soon he took his place among them.