

# The Birds of Spring

Washington Irving

My quiet residence in the country, aloof from fashion, politics, and the money market, leaves me rather at a loss for important occupation, and drives me to the study of nature, and other low pursuits. Having few neighbors, also, on whom to keep a watch, and exercise my habits of observation, I am fain to amuse myself with prying into the domestic concerns and peculiarities of the animals around me; and, during the present season, have derived considerable entertainment from certain sociable little birds, almost the only visitors we have, during this early part of the year.

Those who have passed the winter in the country, are sensible of the delightful influences that accompany the earliest indications of spring; and of these, none are more delightful than the first notes of the birds. There is one modest little sad-colored bird, much resembling a wren, which came about the house just on the skirts of winter, when not a blade of grass was to be seen, and when a few prematurely warm days had given a flattering foretaste of soft weather. He sang early in the dawning, long before sun-rise, and late in the evening, just before the closing in of night, his matin and his vesper hymns. It is true, he sang occasionally throughout the day; but at these still hours, his song was more remarked. He sat on a leafless tree, just before the window, and warbled forth his notes, free and simple, but singularly sweet, with something of a plaintive tone, that heightened their effect. The first morning that he was heard, was a joyous one among the young folks of my household. The long, deathlike sleep of winter was at an end; nature was once more awakening; they now promised themselves the immediate appearance of buds and blossoms. I was reminded of the tempest-tossed crew of Columbus, when, after their long dubious voyage, the field birds came singing round the ship, though still far at sea, rejoicing them with the belief of the immediate proximity of land. A sharp return of winter almost silenced my little songster, and dashed the hilarity of the household; yet still he poured forth, now and then, a few plaintive notes, between the

frosty pipings of the breeze, like gleams of sunshine between wintry clouds.

I have consulted my book of ornithology in vain, to find out the name of this kindly little bird, who certainly deserves honor and favor far beyond his modest pretensions. He comes like the lowly violet, the most unpretending, but welcomest of flowers, breathing the sweet promise of the early year.

Another of our feathered visitors, who follows close upon the steps of winter, is the Pe-wit, or Pe-wee, or Phoebe-bird; for he is called by each of these names, from a fancied resemblance to the sound of his monotonous note. He is a sociable little being, and seeks the habitation of man. A pair of them have built beneath my porch, and have reared several broods there for two years past, their nest being never disturbed. They arrive early in the spring, just when the crocus and the snow-drop begin to peep forth. Their first chirp spreads gladness through the house. "The Phoebe-birds have come!" is heard on all sides; they are welcomed back like members of the family, and speculations are made upon where they have been, and what countries they have seen during their long absence. Their arrival is the more cheering, as it is pronounced, by the old weather-wise people of the country, the sure sign that the severe frosts are at an end, and that the gardener may resume his labors with confidence.

About this time, too, arrives the blue-bird, so poetically yet truly described by Wilson. His appearance gladdens the whole landscape. You hear his soft warble in every field. He sociably approaches your habitation, and takes up his residence in your vicinity. But why should I attempt to describe him, when I have Wilson's own graphic verses to place him before the reader?

When winter's cold tempests and snows are no more,  
Green meadows and brown furrowed fields re-appearing:  
The fishermen hauling their shad to the shore,  
And cloud-cleaving geese to the lakes are a-steering;  
When first the lone butterfly flits on the wing,  
When red glow the maples, so fresh and so pleasing,

O then comes the blue-bird, the herald of spring,  
And hails with his warblings the charms of the season.

The loud-piping frogs make the marshes to ring;  
Then warm glows the sunshine, and warm glows the weather;  
The blue woodland flowers just beginning to spring,  
And spice-wood and sassafras budding together;  
O then to your gardens, ye housewives, repair,  
Your walks border up, sow and plant at your leisure;  
The blue-bird will chant from his box such an air,  
That all your hard toils will seem truly a pleasure.

He flits through the orchard, he visits each tree,  
The red flowering peach, and the apple's sweet blossoms;  
He snaps up destroyers, wherever they be,  
And seizes the caitiffs that lurk in their bosoms;  
He drags the vile grub from the corn it devours,  
The worms from the webs where they riot and welter;  
His song and his services freely are ours,  
And all that he asks is, in summer a shelter.

The ploughman is pleased when he gleams in his train,  
Now searching the furrows, now mounting to cheer him;  
The gard'ner delights in his sweet simple strain,  
And leans on his spade to survey and to hear him.  
The slow lingering school-boys forget they'll be chid,  
While gazing intent, as he warbles before them,  
In mantle of sky-blue, and bosom so red,  
That each little loiterer seems to adore him.

The happiest bird of our spring, however, and one that rivals the European lark, in my estimation, is the Boblincon, or Boblink, as he is commonly called. He arrives at that choice portion of our year, which, in this latitude, answers to the description of the month of May, so often given by the poets. With us, it begins about the middle of May, and lasts until nearly the middle of June. Earlier than this, winter is apt to return on its traces, and to blight the opening beauties of the year; and later than this, begin the parching, and panting, and dissolving heats of summer.

But in this genial interval, nature is in all her freshness and fragrance: "the rains are over and gone, the flowers appear upon the earth, the time of the singing of birds is come, and the voice of the turtle is heard in the land." The trees are now in their fullest foliage and brightest verdure; the woods are gay with the clustered flowers of the laurel; the air is perfumed by the sweet-briar and the wild rose; the meadows are enamelled with clover-blossoms; while the young apple, the peach, and the plum, begin to swell, and the cherry to glow, among the green leaves.

This is the chosen season of revelry of the Boblink. He comes amidst the pomp and fragrance of the season; his life seems all sensibility and enjoyment, all song and sunshine. He is to be found in the soft bosoms of the freshest and sweetest meadows; and is most in song when the clover is in blossom. He perches on the topmost twig of a tree, or on some long flaunting weed; and as he rises and sinks with the breeze, pours forth a succession of rich tinkling notes; crowding one upon another, like the outpouring melody of the skylark, and possessing the same rapturous character. Sometimes he pitches from the summit of a tree, begins his song as soon as he gets upon the wing, and flutters tremulously down to the earth, as if overcome with ecstasy at his own music. Sometimes he is in pursuit of his paramour; always in full song, as if he would win her by his melody; and always with the same appearance of intoxication and delight.

Of all the birds of our groves and meadows, the Boblink was the envy of my boyhood. He crossed my path in the sweetest weather, and the sweetest season of the year, when all nature called to the fields, and the rural feeling throbbed in every bosom; but when I, luckless urchin! was doomed to be mewed up, during the livelong day, in that purgatory of boyhood, a school-room. It seemed as if the little varlet mocked at me, as he flew by in full song, and sought to taunt me with his happier lot. Oh, how I envied him! No lessons, no tasks, no hateful school; nothing but holiday, frolic, green fields, and fine weather. Had I been then more versed in poetry, I might have addressed him in the words of Logan to the cuckoo:

Sweet bird! thy bower is ever green,  
Thy sky is ever clear;

Thou hast no sorrow in thy note,  
No winter in thy year.

Oh! could I fly, I'd fly with thee;  
We'd make, on joyful wing,  
Our annual visit round the globe,  
Companions of the spring!

Farther observation and experience have given me a different idea of this little feathered voluptuary, which I will venture to impart, for the benefit of my school-boy readers, who may regard him with the same unqualified envy and admiration which I once indulged. I have shown him only as I saw him at first, in what I may call the poetical part of his career, when he in a manner devoted himself to elegant pursuits and enjoyments, and was a bird of music, and song, and taste, and sensibility, and refinement. While this lasted, he was sacred from injury; the very school-boy would not fling a stone at him, and the merest rustic would pause to listen to his strain. But mark the difference. As the year advances, as the clover-blossoms disappear, and the spring fades into summer, his notes cease to vibrate on the ear. He gradually gives up his elegant tastes and habits, doffs his poetical and professional suit of black, assumes a russet or rather dusty garb, and enters into the gross enjoyments of common, vulgar birds. He becomes a bon-vivant, a mere gourmand; thinking of nothing but good cheer, and gormandizing on the seeds of the long grasses on which he lately swung, and chaunted so musically. He begins to think there is nothing like "the joys of the table," if I may be allowed to apply that convivial phrase to his indulgences. He now grows discontented with plain, every-day fare, and sets out on a gastronomical tour, in search of foreign luxuries. He is to be found in myriads among the reeds of the Delaware, banqueting on their seeds; grows corpulent with good feeding, and soon acquires the unlucky renown of the ortolan. Wherever he goes, pop! pop! pop! the rusty firelocks of the country are cracking on every side; he sees his companions falling by the thousands around him; he is the \_reed-bird\_, the much-sought-for tit-bit of the Pennsylvanian epicure.

Does he take warning and reform? Not he! He wings his flight still farther south, in search of other luxuries. We hear of him gorging himself in the rice swamps; filling himself with rice almost to bursting; he can hardly fly

for corpulency. Last stage of his career, we hear of him spitted by dozens, and served up on the table of the gourmand, the most vaunted of southern dainties, the rice-bird of the Carolinas.

Such is the story of the once musical and admired, but finally sensual and persecuted Boblink. It contains a moral, worthy the attention of all little birds and little boys; warning them to keep to those refined and intellectual pursuits, which raised him to so high a pitch of popularity, during the early part of his career; but to eschew all tendency to that gross and dissipated indulgence, which brought this mistaken little bird to an untimely end.

Which is all at present, from the well-wisher of little boys and little birds,

GEOFFREY CRAYON.