

IN YOUR OWN BACK YARD

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Since many people start out as amateur bird enthusiasts and have a mind cluttered with many unanswered questions, the following article taken from a lengthy paper written by the late Wheeler M. Rogerson, (*1) Niagara Falls, N. Y., an observations he made over a period of some twenty years, will illustrate the problems of a beginner. This is an excellent example of how a novice began bird study on his own property and found the answers to many questions, and by so doing he also derived much satisfaction and pleasure.

The many excellent Bird Guides now published offer a sure and valuable means to tie in personal experiences with the accepted and proven standards of scientific ornithology. With the aid of this information, the student has at hand ready answers to the very many perplexing questions, such as: How do you identify the birds that you have seen? How do you learn their songs and calls? How do you know what book to buy?

Here is the major portion of the paper entitled "In Your Own Back Yard" as given in Mr. Rogerson's own words (with a few minor corrections). The accompanying sketch is a copy of the one which ended the original paper.

I should like to tell of an experience of a house-holder, with a small back yard within the corporate limits of a large city, so that many people interested in birds and who would like to cater to them, but feel that their efforts would only be wasted on a flock of English Sparrows can, with patience, be rewarded with a number of species far beyond their expectations. It will, however, take time and patience and one must not feel too badly when the aforementioned sparrows seem to be the only recipients of one's generosity.

About twenty or more years ago we became interested in birds and enjoyed throwing out crumbs in the yard and watching the response of the sparrows as they would rush about trying to consume their share and more before others of their ilk could get a stand in. This is about as far as we went the first year.

The next year a bird house or two were purchased and put up before the snow left so they would be weathered by nesting time.

Feeding the sparrows continued and one day we noticed in the group a nervous little fellow, darker than the sparrows on the back and much lighter on the under parts. When he found a crumb he would start scratching in the snow in hopes of finding another bite to eat. We learned it was a Slate-colored Junco and he was really our inspiration to extend our endeavors.

*1. The material in this article are extracts from a paper written by a nonprofessional and are about the experiences he and his sister had with birds in their own back yard. Mr. Rogerson, now deceased, was a banker who kept accurate notes and later compiled them into a paper. These he sent to Mrs. Stoner who after reviewing them now presents them in their present form.

Suet racks and grain feeding stations were put up in the fall. These proved to be just what the sparrows were waiting for as they immediately took possession and it was a little discouraging to see them do away with the contents. I, however, will say this: disliking the sparrows as much as I do, I really think they have a lot to do with attracting the attention of migrating wild birds, who are always on the watch for a place to eat and rest. As they fly by and seeing other birds eating, it is an incentive for them to drop down and investigate, and if you are fortunate enough to be prepared you may expect an annual spring and fall visit of ever increasing numbers. Do not, however, start feeding unless you intend to keep it up, as without this attraction your home will be no different than hundreds of others to the passing bird.

During the next few years, we added other feeding stations, a pool with a pipe line from the house and a natural stone bird bath placed above the pool at the back. Water trickles through a narrow rock channel into the bird bath and overflows into the pool. The pool and bath are inclosed at the sides and rear by an area that is allowed to develop naturally. Originally ferns, lady slippers, trilliums, hepaticas, jack-in-the-pulpits, violets, and other wild things were planted. Today these are supplemented with many small trees, bushes, vines and other things from the seeds dropped by the birds. This I believe, is our greatest attraction and has been used year in and year out by many birds of all sizes. Care should be taken to keep the water in a bird bath shallow, as even the larger birds are loath to take a chance on water much over an inch and a half deep and after witnessing the average bird bathé we can understand their caution. They really appear out of this world, flopping and sliding from one side to the other, entirely oblivious of their surroundings.

Birds differ in their bathing methods: Robins, Thrushes and most of the other small birds wallow in the water, throwing it over their back by flopping their wings and dousing their heads. The Red-eyed Vireo will perch on a branch above the bath, diving in and right out again. The Hummingbird will find a leaf that has been splashed by the larger bathers and have a whale of a time in a drop or two of water, but the bird that really gets a kick out of a bath is the Yellow-bellied Sapsucker. He takes a long time to get up courage to even alight near the bath, but once in he stays, just going crazy, paying no attention to other birds even though they land on top of him. It is really something to see.

It might be interesting to relate some of the happenings in the yard in the last few years. Our greatest thrill was to look out one very snowy morning in the spring of 1943 and see a migration of thirty or forty Rose-breasted Grosbeaks. Fortunately, the night before, we had scattered a few sunflower seeds for the early rising Cardinals and the Grosbeaks were busy with these seeds. It was a Sunday morning and we spent practically the whole day replenishing the food, so by nightfall they knew fairly well where to camp the next day. In fact we held them for ten days. It took about a half bushel of sunflower seeds to keep them happy, but it was well worth it, as they were always on hand to supply a thrill to the many people who availed themselves of the opportunity to view them from the window.

In the flock was a brilliantly colored male with a broken bill. He would sit on the feeder near the window trying to pick up seeds without success. A saucer of bread and milk was placed in the feeder and for ten days he gorged himself on that, scooping it up with the side of his bill. He left with the others.

We started charting in 1939, recording for that year fifty-seven species. This increased each year until our average yearly count now is around one hundred and ten species, ranging from the little Hummingbird to the Bald Eagle. The latter of course was not a visitor to our garden but was easily discernible from the back porch flying toward the Niagara River Gorge. It was first seen by Mr. Clark S. Beardslee, statistician of the Buffalo Ornithological Society and since then we have recorded it several times in a year.

Our Purple Martins have been an interesting phase of our bird garden. The twenty-six room house erected for them catered to sparrows for the first year or two, then one spring a male Martin investigated with the result that the house was occupied by a pair of Martins for a couple of years. This was gradually increased until we had about a dozen pairs. Another house was erected but, unfortunately, it was near some thorn apple trees that grew tall enough that year to be level with the nesting holes of the house, consequently no Martins, since they do not like a tree near their home. In the spring of 1945 we had to take down the original house as it had begun to fall apart. A smaller house of eight rooms was ordered to replace it, but before it came the Martins arrived. They sat on the poles and wires craning their necks looking for their home, then they would leave but return the next day to see if by any chance the house had been replaced. In about a week the new house had arrived and was placed on the poles Friday night, with not a Martin in sight. The next morning bedlam had broken loose — the birds had returned and found the house, even though it was a new one, which as a rule is unattractive to them, and by eight o'clock they were building nests.

While we do not band our birds, certain characteristics show that the same bird returns year after year. Take, for instance, the pair of catbirds that has raised families in the shrubs near the house since 1939. On arrival in the spring the male will perch on the feeding station near the window and stare into the room until someone takes out a saucer of bread and milk, which seems to be his favorite food in the early spring. It is also enjoyed by Robins, Orioles, Song Sparrows and others. The Orioles, on arrival, look for the Hummingbird feeders filled with sugar and water that hang on a mulberry tree near the veranda. The Chickadees, Nuthatches and Blue Jays come direct to the feeding station.

Now, more than twenty years after our uninteresting start with a few sparrows, it is not unusual to glance out toward the pool and count ten or more species of birds that use our back yard for a regular junction stop. During migration, both fall and spring, there may be individual specie flocks of ten or more, and larger flocks of White-throated Sparrows, the latter usually spending a month with us in the fall. In 1946 ten Purple Finches were here for the month of September.

An attraction to a great many birds are the berry bearing shrubs and trees and our plantings have been made with this in mind, as we are now practically surrounded with honeysuckle, viburnums, wild cherries, elders, wild thorn apples, peaches, raspberries, etc. The viburnum and high-bush cranberry carry their red berries through the winter and have never failed to attract flocks of twenty or thirty Cedar Waxwings, in the spring, who stay until the last berry is consumed. The thorn apples serve a double purpose, being used by early spring arrivals until the last fall travelers as a protective night roost. We have counted over one hundred Robins in the waning hours of an early spring day and in the morning only one or two pairs who have chosen our yard for their home, remain. This continues until the last migrant has left for the south in the fall. The fruit of the thorn, which ripens about the middle of September, furnishes food for the Robin, Wood Thrush, Veery, Brown Thrasher and other fruit-eating birds until time for their southern sojourn. It is interesting to note, that where the ground under the trees will be a bright red carpet the latter part of September, by the time that the last bird has departed it is hard to find a single apple on the ground.

A number of amusing incidents have happened with our bird families. One was the flight of the sleepy little Brown Creeper. In our yard was a dead cherry tree, left standing as it provided a perfect spot for Hairy and Downy Woodpeckers and Chickadees to probe for grubs and a wonderful ant cafeteria for the Flickers. The bark on the tree was loose in spots and our Brown Creeper decided it was his place for the night period. After investigating, he picked a piece of loose bark and pushed his way under it. He must have fallen asleep immediately, since I went out to get a better look at him and actually touched him without any effect on him whatever. We got up next morning at daybreak to see him wake up, which he did shortly after we were seated at the window, but with such an effort. He pushed himself out of the bark, then apparently took a minute's snooze, stretched out one wing and a leg, rested again, then the other wing. This exercise was probably what was needed to throw off his lethargy, since after a couple of shakes he flew away to start his endless creeping up trees to find his breakfast.

The following birds are now with us from spring until fall nesting either in or near the yard: Robin, Oriole, Catbird, House Wren, Crested Flycatcher, Mourning Dove, Chickadee, Redstart, Red-eyed Vireo, Song and Chipping Sparrows, Hummingbird, Purple Martin, Cardinal and this year, in addition, Wood Thrush, Veery and Brown Thrasher. The winter residents will be the Chickadee, White-breasted Nuthatch, Downy and Hairy Woodpeckers, Blue Jay, Junco, Tree Sparrow and Cardinal.

Our record for the last year includes 134 different kinds of birds that we have observed in or flying over our back yard.

Just a final word or so to point out the real benefits you can look for by devoting a few minutes of each day to the birds. If you have a bird book with colored pictures, note the many bright colors you may look for flashing back and forth. Just as blossoms are the attraction of your flower

beds so the birds will be the attraction of the shrubs and trees and added to this will be the many songs of nature's first line vocalists. Then, if you are interested in a closer companionship than is usually the result between man and wild birds and if you have Chickadees in and around your yard, it needs only a few days with a few broken nut meats to entice the little fellows to your hand.

We have flower beds on which sprays and dusts unlimited have been used, and since the war, vegetables have been added to our garden. For the past five years, however, not one particle of insecticide has been used and we can truthfully state today very few pests are encountered. Of course now and then you will see a small caterpillar swinging on his string of silk from some branch of a tree, but the chances are you will also see a Catbird, a Flycatcher or a Vireo flash by and when you look again bird and caterpillar have disappeared.

Some people have the belief that by feeding the birds with extra food it takes away their desire to look for their natural food. This is not the case as the food you put out, in my estimation, is more or less of a treat and the real meal will come from the source that the bird has always known.



Mr. Fred Hall, Director of the Buffalo Museum of Science, prepared this sketch of a Song Sparrow's nest which is similar to the sketch at the close of Mr. Rogerson's paper.