

Cattle Egrets: "Birds? . . . little old men . . . pieces of paper . . ." The comments flew, but the birds did not, as six of us stared at Cattle Egrets. Twenty of them were grouped in the grassy yard at Wickes Lumber Company in Selkirk (Albany County) on April 30, and all were engaged in a cleanup, every one preening.

As the screech of a slow-moving train startled them, they leaped-frogged to the right, away from the tracks, and thus disturbed they began to feed. As a flock they worked along the ground after insects, occasionally ferreting out a nightcrawler. Like Robins, they braced their feet and tugged, dangling the huge worms a moment or ducking a covetous neighbor swallowed the prizes whole. When steadily feeding, they moved along so rapidly we almost had to sweep the scope to keep any one bird in view. After a few minutes one Egret lifted lightly over the high fence, and the others followed in two's and three's, to continue their searching in greener pastures.

All this time the flock had been drawing closer to us until they were only 25 feet away. At this range we could see three color variations, and noticed that the "yellow" bills were really light orange. Three of the twenty had Hallowe'en-corn bills and matching reddish legs. The tawny plumes of these three were deeper in color than those of the other birds. Four Egrets were very pale, showing almost no color on the back, and the head and breast feathers were corresponding lighter, bills yellow. We saw some dusky legs, and thought they belonged to the whiter birds.

The other thirteen looked alike, with yellowish legs and yellow bills. Their caps were sandy, and sandy plumes were both feathered across the upper backs and were seemingly clumped on the front of the long necks. The crowns lay smooth most of the time, but now and then a prickly crest was raised. All the birds had dusky feet.

These fascinating birds were about the size of Snowy Egrets, and like them, showed the crooked neck often pulled tight to the shoulders. In short flight they were beautiful, pure white of wing and spreading tail, more graceful than the Green Heron. It was amusing to watch them land nearby when the long legs swung forward from under the tails and the birds settled with a jerk. One more outstanding feature was the eye — yellow with a black rim around the iris, and deep-set close to the bill, giving the bird an air both stern and comical.

They paid little attention to us and so engrossed were we that we watched for an hour — and considered ourselves lucky indeed.

Mrs. George Budlong, who discovered the Egrets the morning of April 30 and kindly spread the alert, reported later "late in the afternoon I noticed most of them were resting with their heads lowered and only a few were eating, staying in a close group. Then about 6:30 p.m. they started moving around, spreading out and eating again. Finally, at 5 minutes to 7 they circled the field a few times and took off heading north and flying low".

On May 1 twelve Cattle Egrets were seen on Sunnyside Road, Scotia, in Schenectady County, and directly upriver from where the Egrets stopped in Selkirk.

Beverly Stevens Waite, R. D. 2, Box 454, Altamont.

A Wintering Brown Thrasher: Although for several winters we have enjoyed special bird visitors, this winter was made especially exciting by having a Brown Thrasher spend many hours in a pine tree and under the picnic table just outside our back patio, and as a regular guest partake of our suet and bird seed.

We had watched a family of Brown Thrashers since last May, first noticing them in the early mornings, feeding on the back lawn or singing at dusk prior to a bedtime snack of insects. After they had raised two broods we saw less and less of the birds and after a very mild, balmy week-end in October we assumed that they had migrated. We were sorry to see them leave because the possibility of their return seemed remote for the brush row where they had nested was cleared by the caretaker of some neighboring property.

However, on Christmas morning my husband looked out at the snow glittering in the sunlight, and saw a Brown Thrasher just outside the window. It sat jauntily

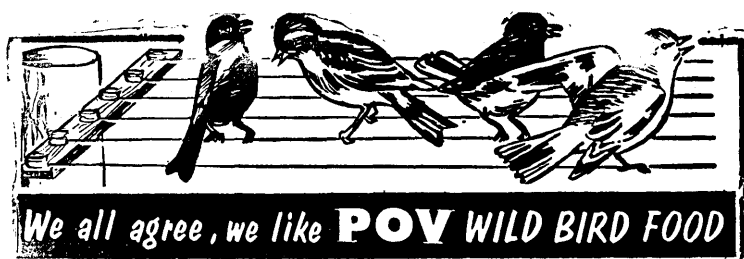
on a secluded branch of an evergreen beside an electric light bulb, basking in the warm sun, having her picture taken, and accepting the excited admiration of our four-year old, all within a distance of two feet.

Our first thoughts were of plans for survival food for this area. After consulting various bird books, we decided to put out test portions and see which the bird preferred, and which locations would be most acceptable. Wild bird seeds, uncooked oatmeal, chick scratch, and sunflower seeds were placed in small separate portions under the pine tree and beneath the picnic table. It was necessary to put the food out the night before, since the thrasher came at dawn or as soon as the kitchen lights shown out on the patio. The wild bird seed mixture and a little of the oatmeal soon were proven the accepted food. Pieces of apple and an orange, sliced in half were available, and several times we saw the bird peck at them. Since the ground under the table was seldom frozen and the thrasher worked at the dried leaves along the edge of the flag stones, this seemed the most suitable place for regular feeding. When it snowed we always cleared the snow down to the leaves and soil, before spreading the seeds. As far as we know the thrasher always ground-fed, and did not go to the feeder with the other birds, though it ate snow from the pine boughs.

After each severely cold night, or storm we anxiously watched for the bird. The favorite night roost seemed to be in some thick fir trees across from us, and their heavy branches must have given protection through several wet-snow and sleet storms, when the wind was so cutting even to us.

Our windows afforded us rare opportunities to see this wood-land visitor from many angles. The bird soon had several favorite perches in the pine tree and we, peeking through the venetian blinds would look until we saw the fluff of rich brown, and the striped buff breast.

Our visitor gradually become a very important part of our family, and if our movements were slow and guarded, would feed in full view. On Sunday mornings we heard the thrasher's song, mingled with the cardinal's, and have felt more than compensated for all the worry and watching we have had over our welcome southern winter visitor. — Mrs. Perry R. Mackey, Hillside Lake, Wappinger Falls.



Available at: A. & P., Quality Cash, Grand Union, Bohack, Daitch-Shopwell, Safety, Gristede Bros., and other quality Super-markets.
