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Familiar Birds in Their Winter Homes

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IT IS usually a pleasure to meet a friend from home when in a distant land. Sometimes we recognize him at once as "the same person" we knew at home, his dress and mannerisms have not been affected by his visit abroad; but often the altered environment, the removal of restraints to which he has been all his life subjected, cause the appearance of hidden traits which surprise us. Sometimes, too, he dons a costume in which we hardly recognize our old acquaintance. And just as travel sometimes alters the behavior of men, so among birds we find species whose habits in their winter homes are so different from those with which we are familiar that they surprise us.

During my sojourns in several countries of Central America I have kept a sharp lookout for our native birds, noting wherever possible the times of their arrival and departure, and something of their habits in their winter haunts. Almost the first migrant from the North I encountered in the tropics was the Catbird. I had made my way down a drainage-ditch through a recently begun banana plantation in western Panama, dodging at intervals under brush and fallen tree-trunks which spanned the dry channel, to the edge of the forest. Here, beneath the tall, vine-laden trees, was a thicket of the beefsteak heliconia, with huge, upright, stiff leaves and great, bizarre, pendent

A WINTER CATBIRD
Photographed by F M. Chapman, Little River, Fla.

flower clusters more than a yard long. It was my first venture into the lowland forest alone, and I had not been long enough in the tropics to have completely overcome the delusion common in the minds of so many who have never been there, that venomous snakes lurk in every thicket and are a constant menace to life. So I was advancing slowly and gingerly into the midst of this rank and unfamiliar vegetation, machete tightly clutched in the right hand, when I heard a well-known mewing bird-note and, glancing upward, beheld our same gray Catbird perched atop one of the huge leaves. There seemed a touch of mockery in his nasal whine, as though he scorned the excess of caution of a stranger in those thickets. At the same time the familiar presence increased my confidence. It was an assurance that nature in Panama is essentially the same as I knew her in the North, neither more deadly nor more cruel, though she performs her work on a larger and more profuse scale.

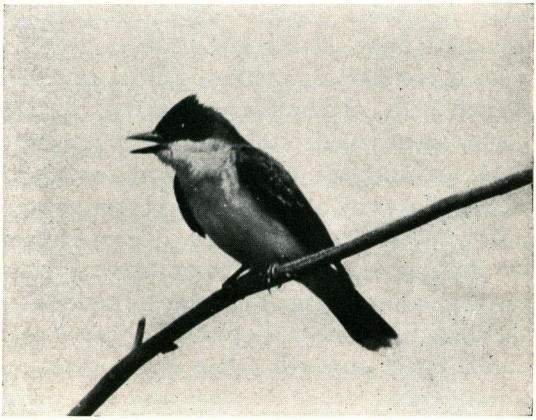
The following summer found me living in the beautiful Lancetilla Valley, near Tela on the northern coast of Honduras. Early on the morning of August 14, 1930, as I stood watching the hummingbirds which were attracted in great numbers to a grove of eucalyptus trees then in full bloom, I glimpsed, at almost the same time, a male Orchard Oriole and a Yellow Warbler, both newly arrived from the North, the earliest migrants of the season. I had seen the last Yellow Warbler of the spring on May 9, so the species had been absent from the valley only three months and five days. The following morning the Orchard Orioles were present in the eucalyptus trees in greater numbers. There were males in the chestnut-and-black plumage of adults, year-old males in yellow with black throats, and many individuals in the dull yellow plumage common to both females and males in their first season. The plumage of the adults was much worn, for they had not yet completed their postnuptial moult. Clinging to the extremities of the eucalyptus twigs, they probed the white powder-puff blossoms with their sharp bills, a feat the Hummingbirds more easily accomplished by poising on vibrant wings in front of them. Early as these birds had reached us, there are still earlier records from points farther south, for G. K. Cherrie has noted their arrival at San José, Costa Rica, on July 31.

The Orchard Orioles rapidly increased in number until they became one of the abundant birds of the valley. I never encountered them in the forest. When they first arrived, the males frequently burst into snatches of hurried, whistled song. In September their songs were heard at rarer intervals, but toward the end of October, more than two months after the appearance of the earliest migrants, I still occasionally overheard snatches of subdued song. When the Baltimore Orioles arrived, seven weeks later, they also uttered a few whistled notes, and in February I heard a Catbird singing his familiar medley as he retired early one rainy evening to roost in the bamboos. These are the only winter visitants I have heard singing in the tropics, although, of course, most if not all species utter their characteristic call-notes during the winter.

Before the end of the month, seven additional species of migrants made

their appearance in the valley. I found the Redstart, Worm-eating and Black and White Warblers on August 19, Spotted Sandpiper and Wilson's Plover (on the seashore) on the 22d, the Louisiana Water-Thrush on the 25th, and the Wood Pewee on the 27th.

On September 3 the vanguard of the Kingbirds arrived, and I saw two. They rapidly increased in numbers until, because of their active habits and indifference to concealment, they became one of the conspicuous birds of the region. Occasionally they indulged in brief aërial sparring-bouts among themselves, and once I found several engaged in a quarrel with some Giraud's Flycatchers (*Myiozetetes similis*), a bird of a much milder disposition, but all in all they were quite peaceable and well behaved. But what surprised me most about the Kingbirds was that in the evening they retired to roost with the Seed-eaters and Orioles in a patch of elephant grass. They were the last to seek the shelter of this tall grass, but after performing the most intricate aërial evolutions as they snatched up insects from the evening air, they took their places quietly, the only silent figures among that chattering multitude. Often, before it became quite dark, one would hover on wing between the grass-spikes to pick up a final morsel. Although the roosting-place was crowded with birds of eight different kinds, I never noticed any dissensions; all dwelt together in perfect harmony. On October 14 the last Kingbird departed for points south, and I saw no more that winter.



KINGBIRD
Photographed by Walter E. Hastings, South Lyon, Mich.

During September several other species of migrants arrived. The Hooded Warbler made his appearance on the 3d of the month. In his winter as in his summer haunts he frequents low, moist thickets. On the 8th I found a Prothonotary Warbler feeding beside the Tela River. I first encountered Kentucky Warblers on the 11th, but they were never much in evidence in the region. Red-eyed Vireos were observed on the 14th, and soon became numerous, but they did not remain with us, preferring to pass the winter in South America.

October was preëminently the month of the arrival of the migrants, and 16 additional species reached us from the North. During the first week of the month the Yellow-breasted Chat, Wood Thrush, Chestnut-sided Warbler, Magnolia Warbler, Northern Water-Thrush, Grinnell's Water-Thrush, Acadian

Flycatcher, Baltimore Oriole, Summer Tanager, Scarlet Tanager, Maryland Yellow-throat, and Belted Kingfisher poured into our little valley. At this period there were so many migrants in the cleared and scrubby lands of the valley that I received the impression they were more numerous, in point of individuals, than the resident birds, although there were many more species of the latter. The Yellow Warbler was the migrant most in evidence, and I think they must have equaled the numbers of the most abundant resident, the Morellet's Seed-eater, which swarmed in all the grassy clearings and pastures, and exceeded the Wood Wrens (*Pheugopedius maculipectus*) of the vine-tangled thickets, the second species in point of abundance in the valley. The Kingbirds were the Flycatchers most frequently seen, but the Wood Pewees were everywhere encountered, often perching on fences and stakes in the cleared lands, whence they sallied forth for insects, seldom calling. From the dense, vine-entangled thickets which covered abandoned banana plantations came the cluckings, chuckings, and mewings of innumerable Chats, but they were just as wary as they are during the summer, and to glimpse one was a feat —or an accident. The liquid *quirt quirt* of Louisiana Water-Thrushes sounded all day long as the birds fed on the bare ground beneath the fruit trees, the earthen pathways, and the sandbars beside the river, along which the rattle of the Belted Kingfisher mingled with that of the three resident species.

The Black-throated Green was the last of the Warblers whose arrival I recorded, on October 26. They were never numerous. The Catbirds, latest of all the smaller migrants, were not noticed until the following day. Thence until the following April they are familiar denizens of the thickets and the door-yard shrubbery.

A common winter visitant throughout Central America is the Killdeer. Near my residence in Western Panama was a little-used golf-links which was the chief resort of the Killdeers of the vicinity, just as they frequent our golf-links in the States. Throughout the winter we heard their familiar plaintive cries. In April their numbers began to thin, but the last bird lingered until May 8, long after his relations who went north had laid their eggs. In January, 1931, I spent two days in Puerto Castilla, Honduras. Here the dwellings of the employees of the Fruit Company stand close to the sandy shore, from which one looks across the beautiful crescent bay to Trujillo, oldest town in the country, nestled at the base of verdant, rounded mountains. Between the pleasant homes are broad lawns where Killdeers fed in a familiar manner. Never elsewhere have I encountered Killdeers in such close proximity to dwellings, or where they would permit such a close approach before taking flight. I heard them calling night and day and wondered when they slept. Here flocks of Myrtle Warblers, sparrow-like in their winter dress, fed on the lawns in the dooryards, and flew up to perch on coconut fronds when alarmed. Here, too, I encountered the only Sycamore Warbler I ever saw.

The Water-Thrushes, too, are much less retiring in Central America than

on their breeding-grounds, and seem less partial to the vicinity of a stream. The Louisiana, the Northern and Grinnell's Water-Thrushes, at one place or another, are a familiar sight on the lawns, and especially on clean, bare soil, whether around houses or under fruit trees. In Panama, several Northern Water-Thrushes passed the winter near our house, and fed on the lawn or more commonly on the bare ground beneath the banana groves. One lingered until May 10. At Tela, although the Louisiana Water-Thrush was very numerous during October, only a few remained, and during the winter Grinnell's Water-Thrush was the most abundant of the three.

When the heavy rains set in on the Caribbean coast at the beginning of November, I was glad to escape them for a period in the mountains of Guatemala, in the department of Chimaltenango, where, at this season, at an elevation of between 8,000 and 10,000 feet, the days were mild and generally clear, the nights cool and often frosty. Here I made my first acquaintance with a number of migrants from our western states. The most abundant of these, Townsend's Warbler, was just as numerous here as the Yellow Warbler is in the Caribbean lowlands at the same season. I found it as frequently in the gardens and clearings as in the forests of oak and pine. The Pileolated Warbler, the western representative of our Wilson's, was next in abundance, but more partial to the hedge-rows and bushy places than to the woods. Frequently, too, I encountered the pretty little Red-faced Warbler, who seemed to be trying to hide his persistent blush behind a black mask which he wore a trifle too high on his forehead. Only once or twice I saw the Hermit Warbler and the Olive Warbler, which were rare. A flock of thick-billed, Sparrow-like birds which frequented the garden at 'Chichavac' were Rose-breasted Grosbeaks, but the males had only the slightest tinge of red on their breasts to betray their identity. They fed at times upon the seeds of a shapely euphorbiaceous shrub (*Stillingia acutifolia*) poisonous to cattle, but seemed to suffer no ill effects from this diet. The Ant-eating Woodpecker (*Balanosphyra f. formicivora*), although resident, is almost identical with the California bird. Here where the resident birds include Flickers, Blue Jays, Juncoes, Towhees, Brown Creepers, Siskins, Bush-tits and Redstarts, which feed among forests of oak and alder, cypress and pine, the northerner feels in a more familiar setting than among the strange vegetation and birds of the lowlands.

At the end of January, before the cessation of the dreary, chilling winter rains, I returned to the Lancetilla Valley and made a census of its birds. The most abundant winter residents were the Catbird, Yellow Warbler, Redstart, Magnolia Warbler, Grinnell's Water-Thrush, Orchard Oriole, and Wilson's Plover (along the beach). Only less numerous I found the Chat, Summer Tanager, Spotted Sandpiper, and Wood Pewee. The Baltimore Oriole, Maryland Yellow-throat, Northern and Louisiana Water-Thrushes were rather rare. In two weeks I encountered a single Ovenbird, a single Indigo Bunting, and a male Rose-breasted Grosbeak in full nuptial plumage.

SNOWY EGRET AT NEST