Costa Rica's

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The best songsters are often very plain birds. When we compare the many resplendent tanagers, honeycreepers, and parrots that are nearly or quite songless with far less colorful thrushes, wrens, and mockingbirds who sing superbly, we might conclude that nature, parsimonious with her gifts, has given brilliant plumage to some birds and excellent voices to others; only exceptionally, as in certain New World orioles and wood warblers, have both gone to the same species. When she endowed Costa Rica's national bird with an outstandingly fine voice, she seemed to have no bright color to spare for him, for in his unadorned brown plumage he is one of the plainest of feathered creatures.

Ranging from northern Colombia to northeastern Mexico, and from the lowlands up to six thousand or seven thousand feet and occasionally higher, this large thrush has acquired many names. Its similarity in size, habits, and voice to their familiar robin redbreast led U.S. citizens resident in Central America to call it the tropical robin. In recent bird guides it has become the Clay-colored Robin, which is not aptly descriptive, as clays range in color from red to blue. The older name, Gray's Thrush, is simply a translation of the bird's scientific designation, *Turdus Grayi*. Garden Thrush seems much more appropriate, as it is the familiar thrush of gardens, parks, and plantations through much of Middle America, not only in the rainiest regions, but amid the lusher growth of river bottoms and irrigated plantations in the more arid districts. Costa Ricans name their best-loved bird *Yigüirro,* perhaps in allusion to one of its calls.

Although these thrushes live in the garden that surrounds our Costa Rican home, as in many another throughout the length of Central America, they are not the most confiding of our birds. For over two years, finches, tanagers, and honeycreepers had been coming to eat the bananas, which daily I placed on a board in a guava tree beside the house, before I saw a Garden Thrush there. Apparently, scarcity of other foods in a severely dry March forced them to overcome their timidity and join the other birds on the feeder. Even then, they would continue to eat only if unaware that I watched them. Unlike most of the visitors of twenty other species, they left abruptly when I appeared on the porch, to lurk among leafy boughs higher in the tree, nervously calling *tock tock tock* until I vanished. Later, both parents carried billfuls of banana to their nest in a nearby open shed. After a few weeks, a young thrush with spotted wings came to partake freely of the fruit, while it voiced sharp little notes.

As the years passed, our thrushes, who had often been introduced to the feeder by their parents, became less shy and difficult to watch. Often they tried to remove such big billfuls that they pushed a whole banana off

Golden-voiced YIGÜIRRO

the board, as the other diners rarely did. Sometimes, with snapping bill, a thrush chased other birds from the table, but at other times one would share the fruit with a tiny honeycreeper, beside which it appeared gigantic. When it finished eating, the thrush always flew away, leaving the board free for other birds.

Wild figs, berries of many kinds, and seeds covered by soft red or white arils rich in oil vary the Yigüirro's diet. It is amusing to watch one of them eat the fairly large fruits and seeds of certain forest trees. He struggles hard to force down a whole fruit, and, if he fails, he drops it to find another slightly smaller. It seems never to occur to him to peck into the fruit and remove pieces, as tanagers do, and as he does when he eats banana or detaches fragments from the long, dangling, green fruiting spikes of the *guarumo* or cecropia trees. Like other thrushes, Yigüirros forage much on the ground, where they hop along with feet together, and with their bills toss aside fallen leaves, while they search for worms, slugs, larvae, and pupae of insects. Sometimes they eat small lizards.

In March, April, or May, according to the region and the season, when gathering clouds foretell the dry season's end, Garden Thrushes break their long silence with snatches of song. Costa Rican country people say they are "calling the rain." After showers have refreshed the drooping vegetation and nesting begins, the Yigüirros are in fullest song. In cultivated districts where fruit trees and shrubbery are interspersed with tangled thickets, their many-voiced dawn chorus saturates the air with melody. As the sun rises brightly into a clear sky, they sing less or fall silent, to resume singing after midday, when clouds moderate the intense tropical sunshine. On dim or drizzly afternoons in April and May, the thrushes in our garden perform so continuously that occasional intermissions, as at an opera, would be welcome. As with other birds whose songs are richly varied, individuals differ in the quality of their prolonged, smoothly flowing songs, which tend to be pensive rather than spirited, like those of the White-throated Thrush in the neighboring forest. After their nesting season ends, usually in June or July, Garden Thrushes enter a long period when only their call notes are heard. A rare, brief snatch of song, in the rainy second half of the year or the dry early months that follow, stirs memories of more tuneful days.

While we sat at breakfast, before sunrise on an April morning, a male Garden Thrush flew into a *caña de India,* or dracaena, shrub just outside and sang a few notes amid the large red-and-green leaves. Early on the next morning he did the same, always coming to the same spot, and remaining for about a minute. Sometimes he repeated his visit later in the day. I never noticed anything in his bill.

On the third day, the pair of thrushes started to build in the site that the male had chosen for a nest. Watching through the dining-room window, I was surprised to learn that he was helping, for at other nests females had worked alone. The sexes were so similar in appearance that I could distinguish him from his songless mate only by the musical notes that he uttered while bringing material or sitting in the nest site to arrange it. After working at the nest, he might sing more freely, answering other thrushes who were caroling nearby.

Since the male did not always identify himself by voice, I could not count how many times he came. Nevertheless, it was clear that he took a substantial part in the undertaking, for both builders were often at the nest together. At first, when one thrush arrived with material and found the other on the nest, it either dropped the piece beside its partner or carried it away, to return with it after the other had gone. Later, they learned to take pieces from each other's bills. Most of the building material was gathered from the ground. The male carried up a piece of living plant longer than himself. Other contributions to the nest included fibers, moss, muddy fragments of green plants, and lumps of mud. In the first two hundred minutes of the second day of building, the two partners visited the nest ninety-five times.

On the third morning the pair continued to work hard, bringing seventy-two contributions to the nest in three hours. Sometimes the nest was occupied continuously for many minutes by the mates working in it alternately. Each preferred to place and arrange its own contribution. If the new arrival found the other in the nest, it would stand on the rim until the other left, or sometimes force itself into the nest beside the other, who then flew away. Between spells of working, they fed a stubby-tailed fledgling of an earlier brood.

As the nest neared completion the male spent more time singing and helped less, while his partner brought rootlets and fibers for the lining and carefully arranged them in the bowl. By midmorning of the fourth day of building, the structure was finished. A typical thrush's nest, it was a broad, thick-walled, open bowl. Within an outer shell of green moss and coarse vegetable materials, some of which projected untidily, was a layer of mud or clay, bound together by fibers. More fibers, coarse rootlets, and curving rachises of small compound

leaves formed the lining. In the rainy days that followed, the pieces of grass and other plants, and perhaps also seeds, grew in the nest's earthy layer, to make a green wreath around the rim. Some thrushes incubate their eggs and raise their young in the midst of an attractive aerial garden that they incidentally planted while they built.

The nest eight feet up in the *caña de India* was at about average height. Others that I have seen ranged from forty inches to over one hundred feet, but those more than thirty feet above the ground are rare. Usually Garden Thrushes build in leafy shrubs or trees that offer concealment and firm support for their heavy nests. Less frequent sites are bunches of green bananas or plantains hanging where they grew, beams beneath thatched sheds, or rather open hollows in trees. One year, when we were absent for several months and the window through which I watched the thrushes remained closed, a nest was built upon the sill.

Three days after she finished her nest in the *caña de India* the female laid a pale blue egg, speckled and mottled all over with bright shades of brown and blotches of pale lilac. She slept over the single egg, and deposited the second late on the following morning, as frequently happens with Garden Thrushes, who seldom lay around sunrise, as their neighbors the tanagers regularly do. Although this second-brood nest received only two eggs, sets of three are more frequent, and very rarely four are laid.

While the thrushes were building in the *caña de India* they seemed not to notice that they were watched through the open window. After she started to incubate, the female became much more distrustful. No matter how far back in the dining room I sat, she would not continue to warm her eggs while I watched, with the window open only wide enough to see her. Doubtless she incubated with no help from the mate who had built with her; for at other nests, which I studied for long intervals from a blind, only the females covered the eggs, rarely sitting for as long as three hours continuously. Probably because the thrush in the *caña de India* so near the house was often disturbed, her eggs took thirteen days to hatch. At more secluded nests the incubation period is usually only a few hours more than twelve days. The female sometimes eats the empty shells and sometimes carries them away in her bill.

The newly hatched thrushes had pink skins lightly shaded by sparse, but fairly long, straw-colored down. Their eyes were tightly closed. The insides of their mouths were orange-yellow, and the flanges at the corners, which made them more conspicuous, were yellowish. Already they could peep and raise their gaping mouths for food, which soon was brought to them by both parents. When four days old they could open their eyes a little, but mostly kept them closed. At the age of a week they preened their sprouting pinfeathers, from the ends of which the plumage began to escape on the following day. At thirteen days, the nestlings were well clothed with plumage and closely resembled their parents, except for the cinnamon-rufous spots on their wings, which adults lack. Until a day or two before their departure, their mother brooded them every night, although she had long since ceased to cover them on clear days. One left the nest when fifteen days of age, the other at sixteen days, as most young Garden Thrushes do. Rarely a brood quits the nest when only fourteen days old.

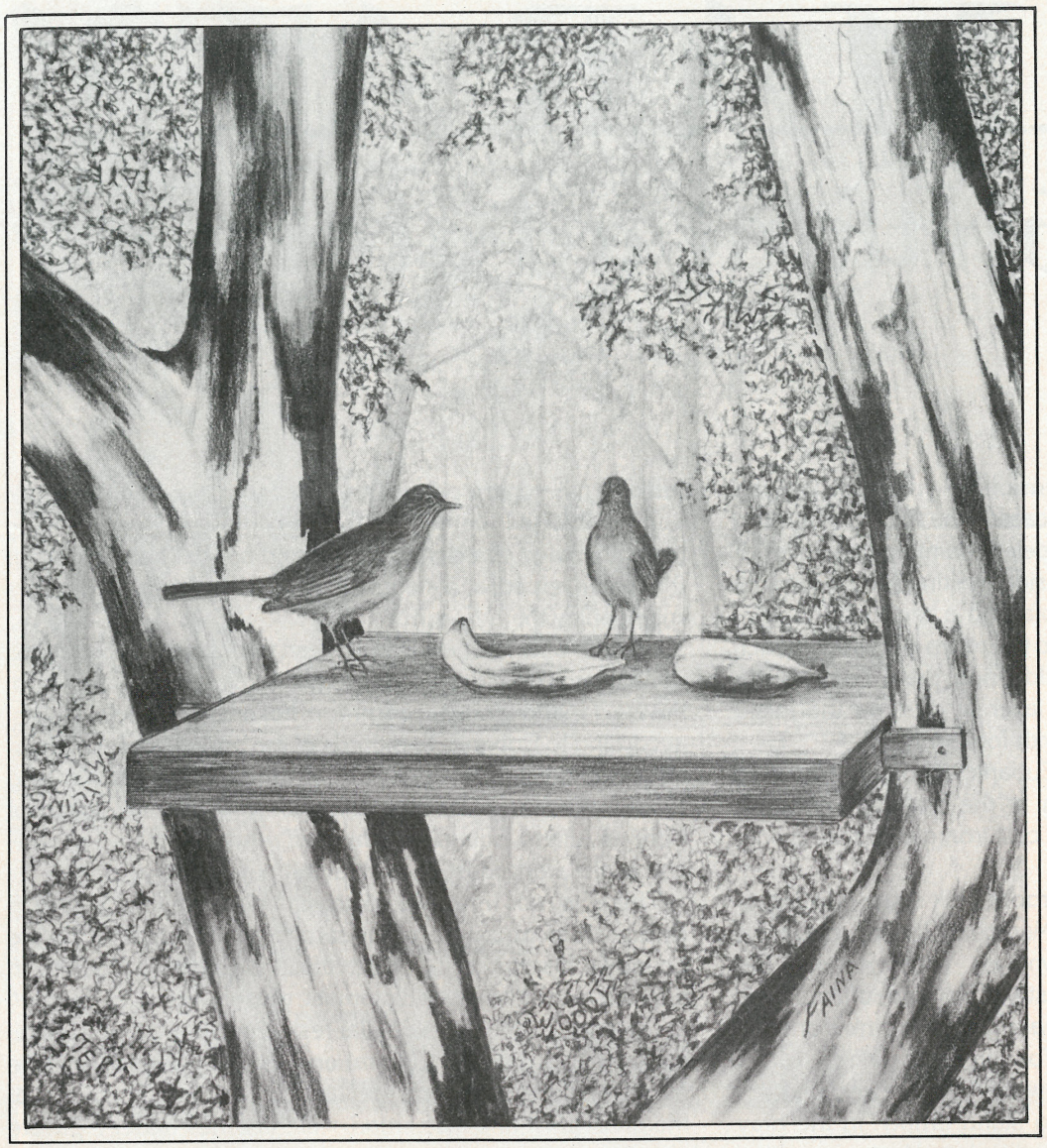
For the last six years the Yigüirros have continued to nest by the dining-room window, usually starting in March. Each year they build upon the remains of their previous year's nest, until their accumulation of materials has grown quite high. This year, after two nestlings departed, leaving an unhatched egg in the nest, the female added fresh lining to the bottom, but not enough completely to cover the addled egg. It remained partly visible between the two that she laid for her second brood, only eight days after the first brood left the nest.

In these six years the thrush laid seventeen eggs and the pair raised ten fledglings, but without our intervention they would have had fewer progeny. One nest tilted so badly that I tied it up, lest the eggs roll out. Last year, while we sat at supper after nightfall, a single low note of alarm told us that the Yigüirro was in trouble. Throwing open the window shutter, we beheld, in a flashlight's beam, a long speckled snake stretched out beside the nest, from which it had just driven the mother. With sticks we attacked the serpent before it could swallow the feathered nestlings she had been brooding. Saved in the nick of time, they flew away three days later.

No Garden Thrush has ever pecked or struck me, as certain smaller birds have done when I touched their nests, or tried to lure me away by fluttering over the ground as though injured and unable to fly, a common ruse of parent birds. None has even flown menacingly toward me while I was at its nest. Nevertheless, few birds seem more concerned for their young, or more distressed when they are, or appear to be, in peril. At the height of the breeding season I have walked through bushy pastures, accompanied all the way by the plaintive *key-o-o* of a succession of parents, until their cries grated on my nerves. While the thrushes nest in our garden we hear them complaining from dawn to nightfall, about ourselves, about squirrels, about snakes, about an intruding falcon, often about nothing that we can discover.

Sometimes I wonder how birds so frequently distressed avoid nervous collapse. Although they rarely approach closely to people, they dart at nest-robbing squirrels until the rodents scamper away. When a Black Hawk-Eagle carried off flycatcher nestlings from a garden where several pairs of thrushes lived, the brown birds continued to swoop past the big raptor's head longer than the parent flycatchers themselves.

Some years ago, a thrush who nested in a queen-of-flowers tree in our garden developed a great antipathy to me, doubtless because from time to time I looked into her nest, and with a long pole I gathered rose apples and cashews from surrounding trees. Almost every evening, when I fed the horse at the gate, she perched above us, complaining, until his meal was finished. She even cried out when, through an open window, she glimpsed me inside the house, although most birds who live in the garden seem to pay no attention to anything indoors. One morning when, well screened by foliage, I was sitting about sixty feet from the thrush's nest to watch a Silver-throated Tanager build her nest, the thrush



A banana placed on a board in the crotch of a guava tree attracts the shy yigüirro. A scarcity of other foods may force the normally timid birds to approach a feeder. Most often yigüirros forage on the ground, tossing aside fallen leaves with their bills as they search for worms, slugs, larvae, and pupae of insects, as well as an occasional lizard. Wild figs and an assortment of berries and seeds vary their diet

perched in the neighboring rose-apple tree and repeated her querulous cries for over an hour.

This thrush evidently remembered me until the following year, when again she nested in the garden. Before I had found her nest, or gathered fruits near it, my appearance outside the house set off a series of loud protests. As I walked through the garden she followed from tree to tree, pausing in each to repeat her *key-o-o*. It was remarkable how promptly she spied me as I approached the garden from a distant excursion.

When I noticed that other people of either sex did not so readily evoke the thrush's protests but I was the particular object of her aversion, I decided to test her ability to recognize me. Just after she had complained about me as usual, I entered the house and donned clothes and a hat quite different from anything that I wore on the farm. When I emerged in this strange garb, the thrush complained once or twice, but did not follow me with reiterated cries, as when I wore my ordinary attire. A number of other appearances in my disguise failed to elicit a response from the vigilant bird. In another test, I walked through the garden in my usual clothes, the thrush following with loud cries, then, in her presence, I covered them with a blue dressing gown that I had carried inconspicuously under an arm and put on a hat that I seldom wore. After a few more complaints, the bird fell silent and ceased to follow me. Later, when I removed gown and hat, the watching bird immediately resumed her cries. Evidently, she recognized me, not by my face, as some birds recognize people and other birds, but by my total aspect, and she was mystified when it suddenly changed.

In strong contrast to Guatemala's Resplendent Quetzal or Venezuela's colorful Troupial, Costa Rica's national bird is very plain. Nevertheless, the songful Yigüirro, so careful of its nestlings, is a fitting symbol for a people so fond of music and devoted to their children as Ticos are.

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