The Catbird —  
_at Home and Abroad_

by ALEXANDER F. SKUTCH

Illustrations by Romeo Munschi

WHY DID the catbird receive his name? The obvious, and correct, answer is because of his mewing call. But those who know the grey, black-capped catbird intimately — in both his summer and winter home — can think of another reason why the name is appropriate. The catbird, like the cat, leads a double life.

While still a small boy, I had a black-and-white cat that, when in the house, demonstrated deep affection for her master in the usual effusive feline manner, rubbing against his legs, purring, and curling up beside him while he read. But one day I chanced to meet Tabby in the woods some distance from home. Instead of coming to my call, as my dog would have done, she bounded away like a wild creature — she was one sort of animal by the fireside and quite another when abroad in the fields or woods. So, too, the catbird that I met in his winter home. There, amid the huge-leaved herbs and riotous tangles of vines and bushes at the edge of a Panamanian banana plantation, he seemed quite a different creature from the one that, in the summer, dwelt tamely in our suburban garden in the North.

Of catbirds at home, I knew none more intimately than a pair that nested one May in the barberry hedge beside my parents’ home in the suburbs of a great city on the Atlantic seaboard. The female had a slightly deformed bill that would not close tightly and which made it easy to distinguish her from her mate. Normally, it is not possible to tell the male from the female except by voice, for both wear the same modest attire. Hence, I had an unusual opportunity to learn the role of each in domestic affairs.

The nest, found in mid-May, was placed three and a half feet above the ground amid the slender, thorny shoots of a barberry bush. It was a framework of small sticks that was partially covered with dead leaves and scraps of paper. Later, some long pieces of string were coiled into the interior, and eventually the nest was completed with a lining of fibrous rootlets.

Early the following day, the first of the pretty greenish-blue eggs was laid. Two more followed on consecutive days. Although catbirds usually lay four, and sometimes even five or six, eggs, this bird considered three a nestful. After she had been incubating a week, I set up a little wigwam of brown cloth close in front of the nest where I could watch the birds without disturbing their routine. I kept vigil all of one morning from dawn to noon and all of another afternoon from one to seven o’clock — thirteen hours in all. With watch and notebook, I made notes on all the comings and goings of the catbird pair.

Brooding the Eggs

The female alone incubated the eggs. During the thirteen hours of activity that I recorded, she sat on the nest twenty-four times but once she stayed for more than an hour. Her twenty-five recesses, for the purpose of seeking food, varied from three to twelve minutes in length. From my observations it was not difficult to compute that she sat in the nest 77.5 per cent of the day.

That catbird kept her eggs warm in much the same fashion as other small birds. A close relative of her species, a white-breasted blue mockingbird that I watched in the high mountains of Guatemala, sat on her two blue eggs for 74.6 per cent of the day, coming and going with much the same rhythm as the catbird in the barberry hedge. Small flycatchers often sit for shorter periods and take more frequent recesses, covering their eggs only 50 or 60 per cent of the sunny hours. Bigger birds, such as thrushes and jays, may sit for longer periods.

And what did the male catbird do while his mate sat on the nest in the hedge? He sang — chiefly in an ash tree some yards away where he could overlook the nest and its surroundings. His song was subdued but very sweet, and, although it was the usual catbird’s medley, it was seldom marred by the
cutcalls and other harsh or grating notes that many catbirds use. When he saw his mate fly from the eggs to seek food, he left the ash tree and advanced to a hawthorn growing so close to the nest that some of the longer branches overshadowed it. There he kept faithful guard over the eggs until she returned. As soon as the female, her hunger satisfied, came back, he flew to a more distant perch and resumed his singing.

**Defending the Nest**

If I touched the nest while the male catbird was on guard, he approached as close to me as he dared and, with spread tail and drooping, quivering wings, hopped excitedly about and uttered loud mews. The female was bolder. If I held my hand over the nest, she struck it with her feet, meanwhile voicing loud, whining notes of distress.

After thirteen days of this routine, the eggs hatched. The dark skins of the three blind nestlings bore a few tufts of grey down, quite inadequate to cover their nakedness. When hungry, they stretched up their scrawny necks and opened wide their mouths, revealing a yellow interior. The male bird joined his mate in toiling to accomplish the impossible—to keep those three yellow mouths filled with caterpillars, spiders, miscellaneous insects, and berries.

After the nestlings hatched, the parents became bolder. If I touched them, the mother pecked vigorously at my hand in addition to striking it with her feet. Her mate would fly against the back of my head as I bent over the nest. Three days after the babies were born, I received such a mauling as no other birds have ever given me, before or since. To see what the catbirds would do, I held a hand over the nest. The female came up and pecked it fiercely, finally alighting upon the back of it, where she stood and showered blows upon me with all her might. The pecks were slightly painful and one drew a little blood. When I turned the palm upward, she would not light upon my hand, but pecked at it from the side. She seemed to understand how the human hand operates and in which position it is most swiftly dangerous. And while the mother catbird punished my trespassing hand, her mate fluttered about my head and struck it.

An antbird in the tropical forest once pecked the hand that I dared to place upon his nest, and a male groove-billed ani repeatedly struck the back of my head when I visited his nestlings. But on no other occasion have both parents attacked me at once. To be hit on the head at the same time that I was pecked on the hand was an experience unique in all my adventures with birds. Had these catbirds been as big and powerful as jays, I should not have dared to approach their treasures without a helmet and a pair of heavy gloves. Many catbird parents complain so earnestly when their nest is approached and show such unmistakable signs of distress, that one with a feeling heart is inclined to run away at once and relieve them of anxiety.

When the nestlings were a week old, I gave their parents some “intelligence tests.” Covering over the nest with a big dock leaf so as to conceal the babies, I disappeared into my little wigwam to watch results. When the catbirds came with food and could not see their youngsters, they hopped all around, completely baffled. The female once gave a tug at the leaf, moving it perhaps an inch and exposing a small portion of the nest, but neither she nor her mate made a real attempt to remove it. The nestlings were now strong enough to push up an edge of their green coverlet, and eventually their meal was passed to them beneath.
it. Similarly, a handkerchief that I used as a cover over the nest was left there without any attempt being made to take it away, but the mother managed to slip a raspberry to a nestling beneath its uplifted edge.

The white-breasted blue mockingbirds, to which I gave the same tests in the Guatemalan highlands, made a far better record, completely removing both a leaf and a handkerchief placed over their two nestlings. Yet, quite in contrast to the catbirds, the mockingbird parents were so shy that they never came near while I was at the nest. I admired the mockingbirds' heads and the catbirds' hearts.

The mother catbird brooded her nestlings every night until the youngest was eight days old and fairly well clothed with plumage. During their last two nights in the nest, the little birds slept without a coverlet. They left the nest when they were eleven days of age. They could barely fly.

Away to the South

Once their parental duties are done, the catbirds spread over the countryside, lurking in the thickets, hedgerows, and the borders of woods, frequently uttering their mewing notes and sometimes singing sweetly in an undertone. When the leaves begin to fall, they start their southward journey; here and there an errant individual elects to remain in the north and face long months of snow, ice, and scant fare. Most fly away to seek a warmer climate in the Southern States, the Bahamas, Cuba, eastern Mexico, and in Central America as far south as Panama. In Central America, they are among the last of the smaller birds to arrive, not appearing in Guatemala and Honduras until late in October — more than two months after yellow warblers, redstarts, orchard orioles, and other early migrants arrive from the north. Soon they spread over all the Caribbean lowlands, but are more abundant in Guatemala and Honduras than farther to the south. They appear never to cross the Cordillera to the Pacific coast. They settle down for a long sojourn of nearly six months, some remaining until the end of the following April.

Here, amid the most luxuriant tropical vegetation, the catbirds lead the more obscure half of their double lives. A few, it is true, encounter agreeable conditions in some of the Caribbean ports, such as Cristobal, Puerto Castilla, and Tela. There they find cottages set among lawns and shrubbery, providing an environment in some respects not greatly different from that of the villages and the suburbs of the big cities in North America where they nest. Only here, instead of in barberry hedges, lilacs, bridal-vinca, dogwood, and holly, they dwell amid hibiscus bushes with huge red blossoms, golden-flowered allamanda, bougainvillea, palm trees, and the multi-hued foliage of codiaeum. The settlements in this wild region are few and far between, and most of the wintering catbirds reside in country with few human inhabitants. They are at home among the riverside thickets or in the riotous growths, scarcely penetrable by man, that overrun abandoned plantations of banana or cacao.

Now, family bonds quite disavowed, the catbird becomes an unsociable creature, leading a solitary life and never flocking like cedar waxwings, dickcissels, or myrtle warblers while in Central America.

When they first arrive in their winter home, the catbirds are as loquacious as they are in the United States in September while preparing for their long southward flight. They call and mew all day long. But as soon as they are well settled, each in his chosen retreat, they become taciturn and seem to be less numerous. But even then the catbird preserves a trait that often leads to his detection — he is very inquisitive. He will often respond to the squeaking noise that the bird watcher knows how to make by drawing in his breath with his lips pressed against the back of his hand. In fact, he is about the only winter visitor in Central America who takes an interest in the sound that sometimes draws nesting birds like a charm. Alert and full of curiosity, the catbird, when he hears the squeak, flies nearer and nearer through the tangle, until at length he comes within sight of its edge. There he vibrates his wings, flits his tail, and, twisting from side to side on his perch, peers out with bright, dark eyes. At length, his curiosity about the strange performance satisfied, he retires once more into the depths of the thicket, to keep company with snakes, lizards, armadillos, antbirds — and himself.