Photograph courtesy U. S. Forest Service

NORTHERN BIRDS AT A COSTA RICAN FEEDING

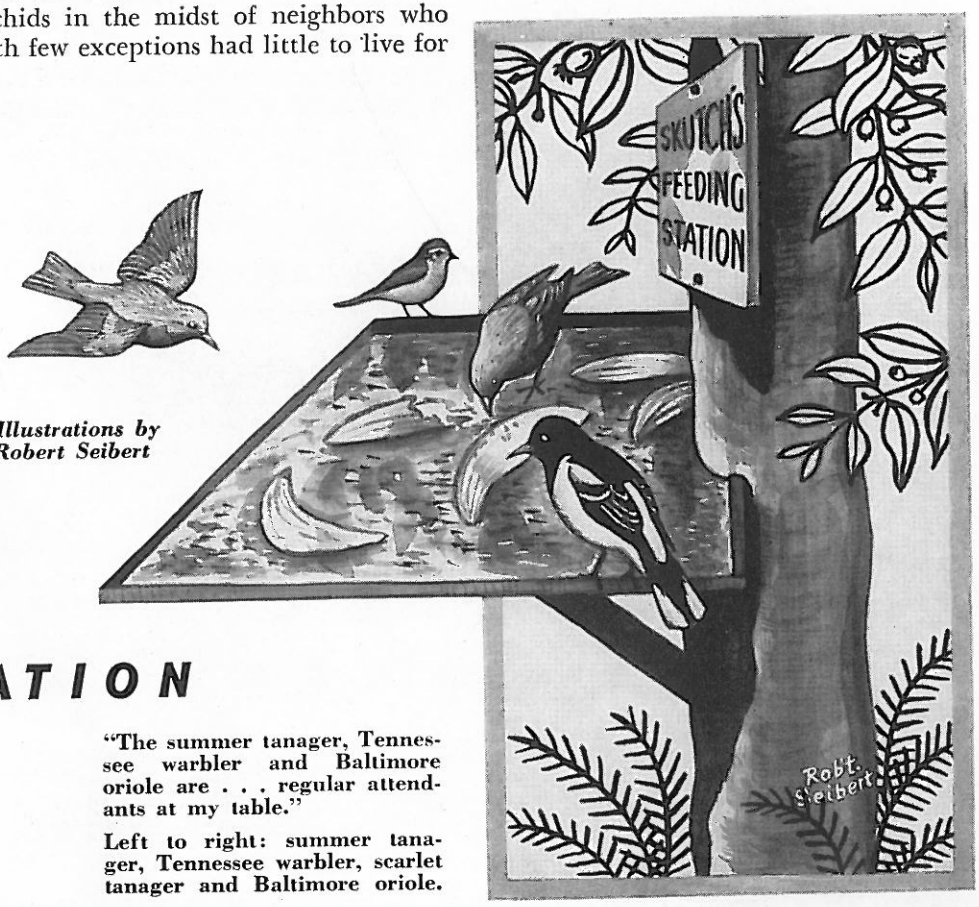
By Alexander F. Skutch

IN Central America many people keep wild songbirds in cages; few provide them with feeding-shelves and bird-baths, or consider which plants will most attract them to their dooryards. I myself have seen only three feeding-shelves in Central America. The first was that maintained by Dr. Frank M. Chapman in the little clearing in the forest on Barro Colorado Island in Gatún Lake in the Panamá Canal Zone, during his sojourns there in the dry season. When I last saw this, in 1935, it was visited only by the pair of brilliant crimson-backed tanagers that dwelt and nested in the clearing, and by a single quadruped,

José, the famous coatimundi, that had learned to climb along the horizontal trolley wires by which the tray was suspended several yards above the ground and at a good distance from the supports. Fragrant ripe bananas lured him to perform this incredible acrobatic feat and rewarded his strenuous efforts. I am told that in recent years feeding-shelves have become more popular in the Panamá Canal Zone, but I have not been there lately.

The second feeding-shelf that I saw in the tropics was in the Valley of El General in southern Costa Rica. This one was maintained by a barefoot farmer, a most remarkable self-taught man, who took an interest in birds and trees and orchids in the midst of neighbors who with few exceptions had little to live for other than raising corn, hogs, and sugarcane, thereby scratching together—if they were exceptionally hard-working and fortunate – penurious fortunes which they did not know how to enjoy. Naturally these tight-fisted, hard-bitten *campesinos* considered Don Isaías, who fed the birds many good bananas which they would have used to fatten hogs, a curious character.

Don Isaías' feeding-shelf attracted a colorful variety of resident and migratory birds. When I first came to El General as a wandering collector of plants and watcher of birds, Don Isaías was one



Illustrations by Robert Seibert

STATION

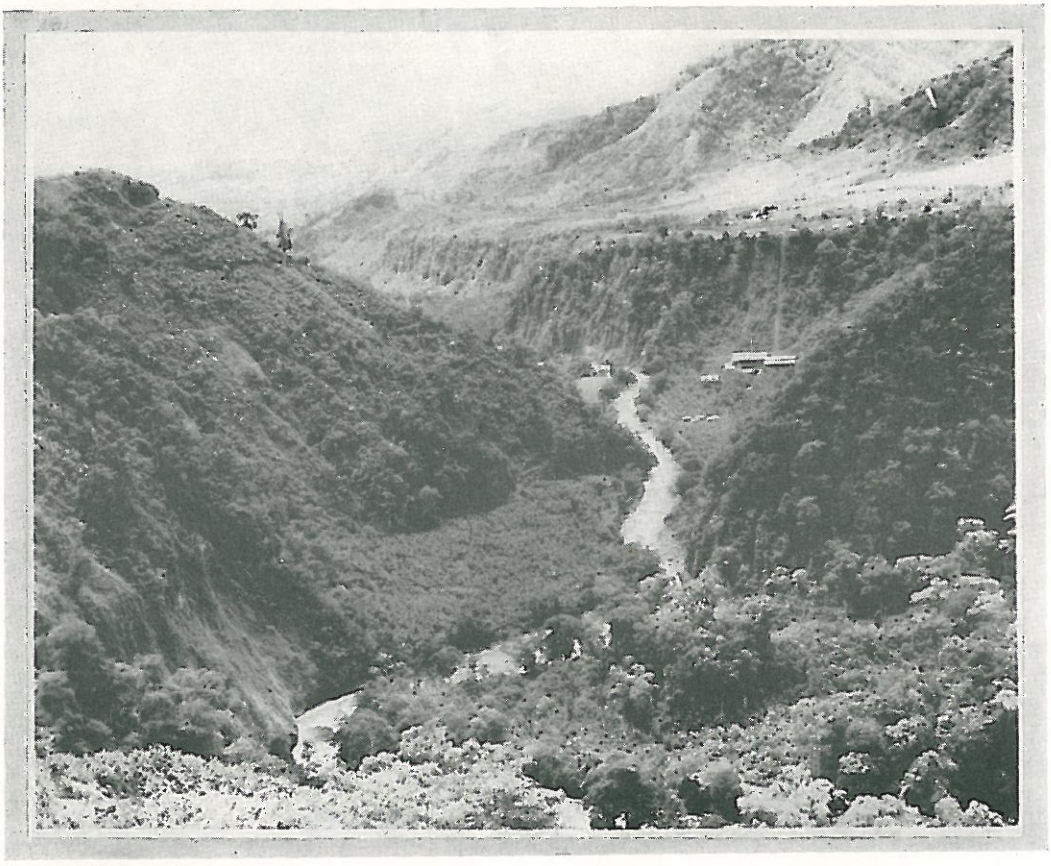
"The summer tanager, Tennessee warbler and Baltimore oriole are . . . regular attendants at my table."

Left to right: summer tanager, Tennessee warbler, scarlet tanager and Baltimore oriole.

of the very few residents whom I visited with pleasure. In those pre-highway days when El General was an isolated community shut in by great forests and high mountains, easy to reach only by the newly-established airplane service, most people were short of money. Although Don Isaías was as poor as others, his always clean little two-room dwelling, roofed with red tiles and walled by rough unpainted boards, was attractive amidst flowering shrubs and blossoming orchids. It was pleasant on a warm afternoon to sit on the little porch, eating one of the big sweet oranges of which my host seemed to have an inexhaustible supply, and to chat with him while I watched the birds come in a constant stream to the table in the yard.

Later, when I settled on my own farm on the opposite side of the Valley of El General, I fastened a board in a guava tree beside the house. Beginning early in 1943, I placed bananas there daily. At first the birds in the yard ignored my offering, but I was not discouraged. First to come to the table, and ever since my most constant guests, were the song tanagers, the males velvety black with an intensely scarlet rump, the more numerous females olive with bright orange on the breast and rump. Little by little other local species, chiefly tanagers, discovered here a reliable supply of delicious food. After two years, 15 kinds of birds were regular or occasional attendants. Thereafter additional species were attracted more slowly. It was a

"When I settled on my own farm on the opposite side of the Valley of El General, I fastened a board in a guava tree beside the house." Photograph courtesy United Fruit Company.



great day when the retiring black-striped sparrow that lurked beneath the hedges about the yard overcame his shyness and flew up to the board and ate. On June 13, 1946, I first saw a male red-crowned woodpecker at the table. Later his mate came, and the following year they brought their two youngsters, one of each sex, to be fed close to the food supply.

Two more years have passed without bringing any new kind of visitor. Apparently I have drawn all the banana-eating birds in the vicinity, but I continue to wonder why the lovely and abundant blue-rumped green tanager passes by the board without ever stopping to eat, although three other no less brilliant species of that amazingly bright and varied genus *Tangara* are regular attendants. Still, I have attracted 22 species of birds with a single kind of food, and am not inclined to complain. I have made no bid for the patronage of the grain-eaters; but blue-black grosbeaks and white-fronted doves constantly come to eat maize in the thatched corn-crib on the lower terrace, or even from the lawn close by the house where we feed the chickens.

The visitors to my table include nine of the 16 kinds of tanagers on the farm, five of the six species of honeycreepers, three finches, two kinds of woodpeckers, an oriole, a warbler and a thrush—as colorful an assemblage of small birds as one can find anywhere. During rainy spells in October and November they come in greatest numbers and crowd the table with as many birds as can find standing-room on a board 15 inches square. They hold one spellbound with constantly shifting patterns of brilliant colors—red, orange, yellow, green, blue of many shades, white, black, brown and gray—and devour as many bananas and plantains as I can provide for them.

I should like to tell something of each of these 22 kinds of birds: how the male yellow-browed tanager gallantly feeds his mate while she stands helping herself to a banana far bigger than she can eat; how the black-winged palm tanagers year after year carry off food to a nest I have never been able to find (tucked beneath some neighbor's thatched roof, I suspect); how at the proper time each pair of old attendants introduces its youngsters to this avian restaurant; how the presence of this constant supply of food has induced shy birds to nest close by the house. They have lost so much of their shyness toward me that, at last, I have succeeded in making satisfactory studies of their home-life. But I wish to tell especially about the four kinds of visitors from far in the North that have done me the honor to eat at my table.

Crimson-backed tanagers visited Frank M. Chapman's feeding station in a forest clearing on Barro Colorado Island, Panama Canal Zone.

The first migrant that I saw on the feeding-shelf was a summer tanager that came on December 24, 1943. It wore the yellowish female plumage, but a slight tinge of red on the rump suggested that it might be a young male. Most distrustful, it dropped down from the branches of the guava tree to the board, jabbed its bill hurriedly into a banana a few times, then darted up and away. Since that day summer tanagers have

been constant visitors to the shelf during their sojourn on my farm, but they are always shy and suspicious. Usually they eat so hurriedly that I have wondered whether they did not later suffer from indigestion, after they had dashed back into the sheltering foliage. Unlike scarlet tanagers, which here are transients

"Blue-black grosbeaks . . . constantly come to eat maize in the thatched corn-crib of the lower terrace."

journeying to or from their winter home in South America, adult male summer tanagers wear their nuptial attire throughout the year. They are the only all-red visitors to my table and add a welcome dash of color. During some winters young males in transitional plumage have also been here. Their first red feathers appear in November or December. It is interesting then to watch the red spread gradually over their bodies in irregular pattern, contrasting prettily with the yellowish ground-color. The change is slow, and many young males leave for the North in motley attire, half red, half yellowish orange.

Summer tanagers are most unsociable in their winter home. They never flock and each appears to claim a territory from which it tries to drive away others of its kind. When quarreling over territory, males not infrequently voice fragments of song and sometimes sing at greater length, but in subdued tones. I have known an individual with no trace of red in its plumage to sing under these circumstances just after its arrival in October, but whether it was a female or young male I could not tell.

Because of their mutual antagonism, which is manifested irrespective of sex, I rarely see two summer tanagers on the feeding-board at one time. If several are about, as happened in the winter of 1947-48, the latecomers wait respectfully on neighboring boughs until the one on the shelf flies away. Summer tanagers arrive in Costa Rica late and leave early. Usually they reach my farm during the first week of October and stay until early April. This year I saw a female in the woods at the unusually late date of April 17.

In March, 1944, I first saw Tennessee warblers on the feeding-shelf. This surprised me greatly, because I had never before known this little greenish gray bird to eat fruit of any kind. Indeed, in the whole wood-warbler family, fruit-eating is rather exceptional, insects being the preferred diet of these active birds. As usual, the pioneer Tennessee warbler was shy, hesitating long to alight on the board in my presence, although the regular attendants continued to come and go without fear. After this first appearance, Tennessee warblers rapidly formed the habit of eating bananas and were soon among the most abundant visitors. I have often seen eight or nine on the board at once, with others waiting among the neighboring boughs. Although gregarious, these little warblers are not entirely friendly, and often two rivals rise up into the air, sparring face to face, but soon separate and return to eat in peace. Since they started to visit my table, I have seen them eat wild fruits, including the green-fruiting catkins of the cecropia tree. Compared with ripe bananas, this seems to be a harsh and unpalatable

fare; but birds of many kinds depend largely upon these cecropia fruits during the dry season when more succulent food is scarce.

Tennessee warblers are numerous during the winter in Central America, chiefly at middle altitudes, between 2,000 and 6,000 feet above sea-level. Although a few winter in the lowlands, others occur still higher in the mountains. The shade trees of the great coffee plantations are especially attractive to them. They swarm there in vast numbers through the open crowns, probing the clustered white stamens of the flowering *Inga* trees. I think "coffee warbler" would be a more suitable name for these birds than Tennessee warbler. Some of them pass through Tennessee on their way to and from Canada in spring and fall, but they neither nest nor linger there; whereas the coffee plantations of Central America are their favorite abode during half the year. On my farm they arrive during October and remain until the last week of April. This year I saw my latest Tennessee warbler at the feeding-shelf on April 30.

Orchard orioles prefer the hot lowlands while in Central America. Only rarely do they pay a brief visit to my farm 2,500 feet above sea-level. The hardier and more adaptable Baltimore orioles pass the winter at altitudes ranging from the coast up to 8,500 feet, where from November to March they endure the penetrating cold of frosty highland nights. Here they are with me in numbers every winter, often roosting in the orange trees, where in the beam of the electric torch the males slumbering amidst the dense, dark green foliage look more like deeply colored oranges. They first came to the feeding-shelf in March, 1944, and since then, have been constant and abundant attendants. Although they travel in loose flocks during the winter, they are by no means as sociable as the song tanagers.

Each Baltimore oriole wants to be the only one of its kind on the table. As a rule they eat in turn at the feeding station rather than simultaneously, although at times, two will be on the board together. Yet they make no serious objections when birds of other species eat beside them, provided they are not crowded too closely. As the time for their northward departure approaches, and less after their arrival in the autumn and rarely even during the winter months, the male orioles voice bright fragments of song, although they seldom sing in a sustained fashion. They arrive between September 10 and the beginning of October and linger until the final ten days of April. For each of the past five years that I have seen my latest Baltimore oriole at the feeding-shelf, the range in dates has been only from April 20 to 26, indicating that the last orioles are quite constant in their time of withdrawal. Indeed, during ten years, my latest spring records for Costa Rica have ranged only from April 15 to 28.

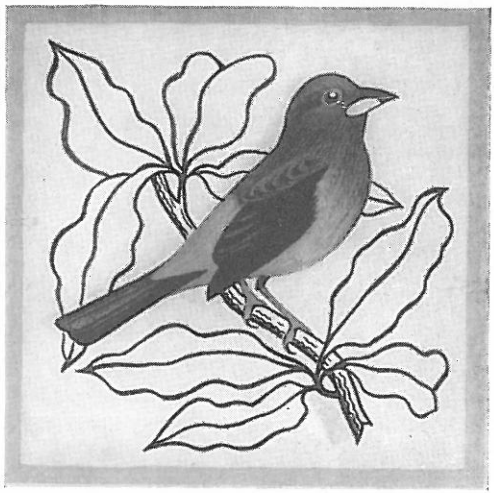
"First to come to the table, and thereafter my most constant guests, were the song tanagers."

These three species—summer tanager, Tennessee warbler and Baltimore oriole —are abundant winter visitors to my farm and regular attendants at the table.

A fourth species is a rare visitor and has only once honored my board. In the afternoon of April 11, 1945, an indigo bunting clad in brown—without much doubt a female—came repeatedly to eat bananas. Somewhat afraid of the bigger Gray's thrushes and song tanagers, she would fly away as one of them alighted on the table. Again and again she returned to eat more. She was back before sunrise next morning, and came many times throughout that day and the four days following. Gradually she grew more confident on the table, both while I looked on and when bigger birds arrived to eat beside her. After six days' attendance at the feeding-shelf she left, probably during the night of April 16. It is now more than three years since I have seen one of her kind at the table. Incidentally, she provided my latest spring record of the occurrence of the indigo bunting in Costa Rica.

These four, and some 50 other kinds of birds from the United States and Canada that I have met in this vicinity, either as transients or winter visitants, remind me forcibly that the protection of birds is a truly international affair. I wonder how many of those citizens of northern countries who watch eagerly for the arrival of the birds in spring, who provide them with food, plant shrubbery to shelter their nests, protect them zealously against all enemies, place bands on their legs, and regretfully note the departure of the latest loiterer of fall—I wonder how many of these good people follow their beloved birds in thought to the lands whither they are bound? Do they visualize the catbird, that nested so tamely in their yard, as lurking amidst strange, lush, huge-leafed herbs about the edges of banana plantations in Caribbean Central America? Do they picture the chestnut-sided warblers, that in summer nested in old fields with light bushy growth, as foraging now in the lofty rain-forest of Costa Rica and Panamá—that "jungle" that holds so many terrors for people who have never experienced its peace? Do they imagine the russet-backed thrushes, that nested in northern coniferous woods, as following the army ants in the tropical forests, in company with ant-birds, woodhewers, manakins and other feathered creatures? Many of these northern birds pass more than half the year in their tropical homes. Their welfare depends upon what happens to them in the South no less than upon what befalls them in the North.

If these migratory birds could talk of conservation, they would take a less limited view than that of many human conservationists whose outlook and experience is all too local. True cosmopolites, these feathered creatures would insist that bird protection must be international, if it is to be effective. The songbirds might ask why, although fairly well protected from human persecution in the countries where they nest, they must, in the tropics, run the gantlet of firearms, slingshots in the hands of boys small and big, and traps set for them. They might ask with what right bright-plumaged, sweet-voiced rose-breasted



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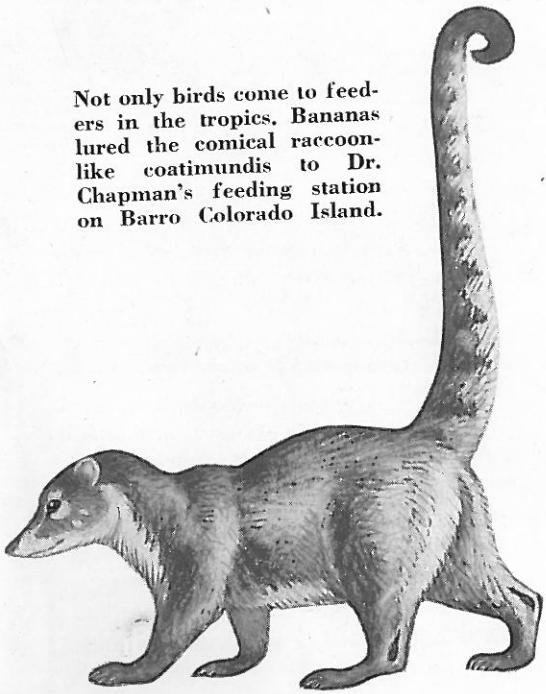
grosbeaks, Baltimore orioles and painted buntings, are imprisoned in cruelly narrow cages and never permitted to return to the land of their birth. They might demand to know what had become of International Law when travelers could be seized and held indefinitely in foreign countries with no possibility of redress.

Treaties have been made to protect the migratory birds in some of the republics south of the Rio Grande. More might be negotiated, but in the present state of education and law enforcement in many of these countries such treaties would be of little value. Of what use to place the names of migratory birds on a protected list in a country—as in most tropical lands—where the great majority of the birds, including some of the most beautiful, have no local name?



Not only birds come to feeders in the tropics. Bananas lured the comical raccoon-like coatimundis to Dr. Chapman's feeding station on Barro Colorado Island.

This lamentable situation is in part a result of lack of books. With the exception of Sturgis's excellent, but insufficiently illustrated "Field-book of the Birds of the Panamá Canal Zone" (in English) there is no adequate guide—other than ponderous volumes of use only to the advanced ornithologist—to the birds of any country between the United States and Chile. Since these South and Central American countries are poor and divided, and have few competent naturalists, the deficiency is not likely to be remedied without outside help. The first step in the protection of North American birds in their winter homes to the south must be the preparation of books which will help the residents of these tropical lands to distinguish the migratory as well as the resident birds and to recognize their value, esthetic and economic. We North Americans, with our interest in birds and great resources and scientific training, must make ourselves responsible for producing these books.

The truth of this thesis, that the first step in the conservation of wild creatures is the popularization of interest in them, should be obvious to any member of an Audubon Society who reflects a moment on the name of his organization. John James Audubon, by the strength and fidelity of his paintings, by the freshness and vivacity of his writing, and in large measure, too, by his picturesque character and romantic history, probably did more than any other single man to arouse popular interest in the birds of eastern North America. This widespread interest was a prerequisite to any effective movement of conservation, hence it is fitting that the organization preeminently dedicated to conservation in North America should bear Audubon's name. The countries of tropical America still lack their Audubon. When he arrives he must pave the way for any sound and truly indigenous effort toward conservation within their borders.