

The Summer of Fire and Bird Adaptation

BY CORNELIUS WEYGANDT

There were not so many birds to greet us at Buck Hill Falls on our arrival on July 6, 1908, as on our previous summer visits there. Our coming a month later than in 1907 and the changes in the surroundings caused by the growth of the cottage colony were both factors in diminishing the varieties that met us on this visit. Barn Swallows were in the air around the built-over old farm-house in which we were again to spend delightful days, mid-summer days this year, affording decided contrasts to the real spring days of 1907's June and the prevailing fall days of its September. Barn Swallows were in the air about the clapboard cottage, while in its thickets of lilacs and roses and in its low apple trees and in its little wood of second growth, were many of those birds, mingled of door-yard familiars and quiet wood-haunters, that we got to know so well the previous year. Robin and Wren, Field Sparrow and Chippy, Catbird and Chebec were there, and Ovenbird and Solitary Vireo, but no Indigobird and no Chewink and no Chestnut-sided Warbler and no Summer Yellowbird, and the evening brought no honking Nighthawk or reiterant Whip-poor-will. Four evenings passed before we saw Nighthawks tossing far aloft, and it was one night later still before we heard the first Whip-poor-will, and thereafter, from the house, we never heard more than one at a time; and the Chewink and Chestnut-sided Warbler, common birds in 1905, and still represented in 1907, did not visit us until July 12th; the Indigobird that was a fixture the year before was a rare visitor this summer, and the Summer Yellowbird, still common enough in the valley below, never came to us at all.

As the summer wore on it brought its little adventures with birds. There was the frequent coaxing of a Chipping Sparrow

into the house with crumbs from the table, but without the complete success in taming we won with a ground hackie the previous year; the frequent visits of two Redeyes to the dead limbs on our front-yard mazzard, where they would sit quietly like Robins on the very topmost twig, whence the male would sometimes pronounce his preachment over and over, a proceeding new in my experience of this Vireo; the young Rubythroat we released from a burdock burr that held him fast, to his great fear and great delight, expressed in happy little squeaks as he hummed away; the presence of Great-crested Flycatchers on the upper waters of Broadhead's Creek later than July 15, after which date in previous years we had never seen them; and the Logcock that in late July and early August made the sunset hour more memorable by his passing. It was on the evening of July 26 that we first saw him. Coming out from supper shortly before seven o'clock we noticed a large bird flying heron-like toward us down the Cresco road. He passed us and made his way onward toward a tall broken-topped gum tree that stood out black against the sunset. He "landed" on its side near the top, woodpecker fashion, and bobbed downtrunk backwards for several yards. It was, for sure, a Pileated Woodpecker, unseen here since our first visit in the September of 1903, for I had seen plainly the white about his throat, so near to us he had passed. The sky was mauve and gold and crimson, and the great bird loomed blacker and bigger than he really was, limned sharply against it. He had not dropped along like the smaller woodpeckers, but had kept on more steadily, very like a heron, with only slight risings and fallings. After a rest on the gum tree of some three minutes he flung himself into the air and dove down into the Buck Hill Gorge, making, I supposed, for the great hemlocks there. After this we watched for him of evenings, and several times caught sight of him on his way northward until August 3d, when we saw him for the last time. Where he had spent the day and why he was crow-like so regular in his sunset flight for this week I could not conjecture.

More interesting to me than any new birds discovered could have been was my witnessing of how quickly the birds of the

barrens adapted themselves to their haunts after these had been swept by wood-fires. In fact I saw more kinds of birds and greater numbers of them on the barrens Tobyhanna-way on August 5th and August 6th than I had seen earlier in August on unburned East Mountain, where I came on only Field Sparrows and Chewinks, and more than I had seen on the neighboring Wismer Mountain on July 8, when in a long stay on its top there came about me only Barn Swallows, whose homes were, at nearest, about the barns four hundred feet below and over a mile away, and the Chewinks and Maryland Yellow-throats of the scrub woods about me. It was hardly late enough, when I saw all these birds on the burnt barrens, for them to have gathered there after breeding in the creek valleys below, and, moreover, some of them were accompanied by young. That I saw more, of course, was partly because, with so many leaves burnt off the brush, I had a much better view of my surroundings than on the huckleberried East Mountain and the thicketed Wismer.

It was on the third day of the woods-fires on Big Spring Mountain and Turkey Knob, three miles to the westward of Buckhill Falls, that I went up to see the burnt-over district. All day long on August 4 the fine ash of burnt leaves fell on us at Buck Hill, the wind driving the fires nearer and nearer and bringing out the fire-fighters to prevent the threatening of the community. The fires had been started, presumably by berry pickers, on Pleasant Ridge and had burned their way northward across Turkey Knob to Big Spring, on whose northern slope they were arrested, in some places by the fire-fighters, but in more by masses of rock too bare to support any vegetation. In one place the fires had burned all the way to the Buck Hill stream, the very base of Wild Cat Hollow, a distance of four miles, perhaps, from their place of origin. At its widest the main fire was some two miles broad, unless you counted the places where changing winds had driven it in narrow belts a half mile further toward Buck Hill, its nearest approach to which was the Bockmeyer farm, some two miles distant.

It was about a half mile north of this, on the berry-road up Big Spring, that I came into the burnt-over barrens. Here, where trees twenty to thirty feet high lifted themselves at irreg-

ular intervals above tall scrub, the fire had run along the ground, but seldom eating its way up the trunks. All the leaves on the scrub, here largely oak and chestnut and sassafras and fire cherry, were scorched brown by the heat of the fire in the fallen leaves and light mould below. A number of old trees, some, perhaps, of the original forest cut for tan-bark years ago, were revealed by the burning. These were still smoking, the long drought having made them, rotten from long lying as many of them were, fit fuel for the fire where it had once gained a good headway. Among these fallen trees pine stumps burned with a clear flame, eating holes down into the ground along their roots sometimes to the depth of two feet.

There was no great heat as I walked through the smoking brush, except where I passed such a glowing pine stump near the road, which, fortunately, was seldom burnt over, its many rocks and its wiry and still green grasses having in most places resisted the flames. It was none the less surprising to me, however, though I had come upon little oases of greenery in the charred woods, to hear as I followed the road deeper into the desolation, a good deal of bird-song. It was a gray morning with presage of rain, such a morning as often, even as late as early August, wakes the spring again in the birds, calls back their April instincts, but still I had not expected bird-song now on these barrens, which had known but one rain in six weeks and that but a six hours' rain, and after a fire had just passed through. I had walked but within the burned belt, however, when I heard a Chewink, who from the top of a ten-foot dead stick, sang as vigorously as if he were just mated, though around him arose the smoke of a hundred lingering little fires. More remarkable still was the fact that now, when I was well toward the mid-most of the path of the fire, the singing of Chewinks came to me from all directions. About every hundred yards along the road I would pass a Chewink sending out bravely his little tinkling song over the burnt brush and smouldering pine stumps. Just beyond my first Chewink I had come upon a Field Sparrow singing, and now all along the two miles of burnt road on the mountaintop other of his kind were about, feeding young, some of them, with what I hardly

know, for all surrounding, except the road I followed, and even it, in places, was burnt over. Fewer of the Field Sparrows sang than of the Chewinks, but it was not their young that accounted for their less frequent singing, for the Chewinks, too, were busy with fledglings. Some of the young Chewinks were hopping about on the burnt-through leaf carpet of the barrens, their reds and browns, and the like-colored plumage of their mothers, according well with the scorched leafage, as did the black backs of the males with the charred mould.

Many Robins were flying over, and twice a pair of Doves, whose dusting holes were conspicuous in the dry road I was following, flew over as only they can fly. A nesting Robin screamed from an oak untouched by the fire. At the same time a Flicker scolded from a dead stub near by. Chickadees lisped from the burnt brush, two Yellow-throats sputtered wren-like near me, a Thrasher flew low over the ground, chutting. By these signs I judged I was getting well through the burnt section and so it proved, though the birds had wandered a good way into the smoking woods. I stopped again to listen to their cries and calls, their twittering and song. The Chewinks were still singing; one Field Sparrow was venturing his wistful notes; a Pewee was calling; and, about me, as about me all the way across the burnt-over mountain, the Barn Swallows wheeled, never ceasing their little gratulations so suggestive of home. And all this on the fifth day of August after six weeks of drought and in barrens still smoking from woods-fire.

The burnt barrens drew me back again next day. This time I followed up the Buck Hill Branch all the way to the Pocono Heights House, which lay just on the other side of the fire's sweep. By taking this route I skirted the northern front of the fire's extent. I was curious to see if I should find many birds here, where I thought, perhaps, they would have sought refuge and forage, but I found none at all,—and the day before in burnt woods I had seen many!

Wildcat Hollow was wild indeed this morning, a morning that had in it much of the menace of an autumn evening. The lowering skies seemed close, as if they were not higher than the tops of the low mountains that ascended so steeply on either

side. There was distant thunder and now and then a few drops of rain. So threatening was it that I was glad to reach the deserted clapboard houses that still stand in the old meadow a quarter of a mile below Pocono Heights. I went into the first of them and waited for the storm to break. For a while the running over the news of the early eighties in the old papers that were pasted over the inner walls of the house contented me, but soon, as the drops fell no faster, I went on up stream, no doubt much to the relief of the old ground-hog whose retreat to his shaft up the fireplace I cut off by my presence. I had not seen a bird all the way up the stream and I saw not one here, not even one of the Pewees that earlier each year nest under the stairs of the old house.

Once past the Pocono Heights house, however, birds were plenty. A stiff breeze was sweeping across these uplands, wet from rain not far away; thunder was rumbling on all sides, there was that expectancy before a storm that is as rousing to birds as to man. A flock of Barn Swallows were gathered on fence and wires opposite the great gray barn, the largest in all this region,—gathered in bunches, and noisy as though about to migrate. In the great fields, now all shorn of their crops, which this great barn is far too large to house, Meadowlarks called from all directions, and some of them clattered down across the road just before me. Kingbirds lifted up their voices loudly from the wires and Bluebirds gurgled gently; Field Sparrows and Vesper Sparrows sang as though it were evening twilight in early summer; and the Swallows dipped and swerved about, as grateful on the wing as when they regained the wires. Crows cawed from a distance, and Robins threw themselves high in the air from the fence-posts.

I entered the barrens again after traversing about a half mile of open country, and in ten minutes more I was again in the burnt district, this time on the other side from Buck Hill Falls. A Song Sparrow was singing here in a low place now white with ashes, I suppose, of the sphagnum of what was once a swamp. Pewees were about in the burnt brush as on the day before, and Field Sparrows and Chewinks were even more numerous. Once down the top of the ridge, however, on an-

other road than that up Big Spring I had climbed the previous day, there were almost no birds, though here a nest unburnt, some four feet above the burnt ground, told that earlier a Thrasher frequented this part of Turkey Knob. On my way down to Pleasant Ridge I saw only one Chewink in the brush. One Flicker flew over and all the way the Barn Swallows swept about. Once, still further down, when I was well out of the burnt area, the fall note of a Bluebird fell to me from far above, and below the Bockmeyer farm a Jay called. I saw no other birds until I was home again, where the usual dooryard companions were still about. It may have been only a coincidence, but it seemed indeed strange that this day, as the day before, I saw more birds in smoking woods, just fire-swept, than in places seemingly much more favorable to them. It was not the first time that experience upset for me preconceived ornithological ideas, but it was the most decided instance of such upsetting this summer, and the memory of it, with that of the Logcock against sunset skies, has fastened itself upon me as lasting among all the little avian adventures of the summer.