The Ovenbird's Call-Song

BY ROBERT THOMAS MOORE

I have used the term "call-song" to differentiate the Ovenbird's common song from the more ornate flight-song. Any other term I can think of seems a misnomer. Perch-song, sometimes used, implies that the song is sung from a perch, whereas in my experience it is more often sung from the ground. "Call-song" is at least not misleading, for it connotes a musical production made up of call-notes, and that is what the common song generally is, a series of identical couplets, any of which would sound like the slurred call-note of some species, if issued alone.

I suppose there is no bird-production which has claimed so much attention and provoked such divergent opinions as the common song of this species. From that early work[1] of Mr. John Borroughs, who suggested the "teacher" designation to the present time, there has been an intermittent discussion of the problem, which note of each couplet receives the accent. That the first note received it was Mr. Borroughs' opinion, and with this Simeon Pease Cheney[2] agreed, illustrating his belief by means of an interesting musical record. But in 1904 Mr. F. Schuyler Mathew's[3] declared that both were at fault, insisting that the accent is placed "on the second syllable, thus: Teachér." He, too, offered musical records as proof of his contention. Mr. Chapman, who in his "Handbook" had praised Mr. Borroughs' syllabic rendering, wrote in his excellent compilation[4] on the warblers: "Formerly, singing Ovenbirds said, to my ear, with remarkable distinctness and deci-

[1] Wake-Robin, 1865, p. 52.

[2] Wood Notes Wild, 1891, p. 63.

[3] Field Book of Wild Birds and their Music, 1907, p. 199.

[4] The Warblers of N. America, 1907, p. 222.

sion, téacher, téacher, etc. - - -, but as I now hear the song the accent is placed on the last syllable." To this Miss Paddock[1] assented, but Mr. Gerald Thayer,[2] unlike all the rest, noted some variation. He wrote: "Its tone-quality is, I believe, practically changeless, but its volume, speed and accentuation vary somewhat. Often, for instance, it is accented on the second syllable of each teacher, instead of on the first." This last, though it suggests a solution in variation of product, lacks authority, because it does not produce musical data to substantiate the position taken.

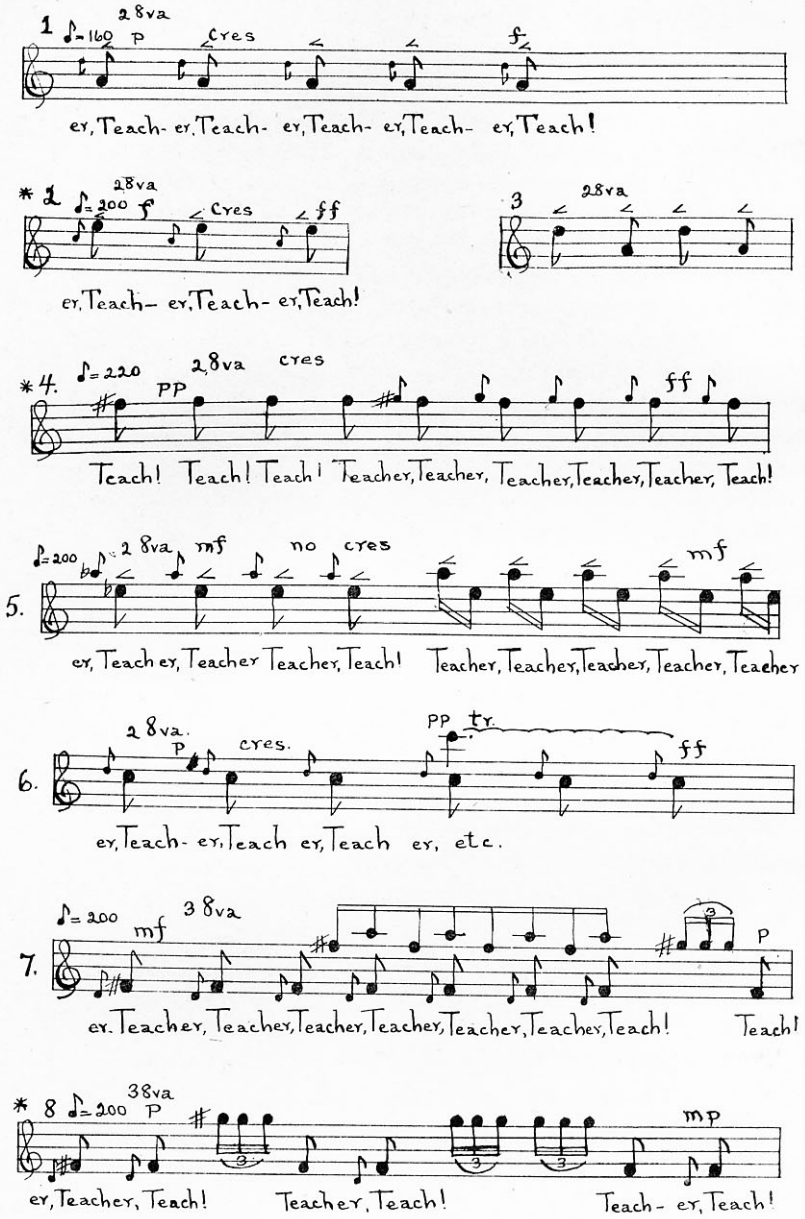
Believing that the real solution would be found by securing a large series of accurate records from different localities, the author has taken every opportunity to do this during the past four years and has now a considerable number, obtained largely from three localities; southern New Jersey, central New Jersey and central Maine. These throw so much light on the problem cited, as well as on other matters of interest connected with the call-song, that the most notable seem worthy of publication. They are not the result of snap judgment, but of careful decision after hours of concentration in the field. Indeed, whole days were devoted to the task of stealing up to singing Oven-birds and deciphering their enigmatic vocalizations, so that the records, I believe, are practically free from error.

There seems to be a general impression that the call-song is subject to little variation. If this were so, the wide divergence of opinion, cited above, would be incomprehensible, except by another supposition that the song-properties are ambiguous. A careful study of my records proves the last supposition correct and the general impression false. One of the song-properties, quality of tone, is extremely ambiguous, but the difficulty lies in the great *variation* the song undergoes at the throats of various Oven-birds. No two birds sing the same song and most individuals during hours of repetition change their productions considerably. There is not one song-property that does not at sometime or other vary or vanish. Even the tone-quality, generally a thick breathy whistle, is subject to some variation, for

[1] Quoted in "Warblers of N. America," p. 224. [2] Thayer, MS.

PLATE II

Oven-bird Songs.



*These records have been shortened for convenience. Recs. 2 and 4 should have two more identical couplets and Rec. 8, four more. It should be noted that Recs. 7 and 8 are written 38va, while the rest are 28va.

the author of Rec. 5 went to the other extreme and used a thin, weak tone, decidedly warbler-like, while the author of Recs. 7 and 8 differed greatly from most Oven-birds in the possession of a just and distinct intonation. Still more in the other song-properties is variation common. The rate of speed is slow or rapid, the pitch is high or low, the couplets alter in number from three to eleven, the position of the accent shifts here and there, the unaccented note ("er") is sometimes dropped completely and that famous crescendo, to which so many have pinned their faith as to an immutable ear-mark of identification, exhibits the extreme limits of deviation possible to a musical expression! I have known songs to increase in power during the deliverance of six "teachers" from p p p to f f f, or in other words the first notes carried no farther than a few feet and the last half a mile, while other songs betrayed the merest suspicion of crescendo!

A comparison of the records (Plate II) indicates these variations precisely. For instance, the rate of speed in Record 2 is marked as ♪ = 200, which means it was rendered presto quick, while Rec. 4 is still faster, ♪ = 220. On the other hand, Rec. 9 (♪ = 160) is about two-thirds as fast, while Rec. 3 was sung in such slow irregular rhythm that it could not be timed with a metronome. An illustration of a typical crescendo effect is found in Rec. 4. In the space of eleven couplets it increases in intensity from a soft tone (pp) to a very loud tone (ff). On the other hand, Rec. 5 exhibits no crescendo whatever! The general pitch of Rec. 9, (page 21), is low, while that of Rec. 5 is an *octave higher.* When we come to the position of the unaccented note ("er") we find it is higher than the accented one ("teách") in Rec. 1, while in Rec. 2 just the contrary is true, and in Rec. 4 the unaccented note in the first four couplets is *dropped entirely!* This omission seems rather common, for it occurs in four of my records.

But these variations, of tone-quality, time, intensity and pitch, are, after all, not more than one would expect from a persistent songster, whose song is not nearly so constant as bird-students have supposed. Far more unusual is the occa-

sional presence of aberrant notes, which add greatly to the difficulty of deciding exactly what the bird is doing and may have confused many reliable students. These perplexing notes may be divided into two classes: those which interrupt the regular couplets and those which do not, the latter being mere ornaments to the couplets, which are sounded at the same time. Rec. 8 is a good example of the first class. Here the aberrant triplets (sets of three notes barred with two lines) break up the couplets ("teacher" notes) which cease while the triplets are being sung. The latter differ in tone-quality and are pitched about an octave higher than the couplets. Probably the triplets are plagiarized from the flight-song, for the combined effect is similar to that of the flight-music and approaches, I doubt not, the aberrant utterances mentioned by Mr. Thayer.[1] Unlike Mr. Thayer's song, this was probably not a prelude to the flight-song, for it was rendered from a tree in the middle of the day and continued for three-quarters of an hour, after which the bird *dropped* to the ground.

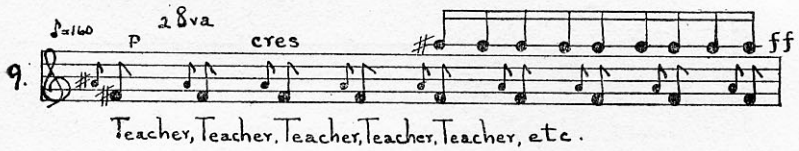
The second class of aberrant notes is more extraordinary and has not been mentioned, so far as I am aware, in the literature of the Oven-bird. I have caught it on several occasions, both in Maine and New Jersey, and in not one case was it a prelude to a flight-song. Sometimes it was a trill (Rec. 6), sometimes the repetition of a single note (Rec. 9, p. 21) and sometimes an extra series of high couplets (Rec. 7), but in most cases the regular couplets are continued to the end.[2] When I first detected this supplementary series of notes, I did not ascribe it to the Oven-bird above my head, but to some unknown warbler farther away, because it was rendered an octave higher than the main part of the song and with an entirely different tone-quality. On this occasion it was a rapid trill, like a Pine Warbler's song, for which my companion mistook it, but delivered with the tone-quality of a violin string. Though it generally entered about the middle of the song, it often did so at any point from the beginning to the end, and occasionally it

[1] Quoted in "Warblers of N. America," p. 223.

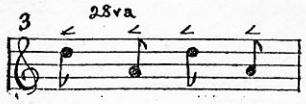
[2] Rec. 7 is an exception, in which one aberrant triplet breaks the couplets at the end.

was whistled very softly without the lower couplets at all. With its inception the regular call-couplets sometimes reversed the accent (after the manner of Rec. 5, which I will explain later) to correspond to the accent of the trill. The remarkable feature of this performance is the "double-noted" effect, an effect which is the almost peculiar possession of the great songsters, notably the thrushes. Potentially, at least, this places the Oven-bird in their ranks, a position which he may actually attain, if he continues to experiment with these remarkable musical devices. It indicates that he has not yet attained and accomplished, but even now, perhaps, is ascending to some rare achievement, possible only to an evolving genius.

It is a suggestive fact that Rec. 7 was produced by the same bird which sang Rec. 8, the example chosen to illustrate the first class of aberrant songs. And this indicates the diversity that exists in the productions of individual Oven-birds. A more remarkable example of this is the following group of five songs which were all sung by one bird on May 19, 1911, during a period of three and a half hours. One other record, which has not been inserted, was sung by the same bird. I was with him from 11 a. m. until 2:30 p. m. He was not once out of my sight! At 11:00 he sang thus,



employing crescendo, a moderate rate of speed (♪ = 160) and the aberrant repeated note. This he sang a number of times with slight variations until 11:30, when he raised it a "third" in pitch. About noon, which was unseasonably hot, the song gradually deteriorated. The trill and crescendo were dropped



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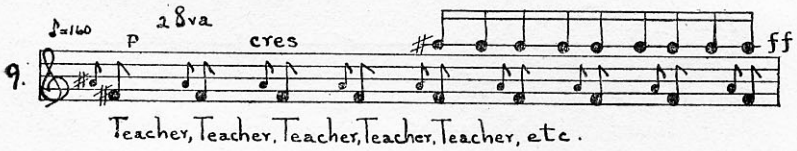

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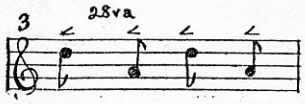
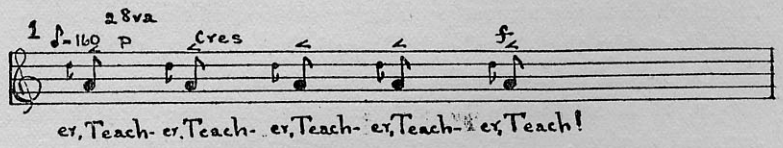
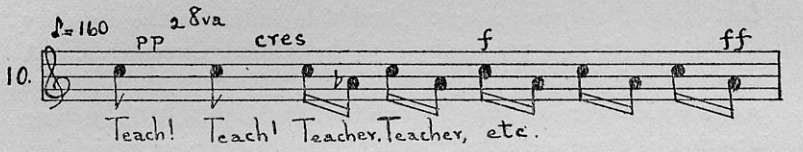


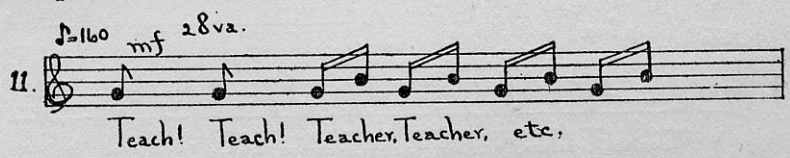
and the couplets reduced to two. At the same time the accented

note lost its characteristic sledge-stroke, so that both notes were struck with equal languor and the rate of speed became very slow. Shortly after this the song went to pieces on single couplets and ceased for an hour. At 1:30 p. m. it was resumed in the form of a typical song, while the rate of speed and accent



were restored. In this rendering the unaccented note came first: "er-Téach, er-Téach, etc." But at 2 p. m. this eccentric individual reversed the accent, and sang Mr. Borroughs' song, although he elided the unaccented note from the first two couplets. But this was not all! A half-hour later the accented note was placed lower than the unaccented and the song dropped in pitch. This Oven-bird was a versatile individual, far beyond





the ordinary, no doubt, and yet every Oven-bird, to which I have devoted an hour's patience, has exhibited the same tendency towards variation.

In this description I have alluded to a "change of accent," which brings up *the* problem of the call-song. Every one is acquainted with Mr. Borroughs' syllabic rendering, the best of its kind, "Teacher, teacher, TEACHER, TEACHER, TEACHER," which provoked the popular question: "Does the first or second syllable receive the accent?" To begin with, this does not state the problem correctly. It is bad enough to force an unmusical word down a bird's throat, but it is the last straw of

insult to accuse him of mispronouncing it! Miss Paddock[1] realized this and, though noting a song similar to Mr. Mathews' records, rendered it syllabically "cher-téa, cher-téa, cher-téa," instead of "teachèr, teachèr, teachèr." So too did Dr. Witmer Stone in his "Birds of New Jersey." The real problem after all is not whether the bird sings "téacher" or "teachèr," but whether he begins his song with an accented or unaccented musical note.[2] The solution of this problem may be found, not only in my records, but also in the combined records of Messrs. Mathews and Cheney, as well as in the perfectly accurate observations of Messrs. Borroughs, Chapman and Thayer. The bird does *both* of these things. Each individual places that accent just where he sees fit and shifts it when he chooses, with the result that some songs accent the first note throughout the call (Recs. 4 and 10) and most the second (Recs. 1, 2 and 6)! About fifteen per cent. do the former according to my records, and this average is probably not far wrong.

Most interesting of all, quite a few individuals shift the accent in the middle of the song, stressing the second note of each couplet during the first half and the first note during the second. So that in the single performance of one Oven-bird we have the solution of the problem which has caused so much divergence of opinion! My best example of this is Rec. 5. The break is represented syllabically at the end of the fourth couplet for the benefit of those who are not familiar with musical notation. It would not be detected, except by a keen ear, on account of the speed (♪ = 200), with which the song is delivered, and yet it would produce an ambiguous effect upon the listener's attention. Indeed this shift of accent, as it may occur unexpectedly at any point in the song, is a most confusing trick and probably more responsible for the divergent report of so many careful scientists than any other eccentric trick of this most eccentric warbler.

Despite the variability in the accent's point of attack, it is in one sense the most constant quality of the call-song. It is always

[1] Quoted in Chapman's "Warblers of North America," p. 224.

[2] Mr. Mathews in one record recognizes a supplementary initial grace note, which I have detected but once.

present, so far as my experience goes, in all performances, however erratic and immature. [1] It is the characteristic trait, which together with the crescendo effect, makes all of these productions instantly recognizable as belonging to the Oven-bird. When heard at a distance, it is invariably decided, almost sledge-like in its stroke, though curiously enough at close range, muffled and obscure. Again it is beat off in exact rhythm, like the ticking of a clock with no sign of decrease or increase of speed. Occasionally interrupted for snatches of the flight-song, the regular beat is at once reasserted, when the borrowed theme has been abandoned.

The name, Golden-crowned Accentor still persists in the synonymy of this species and to a musician seems a better term than Oven-bird. Other birds have evolved roofs for their nests, notably the wrens, who have outdone our whimsical oven-builder, but no other bird in the East has developed such a remarkable accent by the most effective medium for displaying it, that of crescendo. As far as my experience goes, it is the most tremendous crescendo in the bird-world, quite capable of astounding the blasé intruder into its region of high oaks and beeches. There from the bush-free earth out of the heaps of restless leaves will swell that voice, which in the time of three seconds will surge from distant wood to his very feet. No musician can render it with more precision! Heard at a distance it is free of all vagaries and has that confident ring, which at once claims the woods and dominates all other songs, however much finer musically. Other birds have conceived some value in crescendo and have employed it more or less effectively, particularly the Screech Owl, who has pushed it to the extreme in the service of mystery, and the Flicker, whose product is as harsh as the Oven-bird's is soothing, but neither of them has caught the full conception of its noblest power, the ability to express unbounded exultation by one mighty surge to climax, as has this great Accentor, wee of form, but gigantic of voice.

[1] Even here I must note an exception and this only proves how variable this bird is. In Rec. 3 each note was sounded with the same intensity, so that there was no accent, but this happened when the song was deteriorating apparently under the influence of the heat.