

The Snow Hill Bird-Roost

BY SAMUEL N. RHOADS.

Snow Hill is an old negro settlement, probably entitled long ago to its centennial anniversary, and located a mile or more south of Haddonfield, Camden Co., N. J. Approached from the Haddonfield side, it has a sandy, hilly appearance, but on other sides that feature is not manifest. On the northeast side of the hamlet it slopes rapidly toward the spring-heads of a branch of Cooper's Creek, and at this point is located what I have decided to call a Bird-roost, as distinguished from a Blackbird, or Robin-roost.

It may seem as strange to you as it has to me that with all my gadding about for forty years after birds, not only around home, but abroad as well, I had as yet never discovered a Blackbird or a Robin-roost. Imagine therefore my feelings on August 31, 1913, when after a few hours scouting, I found myself in a roost of that kind within rifle shot of my old home. Nor was this all, a negro, whose house stood close by the roost, said that this piece of woods had always been a fall resort for thousands of birds, and a white farmer on the other side said that he had known them to frequent the place for roosting during the fourteen years he had lived there.

This roosting place does not strike one as ideal. It is small; the wooded portion of a hillside covering only about four or five acres. The higher portion is a sandy knoll covered with bushy pines twelve to eighteen feet high; below these, oaks, gums and chestnuts, of twenty to thirty-five feet, thickly cover the slope, and at the bottom, which is swampy, oaks, red maples and black gums, some forty to fifty feet high, reach out to the cleared meadow and brush lands of the true swamp. The roost is thus isolated from other pieces of woods in the vicinity by cleared or partially cleared areas on all sides. This fact may

afford some protection for the assembling birds from the gunners who frequently disturb them; at least it gives them a chance to reconnoitre before entering the roost, a precaution which many flocks take, except those coming in at very late hours. The shape of the roost is like that of a reversed map of Africa, and the widest portion is on highest ground.

In observing the birds assemble, I selected the Haddonfield or northern side, where was a swampy meadow commanding a wide view of the horizon north and west, out of which the great bulk of birds approached. It should be stated that my discovery of the roost was primarily due to observing the regular flight of Crow Blackbirds from 5.30 to 6 p. m. over my home, 81 Haddon Avenue, Haddonfield, during the latter part of August of the present year. Every evening the line of flight was remarkably true to a course over my little garden and certain lofty trees in my aunts' yard, thence over the Town Hall, southward. The elevation of this aerial course was about one hundred and twenty feet, or well above the highest tree-tops. Occasionally the Blackbirds would alight in the woods just behind the garden and gather acorns or pick gumberries with the flocks of Robins there gathered, but that would be earlier in the afternoon. There were about three or four thousand Blackbirds in these flocks, and I supposed on discovering the roost that there would be practically nothing but Blackbirds in it. In this I was greatly mistaken, for though they formed the bulk of roosting birds, there were hundreds of Robins, scores of Starlings, dozens of Doves, and a large number of migratory warblers, finches, thrushes and woodpeckers, nightly associated with them in various parts of the wood.

Probably a version of my verbatim field-notes, taken on the ground, will give the most real picture of what went on at the roost after the "roosters" began to arrive.

"First visit. 4.30 p. m., searching for roost, walked beyond it, when saw some Starlings flying over and back of me, as if to shelter, so asked some boys who directed me to go back $\frac{1}{4}$ mile. Found roost, and a few Starlings in top of high tree near-by, about 200 yards east of Snow Hill School House. More Starlings circle around, then all clear out. 5.12: first Grackles

coming from Haddonfield way, 15 or 20 alighting in top of big gum over spring. 5.20: about 60 Swamp Blackbirds (or are they Cowbirds?) fly swiftly clear over and beyond roost (not seen again). 5.30: a Dove came in. (A clear, calm, hot night this; fine for observations.) 5.40: a dozen Crow-blacks from Haddonfield way go to big gum; many warblers in swamp, scolding and calling; many Night Hawks appear above trees, circling about, not migrating? 5.45: about 50 Crow-blacks leave roost, fly toward Haddonfield, also the Dove. 5.54: Blackbird flocks coming from Haddonfield way, together with 3 Robins, also first Starling from that way. 6.15: 100 Crow-blacks and 4 Starlings. 6.20: 20 Doves in twos and sixes and 150 Crow-blacks, with 30 Starlings, all from Haddonfield way, being first to settle down and begin palaver in roost, also some Flickers, Robins and Brown Thrushes come in. 6.38: 15 Doves, many Robins continually dropping in, mostly from Haddonfield way, also Doves in twos and threes, continuously from same point, about 18 more in all. 6.40: 150 Crow-blacks and another 109 from a new point, viz., eastward. 6.45: large flocks from Haddonfield way, continue; big bunch Starlings from Audubon way, viz., westward, also more Doves, all of which latter appear to settle among pine-scrub on sandy knoll, away from Blackbird roost, most Robins settle in and around same locality, the Blackbirds confining themselves to central portions of taller wood, over space of 2 acres; getting dusk, bats flying, 100 Crow-blacks from east; see a planet; Robins increasing, dashing in low from all points; Brown Thrushes, Veery and Chewinks calling in bush margins of wood. 6.50: Doves and lot of Crow-blacks in continual streams, just over tree tops, dropping in, the latter quite noisy. 7.05: scattering Robins dashing in close to me, out of the dusk. 7.10: no more birds appear to come in, so I leave the roost for home."

Unfortunately, two weeks intervened between my first visit and the next one. The second visit was made on the afternoon of September 15th. The weather was clear, cool and hazy. I arrived at the roost on my bicycle about 4 p. m., and took five photo-views of the roost from various positions. My notes on this visit run substantially as follows:

“4.15: a few Robins already in wood. 5.15: 3 Crow-blacks flew over roost toward Haddon Heights, viz., westward. 5.30: flock of 30 Robins flew into big gum. 5.50: 15 Crow-blacks flew over and came back in three minutes. 5.55: growing dark and apparently no Blackbirds likely to come, when suddenly a flock of 150 drop in from the east, Robins meanwhile coming in fives and tens, scatteringly from Haddonfield way, many others descending from a great height from Audubon way; Night Hawks dashing about high up; some Cedar Birds seen. 6.05: 50 Crow-blacks from the west; Wood Thrushes scolding, also Chewinks, Brown Thrushes and Robins making quite a commotion in woods, probably caused by Owls there, also noted Cat Birds, and a Least Flycatcher, plainly seen, earlier. 6.15: quite dark, but saw 25 to 30 Doves come in, in close file, just over swamp bushes, evidently in much fear. As many Robins as on my first visit. 6.30: went home.”

The great reduction in numbers of roosting birds observed on my second visit was evidently not due to lack of birds in the region or to migration, as my observations in neighboring localities proved, but was undoubtedly due almost entirely to gunners, who, I was informed, had, on several evenings since my first visit, been shooting the Blackbirds as they came in.

Third visit, Sunday, September 28th. “Arrived at roost on my wheel. 5.50 p. m., many Robins coming, in irregular flocks from Haddonfield way, which, I do not doubt, are the same flocks observed in the gum trees back of my house that afternoon, where there seemed to be several hundred. No Blackbirds nor Starlings appeared that night in any direction viewed from the roost, though flocks of the former were in my woods and vicinity that day at Haddonfield. Remained till late dusk, 6.20, and heard a Wood Thrush and Chewink. About 30 Doves came to their roost in the pines in twos and threes, over a period of about twenty minutes. Fine clear day and evening, neither cold nor hot. Should say there was no diminution in number of Robins coming to roost from that noted on previous visit.”

This was my last visit. These observations can be considered merely as a preliminary report on a Roost which will bear further and more careful investigation next year, and it is my hope

to be able to take the matter up with greater thoroughness in the future, as this old-established Bird-Roost appears to be of a much more cosmopolitan character than those which have been reported in last year's issue of *Cassinia*. Owing to the irregular and imperfect manner of making the above observations, it will be best to reserve any deductions or conclusions, which may have occurred to me, for a future paper.

HADDONFIELD, N. J. *Jan. 1st 1913.*