The Valley of the Tacony

BY GEORGE SPENCER MORRIS

In the minds of most ornithologists the bird and its environment are inseparably linked together. We pick up a dry and dusty museum skin and instantly there springs before our mental eye a vision of green meadow, breezy upland, tangled thicket or dense forest as a setting for the living prototype of this dead thing which we hold in our hands. Carrying the thought still further, most of us have in mind some particular spot, with which we instinctively associate a given species; some actual tree or grove or thicket where, perhaps in the distant days of boyhood, we first came to know this bird, or where years of acquaintance with it may have proved this or that spot to be its favorite dwelling or resting place. Again every ornithologist has made a more or less accurate geographic study of the region about his home, and as a result has come to have some favorite tramping ground, which he knows and loves with special intimacy in an ornithological as well as geographic sense. The careful study of these quite restricted sections may often give just as important scientific results as the mere listing of species seen over much wider areas. There is a certain intimate charm in such works as Gilbert White's "Natural History of Selborne" which is in great measure dependent on the narrow limitations of the region dealt with.

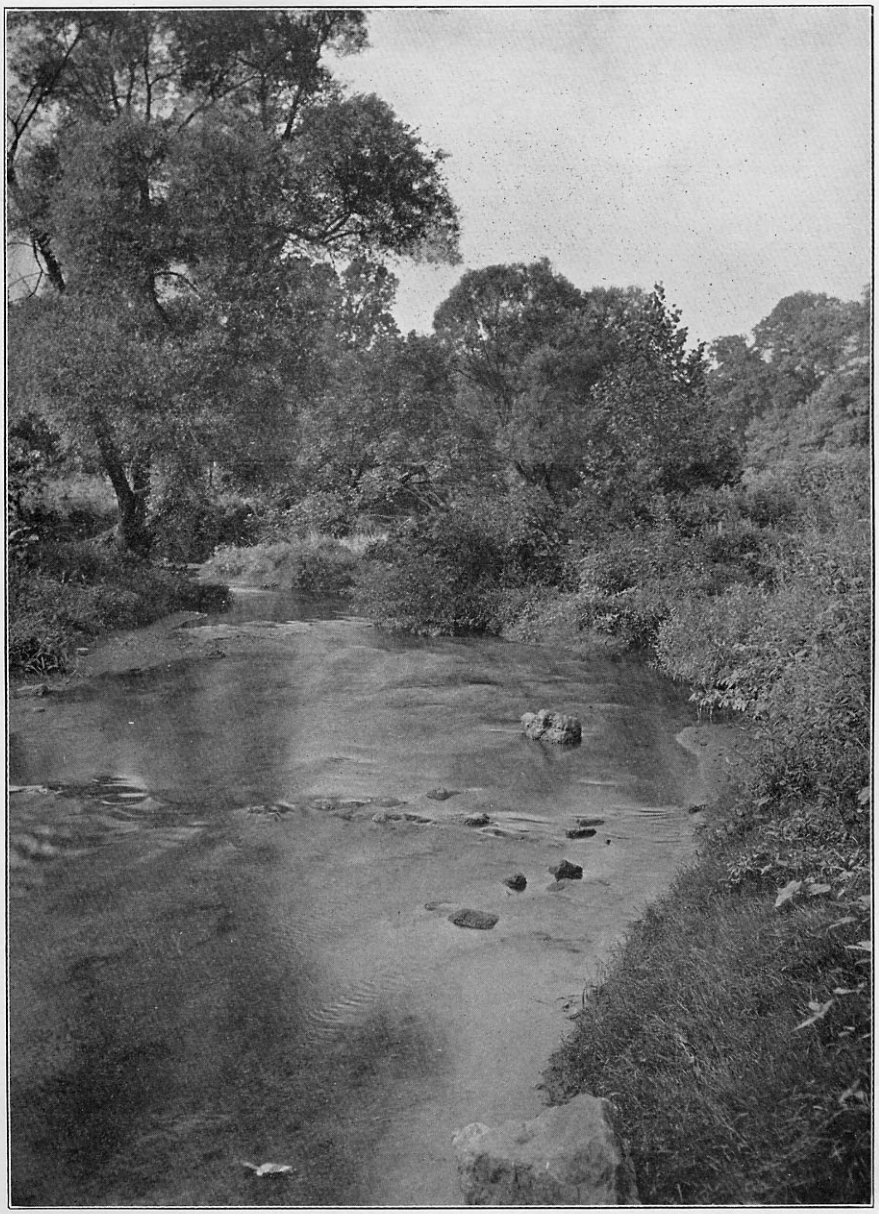
For well nigh fifty years I have lived on the edge of the valley through which winds the Tacony Creek, a stream flowing into the Delaware in the northern section of the county of Philadelphia. Each year the city creeps closer to us. That red-brick wave has almost reached to the opposite edge of our valley, yet still the quiet stream comes down as of old between its wooded hillsides, its marshy meadows, its over-hanging willows and its alder thickets. For the study of bird-life this valley is almost ideal, especially that stretch of some two miles which extends

to the north of my home. I have long felt that I should like to pay written tribute to this my favorite bird-walk.

The hillside in front of our old mansion is thickly wooded. The trees are for the most part tall and stately oaks, beeches, chestnuts or tulip poplars. Here, in summer, the Wood Thrush sings his sweetest, and several nests may invariably be found. In the early spring two or three pairs of Crows almost always build among the upper branches. Throughout the long, hot days of summer the Red-eyed Vireo reiterates his simple sentences and leaves his little cup to hang upon some naked limb, a mute reminder of happier days, when the icy winds of winter sweep down the valley. Along this wooded hillside the Carolina Wren makes the valley ring with his rollicking song on crisp winter mornings, or chatters and scolds as he searches for spiders among the logs of an old woodpile. It is a favorite bit of woods for the Flicker; the Downy Woodpecker is common, the Hairy less so, the Yellow-bellied Sapsucker is a not infrequent visitor in spring or fall, while the Red-head is intermittently common or scarce over periods of several consecutive years, as is his curious custom. In summer the mournful note of the Wood Pewee is always characteristic of the place, and migrating warblers flit in great numbers among the buds and blossoms of spring or the ripening leaves of autumn.

Over the fence at the foot of the hill lies the meadow and through it flows the placid Tacony. When I was a boy this meadow was a marsh with tussocks and rushes and skunk cabbages. The Red-wings always nested here and so did the Maryland Yellow-throat. Modern drainage, alas, has converted this delightful swamp into a commonplace, but useful bit of pasture. Therefore the Red-wings and Yellow-throats have moved on.

Our walk will be up the valley. Looking down the stream we see the water broadening into a pond, with a mill and a village clustered about the dam-breast. Going back over my notes of the past thirty years, I find quite a number of water birds recorded for this pond. I well remember the flock of geese that once alighted in the meadow on a foggy day, but were



HERE DWELLS THE BLUE-WINGED WARBLER

frightened off. Occasionally Butter-balls are seen, and once a Whistler. One Mallard and two Black Ducks are the only records I have of these species, but there have been several Red-breasted Mergansers and one American Merganser. The Pied-billed Grebe is often seen in the spring or fall, a Great Blue Heron stops occasionally, the Night Heron and the Green Heron are comparatively common, the Wilson's Snipe sometimes drops into the meadow in the early spring, the Solitary Sandpiper is a regular migrant, the cry of the Kildeer is a familiar sound, while the Spotted Sandpiper is common throughout the valley.

Turning northward we come at once to the old turnpike bridge with its two stone arches. Here looking back to boyhood, I can remember when the Rough-winged Swallows used to build in the cracks and crannies of these same stone arches, but that is very ancient history. Above the bridge we have a meadow on the right bank of the stream and a wooded hillside on the left. Then the Tacony takes a sharp bend to the eastward and immediately we find ourselves at the back doors of a crumbling, but picturesque old village. The mill which once gave employment to the community is now a ruin, and several of the houses are fast falling to decay, while the best of them give but poor shelter to the human derelicts who still inhabit them. A small and long-deserted quarry, now much overgrown, indents the hillside to the right before you come to the village. Here, years ago a few Bank Swallows nested, and on several occasions the Kingfisher selected this spot for his tunneling.

At this village we have another dam and just below it another stone bridge ; this one being a three-arched structure. In the crevices of this bridge the White-bellied Swallows used to build when the Rough-winged frequented the lower bridge, but many years have passed since this occurred, and now only the Phoebe darts in and out to her mossy nest beneath the cool, gray arches. Clumps of willows and alders and tangles of swampy growth make good bird ground about the headwaters of the pond. Here dwell the Song and the Swamp Sparrows, the Maryland Yellow-throat and Red-winged Blackbird. One can frequently find the nest of the Yellow Warbler, while the Indigo Bunting

usually builds in the bushes over on the edge of the marsh. In winter this weedy, bushy bog gives good cover and food for flocks of finches. Here gather the Whitethroats, the Juncos, the Song and the Tree Sparrows, while occasionally a few Field Sparrows linger throughout the winter.

As we pass up the stream, we come to a drier bit of bottom land, yet still thickly overgrown with weeds, bushes and brambles. Here the Blue-winged Warbler almost invariably builds, as does the Yellow-breasted Chat. The Cardinal also is apt to frequent this particular part of the valley, and here I always expect to hear the first faint flutings of the Fox Sparrow in the warm winter days of late February.

Ahead of us the valley now grows narrower; the hillsides are steeper and more rocky as they draw in closer to the stream, while the water flows more swiftly as we get above the influence of the dam. Rocks protrude here and there from the stream bed and little rapids rush musically across the shallows. Here in winter the Carolina Wren and the Winter Wren greet us with their cheerful chatter as they bustle and rummage about the overhanging banks or peer and pry among the twisted roots of trees that stand by the stream side. In the migrations we often get the strident chirp of the Water Thrush, and more rarely the wonderful song.

The Hooded Warbler is a rare bird in the vicinity of Philadelphia. In fact I have never seen but two hereabout in all my ornithological experience. On May the 9th, 1885 one flashed before me in some bushes by the stream side in this narrow part of our valley. A light load of dust shot was the means of his finding a resting-place among others of his kind in my collection, gathered from regions where the Hooded is more abundant. Three years passed by all but a day, and on May the 8th, 1888, in an afternoon's stroll I approached the same clump of bushes, and lo another Hooded suddenly appeared before me, not two feet from the spot in which I had seen the first one. Is it possible that he sought his long lost brother? If so, his hope was realized; for they now rest side by side. An odd coincidence truly, that the only birds of this species that I have ever seen in this region should have been

THE HAUNT OF THE WATER THRUSH

encountered at widely separated dates, but in the same identical spot.

Along these steep, wooded hillsides we are almost certain in summer to hear the loud, rollicking note of the Kentucky Warbler. Now here is a bird that has unquestionably increased in numbers in this vicinity in recent years. When I was a boy I never saw the Kentucky along the Tacony, although I was quite familiar with the species, for it frequented certain similar valleys lying immediately to the south of Philadelphia, such as the valleys of Crum Creek, Ridley Creek, Chester Creek etc. It seemed then as though the great bulk of the city acted as a barrier to the further progress of the Kentucky so that it did not come into our more northerly valley. Be that as it may, it appeared there some twenty years ago and seems to me to have been steadily on the increase ever since.

At a certain point a small stream draws in from the northwest, coming down through a charming little wooded valley of its own. It is my custom in tramping up the Tacony to make a detour along the course of this smaller stream, returning again to the main valley. In doing this we first follow up a short stretch of open meadow and then plunge into a fine bit of thick growth some twenty feet in height, consisting of willows and alders and other low trees, overhung in some places with a curtain of wild grape vine. The ground beneath is somewhat boggy, though to the left is a high and dry wood of tall timber, and to the right an open hillside. On two occasions I have found the White-eyed Vireo breeding in this lower growth, and White-eye is a rather rare summer resident in these parts. The Tufted Titmouse for some reason seems especially fond of the high wood to the left. He is almost always there whistling or scolding, but only once have I been able to find his nest in all the years that I have passed to and fro beneath these stately trees.

A short distance beyond we enter a wider piece of woodland with a swampy centre through which the stream flows. The spring always seems to make an early start in this protected bit of marsh, and I come here to find my first Maryland Yellowthroat, just as I might go to some particular spot to find the first

hepatica or earliest arbutus. This is one of the very few places on the northern edge of the city where the Worm-eating Warbler may be found, but it now appears to breed here regularly. Its history hereabout is identical with that of the Kentucky Warbler, though it has not yet become so abundant. I never knew the bird in this immediate region until recent years, although in my boyhood it was common enough in the valleys lying just south of Philadelphia. Thus it appears that within the last thirty years our valley has lost the Rough-winged and White-bellied Swallows as breeding birds and gained the Kentucky and Worm-eating Warblers.

I do not know why the Rose-breasted Grosbeak should show such special preference for this bit of woodland through which we have been passing, but during the spring migrations I seem to meet with it here much more frequently than elsewhere. There is a certain group of fine oaks just on the edge of the wood. When their leaves are the size of squirrels' ears and dainty catkins hang trembling on every twig, then is the time one is most apt to catch the gleam of the stately Rosebreasts moving among the upper branches against the warm spring sky, though it may be a mere coincidence with no significance whatever that I should see this lovely bird so much oftener in this particular grove than elsewhere. This wood is a favorite haunt of the Ovenbird. I have several times found his kennel-like nest along the hillsides, and all day long in summer his lilting note rings high and clear among the leafy aisles. The Wood Thrush also is here heard at his best. In the early spring it is a favorite breeding ground of the Crow. A few years ago I found here a Cooper's Hawk nest and an old resident has told me that when he was a young man, a small colony of Night Herons nested in this wood.

Circling around a half-stagnant little pond, from which a Green Heron springs with dangling, yellow legs and ungainly flight, we turn back on our course and ere long come again into the valley of the Tacony. There is still a mile of splendid bird-walk ahead of us. There is meadow and marsh, thicket and woodland, steep stream banks, pebbly shores and jutting rocks. There are ripples and rapids and quiet pools, and the varied bird-life that goes with these changing conditions.

At length at the head of a long meadow we come to a good-sized village, through the centre of which the stream flows. It is the usual terminus of my walk, and it is the stretch of valley lying between this village and my home which has taught me more of bird-life and given me more ornithological thrills than any other section that I have ever known. Barring some water birds and a few upland species, I have here seen practically all the birds of eastern Pennsylvania. I have always felt most grateful to this little valley for all that it has given me, and trust that the day is far distant when the hard hand of the city shall be laid upon it.