Individual Variety of Bird Songs

BY HENRY OLDYS

Volume XVII of *Cassinia* (1913) contains a record of painstaking observations made by the editor, Robert Thomas Moore, of what the author denominates the 'call-song' of the Oven-bird. Mr. Moore settles authoritatively and finally the disputed question of whether or not John Burroughs' 'teacher' characterization of the Oven-bird's song is correct. By a series of notations that have every evidence of accuracy he demonstrates that Mr. Burroughs' characterization is correct *as far as it goes*, but that it represents only one of many forms taken by the bird's song. I was much pleased to see this article, which is amply supported in its conclusion by similar material in my own possession. If necessary I could greatly increase the variety shown, and thus give added emphasis to this demonstration of the Oven-birds' versatility as a songster. It is not my purpose to do so at this time, though I cannot refrain from publishing one unusually aberrant song I secured from an Oven-bird in the grounds of the United States Department of Agriculture at Washington some years ago (Plate IV, Rec. I). This song was delivered in the style of a Carolina Wren and with the *timbre* (quality) of a Maryland Yellow-throat. I should never have attributed it to an Oven-bird, had I not seen the singer, which, fortunately, was perched on a low tree and afforded me two or three minutes of close and perfectly satisfactory inspection.

Let me advert also to one point concerning the "teacher" song which seems to have escaped attention, viz: that it is a *northern* song. I have heard it many times, but never south of Vermont. Mr. Moore's records were obtained, he informs us, in New Jersey and Maine, and I will venture to suggest that if he will examine them, he will find that all those in which the first note of each couplet was accented were secured in Maine.

The northern birds are not confined to this form, nor are the southern birds confined to any particular form; but the "teacher" song is, apparently, used only by northern birds. Nor do they so far as my experience may be taken as a guide, ever sing it while on their migratory journeys through more southerly states.

Individual variety may be found in the songs of most, if not all, other species. Even the humbler vocalists, such as the Black-capped Chickadee, the Black and White Warbler, the Maryland Yellow-throat, and others of this less musically exalted type, exhibit marked variety in the simple songs they utter. Let us take the Chickadee as an example. My observation has been chiefly of the southern form *carolinensis*, though I have noted considerable variety in the singing of *atricapilla* also, and could doubtless show its repertoire to be as varied as that of its southern congener, had as much attention been devoted to one as to the other. In the case of the Carolina Chickadee I have notations of nineteen different songs, besides five or six slight variations of these. This does not include any of the six or seven distinct and separate call-notes; nor does it, of course, include any songs of which I made no musical record. On one warm day in late summer—the 22d of September,—when the thermometer registered a maximum temperature of 98° (a remarkable record for a period when Washington is usually enjoying its first frosts of the season), one Chickadee, out of a flock that I was observing, uttered nine or ten different songs and calls, most of them new to me. I did not note these on the staff: had I done so, the foregoing totals would have been materially increased. And there have been other occasions when I might have added to my records, but did not do so.

One common form of song with the Chickadees of the neighborhood of Washington—the southern form (I have never noted the northern form here)—is noted in Rec. 2. Another is shown in Rec. 3. This last I usually refer to in my notes as the early spring song of the Chickadee, not because it is confined to the season when the bonds of winter are beginning to relax their grip, but because it has often happened to be the first song to break the long silence of winter. It is a welcome herald of the season

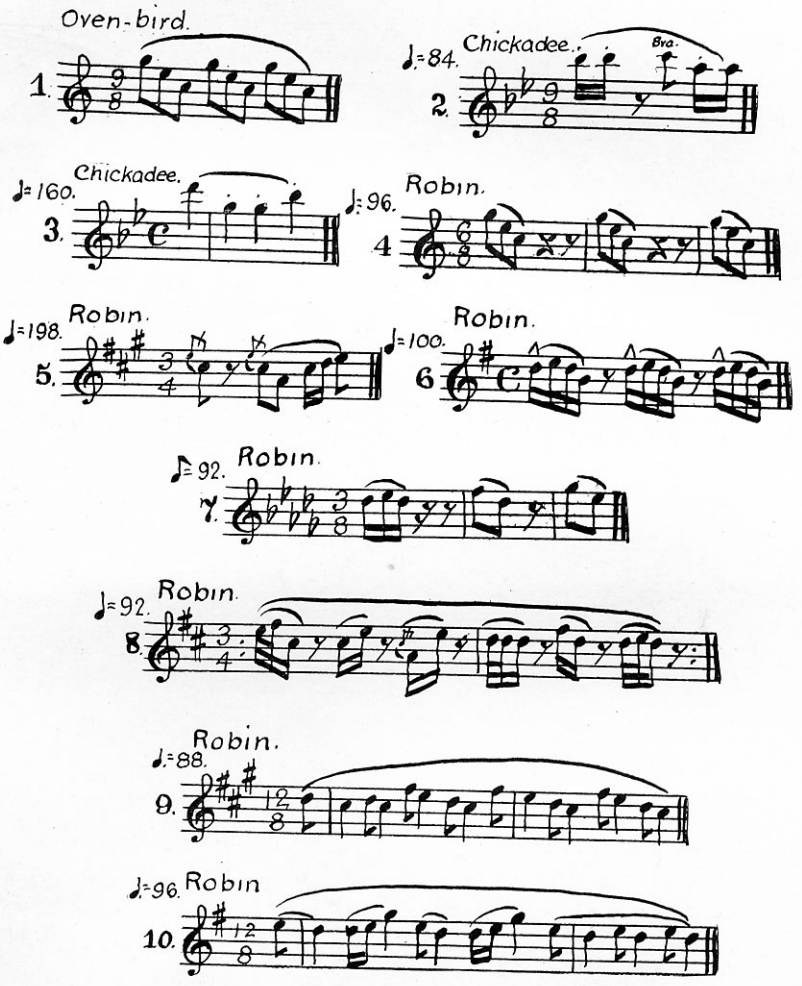
of song. Yet winter with us is not absolutely silent. Though songs are rare at this season, still even on inclement and typically wintry days one may occasionally hear a bit of cheery music from a Song Sparrow, Carolina Wren, or Chickadee; while on those calm vernal days that sometimes ensconce themselves in the very heart of winter, Cardinal, Bluebird, Tufted Titmouse, Meadowlark, White-throated Sparrow, Field Sparrow, Tree Sparrow, or Junco may try its voice; though seldom does one hear more than one or two of these species at once.

My records attest that I have heard Chickadee songs in every month of the year except June, and that this exception is merely accidental I have no doubt. Yet never have I noted the well-known two (sometimes three) note song of the northern Chickadee—the so-called 'phœbe' note—in this latitude. It may be that some of the minor songs—those numerous combinations of glassy notes the Chickadee delights in—which I have ascribed to the Carolina Chickadee were uttered by the northern bird, which has many similar phrases at its command; but the clearly whistled song of *atricapilla* has never greeted my ears in the vicinity of Washington.

Anent this song, so frequently referred to as the 'phœbe' note of the Chickadee, let me say a word or two. The name was originally used by Thoreau and was by him evidently applied to the ordinary spring song of the northern Chickadee, as it has been applied by others ever since. The characterization is only fairly good; for the Chickadee song is a clear whistle, while Phœbe's note is of mixed quality. Phœbe's voice is a very high tenor; that of Chickadee is nearer a childish or feminine treble. Chickadee's note can be imitated perfectly by the human whistle, but Phœbe's cannot. But both Chickadees utter a phrase that is truly entitled to be called the *phœbe* note—a reproduction of Phœbe's song so nearly exact that in four successive springs it misled me into the belief that the Phœbe had arrived from the South. This is the real *phœbe* note of the Chickadee, not the clear-toned whistle of *atricapilla*.

The singing of the Robin shows great individual variety. By this I do not mean to imply that one Robin will vary his songs according to the time of day or condition of the weather—I

Song Records.



have never observed any such adaptation of Robin music,—but that each individual Robin has his own particular phrases, by which he may be distinguished from all other Robins by the close observer. Records 4, 5, and 6 show some different Robin phrases I have secured. The phrases given in Record 4 were followed by two or three other phrases, some moving upward instead of downward ; the little run from *c* to *e* in Record 5 was very clean cut ; while the song, reproduced in Record 6, was beautifully clear.

Most Robin songs have little melodious coherency, but I have noted a number of exceptions to this rule. I once heard three related phrases (Rec. 7) sung by a Robin, usually though not invariably, in the order here given. It will be observed that the three taken together form one melodious whole. Another Robin sang a six-phrase song, as indicated in Record 8. The bird sometimes varied this song slightly and sang also a number of other combinations. I would direct especial attention to the fact that the first three of these phrases were in dominant harmony while the last three were in tonic harmony, which makes the whole song very well balanced. Other examples of more or less melodious combinations of phrases, heard at various places, both north and south, might be given did space permit.

Sometimes a Robin will depart from convention and utter a song that is very unlike the normal Robin song in style. Thus, a few years ago a Robin was wont to greet me as I returned to my home of a summer afternoon with the continuous melody shown in Record 9. And one April day I heard a Robin in the grounds of the United States Department of Agriculture singing a *sub voce* song (Rec. 10) that was also decidedly aberrant.

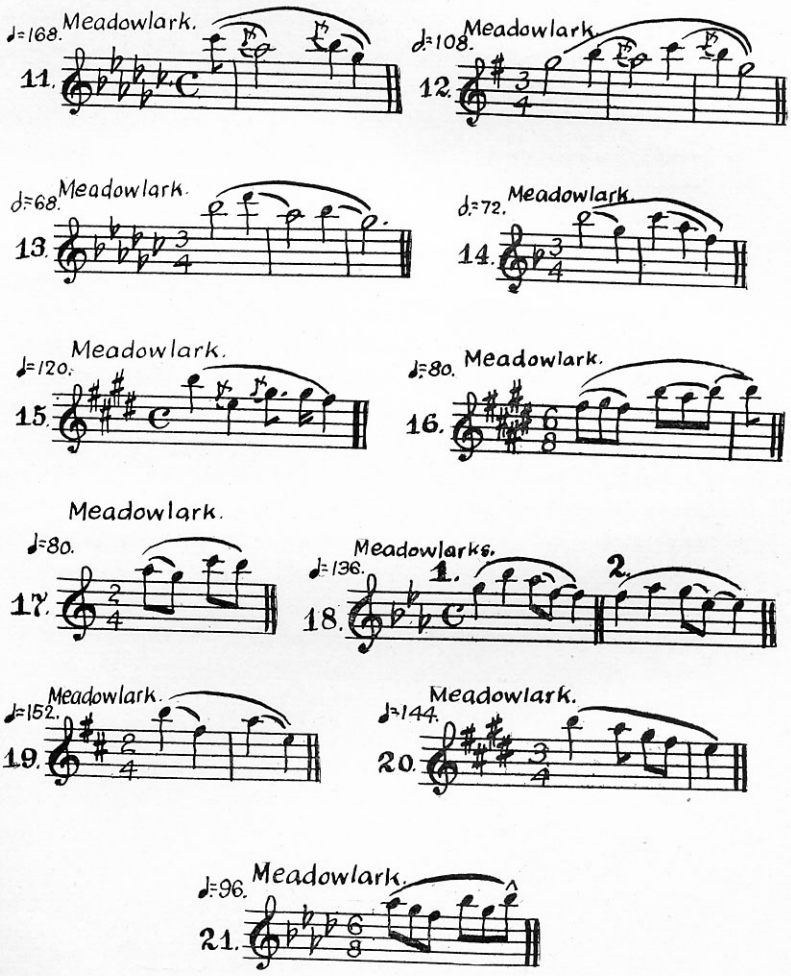
A notable difference is observable in the quality of voice and style of different Robins. One, as though greatly pressed by the stress and strenuousness of this life, will utter a high-pitched hurried, eager song, that communicates a spirit of unrest to the listener and creates a hope that the feverish singer may be moved to take up his summer's abode at some far-distant point. Another, disposed apparently to take life more easily, will sing

on a lower pitch and with a less excited *tempo*. Another, remembering, perhaps, that he is a thrush, will sing still more deliberately and with a thrush-like quality of tone that is a joy to hear. On the other hand there are some whose voices are thick and throaty and lack the clear bell-like tone that is usually characteristic of Robin music. On account of these differences it may or it may not be desirable from the musical point of view to have a Robin for a permanent neighbor. His singing may be a delight, or it may be very wearisome to the nerves.

Yet greater variety is noticeable in the songs of Meadowlarks. Like the Chickadee, Song Sparrow, Wood Thrush, and many other birds, each Meadowlark has a more or less extensive repertory of songs; while the individual differences are so great that it is rather rare that one hears a duplication of phrases by separate birds. I have such a wealth of Meadowlark songs among my records that it is difficult to choose which to present here. However, I shall select a few that best exhibit the great diversity that exists among them. One song (Rec. 11) I heard on the 4th of April, 1905. Another, heard on the 3rd of the following March, (Rec. 12) makes an appropriate musical response —or would do so were the two in the same key. It furnishes a pretty bit of ascending melody in waltz time. The third, (Rec. 13) heard at 5 p.m. on the 13th of the preceding June, offers a descending waltz theme. The fourth, (Rec. 14) sung on the twelfth of April, 1906, was one of four or five different themes uttered by one bird within a few minutes. These four were all heard near North Takoma, a Maryland suburb of Washington, D. C.

On May 1, 1906, two birds I heard near Washington, Pa., gave me two very diverse songs (Recs. 15 and 16). The second of these songs is quite aberrant in style from ordinary Meadowlark music. At North Takoma again, on the 7th of June, 1906, I heard the phrase shown in Record 17 sung in beautifully clear, liquid, and penetrating tones. A few days later, at the same spot—a large field that was a most popular Meadowlark resort—I heard the attractive phrases shown in Record 18 sung antiphonally by two birds. The motive of this duet might have been taken almost bodily from Verdi's '*La Donna e Mobile*'

Song Records.



in the opera of *Rigoletto*. On July 14, 1909, near my present home, two miles farther into Maryland, I heard the theme, shown in Record 19 which, though it has a ponderous look, was sung with graceful slurs that robbed it of all heaviness.

Two more only will I select out of my large store—I have 118 notations of songs of the eastern Meadowlark. One was sung near my home on the 4th of July, 1911, without the usual Meadowlark *portamento* slur, and even slightly *staccato* (Rec. 20). The other was given on the 7th of June, 1913, by a Setauket, Long Island, Meadowlark (Rec. 21). In the last example the first three notes were perfectly true to our scale and were *staccato*. The last three were not quite so true. The final note was a *tsee*, like one of the afternotes of a Wood Thrush, though less emphatic and not so metallic.

I could tell also of a flight-song, an ecstatic warble like that of an Indigo Bunting and uttered in like manner while descending from a height; of the geographic difference in voice and style of song between Meadowlarks of the Middle West and those east of the Alleghanies, birds that are not even subspecifically differentiated; of different degrees in beauty of tone or adherence to the intervals of the diatonic scale; of variant lengths of songs, ranging from two notes to a dozen or more; of differences in what seems to be actual appreciation of melodic beauty on the birds' part. I could also take up many other species of song-birds and show that the same rule of individual variety holds with each. But my paper is already too long and I will content myself with letting the case rest here, satisfied if I shall have aided in awakening in the minds of any of the readers of *Cassinia* a new and fuller sense of the great variety in the songs of the birds.