

BIRDS OF RITTENHOUSE SQUARE

BY JOHN A. GILLESPIE

When the city of Philadelphia was first laid out in 1682 by Thomas Holme (William Penn's surveyor), it was the founder's intention that the City of Brotherly Love should be "a green country town." Were Penn alive today he would hardly recognize the city, inasmuch as only the parks provide the green effect he wished to perpetuate. One could hardly expect him to remember Rittenhouse Square (laid out when the city was first planned some two hundred and sixty-one years ago), and named in honor of William Rittenhouse who built the first paper mill in America. Today, this plot, comprising a square city block, is hemmed in on four sides by tall buildings, and yet the birds in their spring and fall migrations along the natural avian highway bounded on the east and west by the Delaware and Schuylkill Rivers, spot this minute oasis and drop down to secure food and shelter.

The vegetation of the Square consists of deciduous trees, mainly Silver and Sycamore Maple, American Elm, White Ash, London Plane and Sycamore, Red and Black Oak, Japanese Flowering Cherry, miscellaneous flowering shrubs, privet, etc.

The breeding bird population is confined to a few species. Several pairs of Robins nest regularly. A late nesting, which did not materialize, was observed from Sept. 4 to 14, inclusive, 1926, during which period a male occupied the nest and sang daily therefrom. From indications, the female had either deserted or had met an untimely end, and her mate endeavored to "carry on."

Starlings occupy every available cavity which the numerous Gray Squirrels have deemed unsuitable. Possibly before either became so common, the Flicker nested there. On May 26, 1927, I found a young Screech Owl unable to fly, indicating a nest in a Silver Maple cavity nearby. English Sparrows are always in evidence, and on one occasion I saw a pair carrying food to fledglings occupying a bulky nest (such as they occasionally construct) located in an open tree. On May 28, 1929, attracted by bird squeals, I found a fledgling Sparrow Hawk, barely able to fly, in a privet hedge. Undoubtedly he had just flown from a nest cavity in the Square.

For the past 18 years the writer, during lunch hours has observed migrants at Rittenhouse Square (under the supervision of amused park-bench occupants) where the lack of underbrush is a definite asset to identification. Miss Margaret Watson, a competent observer, has also done considerable birding at the Square. Our combined list totals 76 species, six of which were not observed by the writer, viz.: Kingbird, Bewick's Wren (identified under very favorable conditions), Pine Warbler, Yellow-breasted Chat, Rusty Blackbird, and Indigo Bunting.

Mr. and Mrs. Quintin Kramer have worked this territory more diligently than the writer over a shorter period of time, and have observed, by a strange coincidence, 76 species, 18 of which neither Miss Watson nor I have seen at this locality. Altogether 94 species have been identified in Rittenhouse Square by all observers above mentioned.

The Kramers have seen the following species in flight over the Square: Canada Goose, Coopers Hawk, Osprey, Herring Gull, Chimney Swift, Barn Swallow, and Crow.

Rather than enumerate the complete list, I am mentioning some of the uncommon species encountered, as well as the familiar birds observed to the writer's surprise in a City Square.

Duck Hawk. Observed by the Kramers. Probably attracted by the all-too-numerous pigeons.

Sparrow Hawk. Several records. On May 3, 1934, one was seen carrying off a squealing English Sparrow!

Bobwhite. Seen by Miss Watson and the writer Sept. 20, 1929.

American Woodcock. Observed Nov. 1, 1938 by the Kramers. An interesting record.

Screech Owl. In addition to fledgling above mentioned, an adult was observed on one occasion.

Red-bellied Woodpecker! The Kramers made this unusual find on May 5, 1943.

Ruby-throated Hummingbird. Several records.

Yellow-bellied Sapsucker. A common April visitor, but more frequent in late September and early October.

Nuthatches. Both Red and White Breasts occur irregularly.

Brown Creeper. Common migrant. I was leaning against a tree at the Square one day, when a Creeper suddenly dropped to the ground beside me hopped upon my shoe and climbed up my leg well above the knee. Suddenly he stopped (probably deciding the limb was artificial) and flew off to more lucrative hunting grounds.

Wrens. Winter Wrens are regular visitors, as is the House Wren. Carolina Wren seen occasionally. The Bewick's Wren record is accidental. One of the greatest surprises was a Long-billed Marsh Wren seen by the writer at close range.

Brown Thrasher. A regular migrant. The Kramers saw one April 1, 1938, an early visitor.

Thrushes. Hermit Thrush very common. All other species seen regularly with the Wood Thrush (strange as it may seem) the scarcest. One day I was able to approach within ten feet of a Hermit on the lawn, the reason being that the bird was blind in one eye. It apparently was feeding on a worm too tough for it to swallow. When the bird gave up the attempt, the worm disappeared into the bird's body near the bend of the wing! Soon it reappeared and the bird again attempted to swallow it. This procedure was repeated many times,

convincing the writer that the worm was *parasitic* and had caused the blindness in one eye, and would eventually be the cause of the bird's death. A Bicknell's Thrush (an interesting record) is included in the Kramer's list. "This particular bird (observed daily for a week or more) was as small (except for the length of tarsus) as the English Sparrows with which it frequently mingled."

Warblers. Twenty-six species recorded. The less common species, viz.: Worm-eating, Blue Winged, Tennessee, Cape May, Blackburnian, both water-thrushes, Connecticut, Hooded, and Wilson's have all been seen at the Square. In October, one is certain to observe Cape Mays to excellent advantage, low in the maples.

Tanagers. The Scarlet Tanager is seen occasionally. Dr. Witmer Stone once advised the writer that a Summer Tanager had been recorded some years ago at the Square by a competent observer.

Sparrows. Ten species recorded, including the Savannah, White Crowned, Lincoln's and Swamp Sparrows. On October 19, 1932, I counted 35 White-throats and no doubt overlooked a number. The Kramers report a late individual on June 10, 1938.

Systematic observation at Rittenhouse Square, spring and fall, is bound to produce some good days on which a dozen or more species can be seen. Nineteen species is the most the writer has observed in a single day,—September 29, 1938. In general the number of individuals is larger in the fall. At this season the best period is between September 20 and October 15. But spring is not far behind, and regular observation between April 25 and May 15 will reward the watcher. On the latter date, 1929, I recorded the following: Starling, English Sparrow, Catbird, Robin, Olive-backed Thrush, Ovenbird (8), Parula, Chestnut-sided, Magnolia, Myrtle, Northern Yellowthroat (25) and Tennessee warblers, Towhee (a pair), Chipping Sparrow, White-throated Sparrow (12), and Lincoln's Sparrow,—16 species. A Red-letter Bird Day for a City Square in any man's language!