

THE MOCKINGBIRD

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(Editor's Note: We are pleased to publish the major portion of a recently-discovered manuscript written about 1924 by the late Dr. Stone. We present it for its honest, unadorned style for which the author was noted; its expression of a searching, scientific mind; its compilation of early records; and for interesting comparison with today's relatively common status of the subject species in this area. Readers familiar with "Bird Studies at Old Cape May" will find many parallel expressions and observations. For comparison with the later status of the Mockingbird we refer to recent issues of *Cassinia*, especially that of 1952-1952, page 27, "Nesting Mockingbirds in the Lower Delaware Valley", by George Reynard; although the almost spectacular increase of the bird throughout the Philadelphia area in the last several years makes this reference more historical than currently factual.)

From our knowledge of the Mockingbird in its homeland to the southward, and such tradition as pertains to it as a regular resident of our district, we can picture the Mockingbird as a resident of open farming country with some osage hedge, some clump of thorn bush, or a convenient bushy cedar as its nesting site, and with a tendency to keep pretty close to man's habitations.

To those of us who know the bird in the South, its presence always brings to mind some little village in the cotton belt where the pungent odor of wood fires is ever in the air and a breath of delicate fragrance from some blossoming shrub, often ill-defined and composite and hard to identify but distinctly characteristic, comes and goes. Low houses nestling in bowers of climbing roses or hiding behind gardens line the street, while on the outskirts of the village are negro cabins shaded by densely-foliaged umbrella trees and each with a chimney of sticks chinked in with clay from which a slender thread of blue smoke is always curling upward. On all sides stretch the dusty cotton-fields, acres upon acres, for the most part fenceless but always with a black fringe of pine woods cutting off the horizon. This is the true homeland of the Mockingbird.

My experiences with the Mockingbird within our limits have usually been with single birds and at times other than the nesting season. Most of these observations, too, have been in the vicinity of Cape May which seems to be the most likely place to see Mockingbirds within our district today, and which was in the past undoubtedly within their regular breeding range.

The Mockingbird is not usually a bird of the heart of the shrubbery like the Catbird; he is almost always out in plain sight perched on the house top, the fence, the telegraph wire, or swooping gracefully to the ground to investigate some morsel that has attracted his attention. On his perch the Mockingbird stands high upon his legs, if we may use such an expression, his plumage lying sleek and unruffled, while the tail extends horizontally, fluttering slightly as if moved by the wind though possibly the motion is simply due to the effort to maintain a balance. The head is well up and a little forward. Sometimes, as I have seen at Cape May Point, a bird will leave his perch and turn a complete somersault in the air, making a great display of the white on both wing and tail.

Today, curiously enough, we associate the Mockingbird more with winter than with the nesting time, as it is in that season that we most frequently meet with it. A dense thicket, or perhaps a cedar tree which furnishes satisfactory shelter, will be its headquarters. Into this it will dive when alarmed and refuse to flush again in spite of our efforts. One such bird which spent the winter of 1921-1922 in Cape May City varied this habit of seclusion by openly attacking its reflection in the window of a nearby house, battering its wings against the glass repeatedly.

Where these winter Mockingbirds go in summer we have yet to learn. Certain it is that the breeding records of the bird north of the Mason-Dixon line are exceedingly rare, and the winter records though not numerous are out of all proportion to the summer occurrences. While all early testimony is to the effect that it was formerly of regular occurrence about Philadelphia, we have no information at a time when the bird was actually common.

Peter Kalm's bird which he saw here on October 27, 1748 was caged, showing how early began a custom which was ere long nearly to exterminate this splendid songster in the northern part of its range. Kalm also quotes the then current statement that "it is so shy that if anybody comes and looks at its eggs, it leaves the nest never to come to it again".

William Bartram, writing to Wilson about 1810, says of the Mockingbird at his home on the Schuylkill that "formerly, say thirty or forty years ago. they were numerous, and often stayed all winter with us, or the year through; feeding on the berries of ivy, smilax, grapes, persimmons and other berries. The ivy (*Hedera helix*), they were particularly fond of, though it is

a native of Europe. We have an ancient plant adhering to the wall of the house, covering many yards of surface; this vine is very fruitful, and here many would feed and lodge during the winter, and in very cold weather sit on top of the chimney to warm themselves. I have observed that the Mockingbird ejects from his stomach through his mouth the hard kernels of berries such as smilax, grapes, etc., retaining the pulpy part." In his diary, Bartram records the "Mockbird" as present in his garden in the winters of 1802, 1803 and 1804; and in April 1820 he records capturing two in a cage-trap. It will be noticed that even this early the majority of the records were of wintering birds.

Alexander Wilson, in 1810, says: ". . . the eagerness with which the . . . Mockingbird is sought after in the neighborhood of Philadelphia has rendered this bird extremely scarce. . . In the country around Wilmington and New Castle, they are very numerous. . ."

In New Jersey, Jacob Green speaks of the Mockingbird as an apparently familiar bird about Princeton in 1817; and the Rev. Samuel Lockwood records the species as plentiful about Keyport in 1832, but states that it had entirely disappeared by 1880; and neither Audubon nor Nuttall add anything to our knowledge of the Mockingbird in this region.

Dr. Samuel W. Woodhouse writes in 1904 that during the period of his activity about 1840-1850, he never met with the Mockingbird in the vicinity of Philadelphia or anywhere in Pennsylvania. "Years gone by", he says, "when I was constantly in the field, this very question was often discussed with my associates, Drs. J. K. Townsend, George Leib, and others. They said they never met with it north of Maryland".

In view of this testimony one cannot but question whether the Mockingbird was ever anything more than a casual visitor, mainly in winter, north of Philadelphia, or whether it ever bred more than sporadically north of southern New Jersey and Delaware and Chester Counties in Pennsylvania, regions in which it still nests occasionally and perhaps more commonly than we think. It may also have ranged regularly up the entire New Jersey coast. In the vicinity of Carlisle, Baird in 1839-1845 records it as "rare, summer", but the only specimen he secured was from Reed's Creek, Maryland, in December (!) 1839. In York County, near the mouth of Cadorus Creek about four miles from Marietta, W. H. Butler states that he frequently saw a pair in the summer of 1876, indicating its former occurrence along the lower Susquehanna River, which would be quite in accord with the distribution of other Carolinian species.

Wilson's statements regarding its disappearance from the vicinity of Philadelphia may easily refer to the two lower counties mentioned above and

the New Jersey side of the Delaware, areas which were always better adapted to the bird's needs than the more elevated regions north and west. Certainly we know that by 1850 it had reached its present status here and was decreasing, mainly through trapping, in the country, to the southward where we have evidence that it was a regular resident.

In Delaware, C. J. Pennock ascertained from old residents that prior to 1870-1875 the Mockingbird was rather common at least as far north as Odessa, and the young were regularly sought as cage birds. It was this practice undoubtedly that reduced the species to the verge of extinction in that State, and only in the summer of 1900 can they be said to have become again of even occasional occurrence throughout the State, and north of the Delaware and Chesapeake Canal they are still but rarely seen.

In Cape May County, New Jersey, we have the same testimony, and the taking of the young for the song-bird market is well-remembered by certain residents who place the time of this activity at least up to 1870.

It seems probable that the breeding range of the Mockingbird never extended except sporadically beyond the upper limits of the Carolinian fauna, and certainly all the definite nesting records that we have lie within that limit. Today the species ranges from Florida to Maryland (1), and is apparently of regular occurrence in Delaware south of Middletown (C. J. Pennock) and in the adjoining counties of Maryland as far north as Town Point where it has been found breeding (W. Harlow). From here it is but a short stretch to lower Chester County, Pennsylvania, which was apparently its last regular nesting site in the eastern part of this State, and where it still nests occasionally.

In New Jersey it may still nest regularly but locally in the southern parts. Such nests as have come to our attention seem to be isolated occurrences, and the bird is certainly rarer in New Jersey than at the same latitude on the Delaware-Maryland peninsula.

Of the several nestings within our limits which have come to the notice of the Delaware Valley Ornithological Club, we have the following accounts.

A pair near Concordville, Chester County, was seen by William E. Hanum in early July 1896. They had built a nest in a small evergreen by the road side about four feet from the ground. The eggs had hatched apparently by the last of June. A second brood was raised after the first was on the wing, the nest this time in an osage hedge two hundred yards from the first one. The parent birds flew about later with the entire brood of eight, four from each nest; all disappeared by the end of August.

In June 1901, William E. Roberts saw a pair of Mockingbirds near his home in Solebury township, Bucks County, two and a half miles from New

Hope. The birds frequented an osage hedge, seemed tame, and flew about the yard undisturbed by passing wagons on the nearby road. On July 7th the nest was found in the hedge about thirty yards from the house. Mr. Roberts was unable to devote much time to a careful study of the birds, but he reports pie cherries from a tree close by as their favorite food; and that the male imitated the notes of the Killdeer, Bluebird and Blue Jay to perfection, as well as those of the Whip-poor-will, Catbird, Flicker, Upland Plover and Robin.

On June 25, 1915, Isaac G. Roberts saw a bird sitting on a fence post by the roadside about two and a half miles west of West Grove, Chester County. A search discovered the nest about five feet from the ground in a small cedar tree. It contained three young birds several days old. When Mr. Roberts was at the nest one of the parent birds alighted on a fence near by and successively spread its wings and raised its tail but came no nearer. The parent birds would greet each other with a rasping note, but no song was heard on visits to the spot. Mr. Roberts again saw birds in the same neighborhood in August and September of 1917, and a young one in October of the same year.

Earlier records are of a bird seen frequently during the summer of 1893 near Marietta, Lancaster County, by W. H. Butler; and one observed at Dingman's Ferry, Pike County, by H. W. Congdon on July 26, 1894 (*Auk* 1895, p. 190).

All of our other Pennsylvania records are of wintering birds or apparent transients: Ardmore — April 25, 1904 (Baily) and May 27, 1917 (Baily and Serrill); Radnor — December 25, 1905 (Redfield); Berwyn — November 21, 1909 (Burns); Kennett Square — December 15, 1912 and January 4, 1913 (Pennock), and one wintering 1918-1919 (Sharples); Concordville — December 21, 1912 and January 4, 1913 (Mrs. K. R. Styer), and January 5-10 and 26-31, 1918 (Miss E. P. Styer); West Grove — February 28, 1916 (I. G. Roberts); Westtown — one wintered 1914-1915 (Morris); West Chester — December 25, 1916 and May 10, 1917 (Sharples); Lansdowne — November 17-23, 1917 and March 30 and April 27, 1918 (Carter); Frankford — October 3, 1914 (Miller).

In northern New Jersey, we have two nestings at Tenafly in 1876 and 1884 recorded by Dr. F. M. Chapman on authority of Miss Martin (*Auk* 1899, p. 304). Dr. C. C. Abbott states that a pair nested in 1883 and 1884 in a garden in Trenton ("A Naturalist's Rambles About Home"). S. S. Lockwood states that a "colony" still existed at Sandy Hook in 1892 (*American Naturalist* 1892, p. 635).

G. N. Lawrence says that at Barnegat Beach they nested as late as 1866, and a pair was seen there by J. L. Childs on August 25, 1900 and were

reported to him as singing during the early spring and summer (*Auk* 1900, p. 370). At Beach Haven a pair was present all summer in 1906 according to I. N. DeHaven; and at Holly Beach, W. L. Baily secured a full-grown bird in juvenal plumage in 1895.

At Vineland, Mrs. A. K. Prince reported a pair present from May 23 to June 13, 1918, and again one from April 27 to May 23, 1919 at the same place. At Cape May Point, Reynold A. Spaeth found a nest with four eggs in his yard in June 1899; another bird was seen there by him on June 29, 1911. H. W. Hand reported a pair nesting at Cape May in 1911; and on August 24-27, 1917, J. K. Potter and I found five birds, one being a nestling still being fed by an adult. In May 1916 and on May 26, 1918 and June 22 to July 4, 1919, D. G. Baird reports one in song at Cape May City.

Other New Jersey records are of wintering or migrant birds, as follows: Mays Landing — May 1887 (Abbott); Cape May Point — August 27, 1891, adult male secured (Stone); Cape May — August 11, 1897 (Baily), April 21-24, 1908 and May 16, 1910, and one wintering 1917-1918 (Hand); Ocean View — March 30, 1901 (Baily); Stone Harbor — September 4, 1903 (McCadden); Rio Grande — December 27, 1903 (Baily); Fish House — November 4, 1911 (Potter); Camden — May 19, 1908, pursued by sparrows (Potter); Moorestown — March 22, 1914 (Mrs. Agnes Wyrman), and December 25, 1917 and April 14, 1918 (Miss Anna Mickle); Lindenwold — 1910 (Miller; Princeton — January 1, 1918 (Sherrill); Ridgewood — mid-November 1902 (Henry Hales in *Bird Lore*); Point Pleasant — one wintered 1902-1903 (Miss Caroline Murphy).

West of the Alleghanies the Mockingbird ranges from the Gulf coast, north, entering southwestern Pennsylvania where it has been found breeding near Waynesburg, Greene County by J. Warren Jacobs. Mr. Jacobs states that as long ago as 1892 and 1894 he observed singing males in bushy tracts of pastureland in this vicinity, though diligent search failed to discover either the female or nest. In 1911, however, J. W. Piatt found them breeding on his place four miles north of Waynesburg where they continued to nest at least until 1914. Mr. Jacobs confirmed the identification. He is of the opinion that the cutting of the forest and the increase of briery fields overgrown with hawthorn, crabapple and berry bushes accounts for the presence of the birds. ("In the Open", August 1914, pp. 41-42).

Our experience with Mockingbirds in Pennsylvania and New Jersey having been mainly with winter birds, we have had little opportunity to study their famous vocal powers. We do know that many other bird songs are interpolated, probably more of them than we realize, for in the village chorus there is always Mockingbird song far away forming an indistinct background, and many an unidentified note is traceable to this eccentric musician. So, too, doubtless many a note attributed to other species is really but the call of the mimic.

David G. Baird and others heard a bird in full voice at Cape May in May 1916, on May 26, 1918, and again on June 22 and July 4, 1919, but we have no record of a good "mocking" Mockingbird, such as the famous bird of the Arnold Arboretum near Boston which was recorded as "mocking" an amazing number of different species. The real song of the Mockingbird is a composition similar to that of the Thrasher, into which the imitated notes are interspersed, the mocking ability varying greatly in different individuals. While some of the Mocker's imitations are wonderfully perfect, I have always wondered whether others were not chance resemblances and not true mimicking, especially as it seems beyond the range of possibility that certain famous Mockers could have had the opportunity of hearing all the species they are credited with mocking. What, too, shall we say of Mr. Dickey's young Mocker only a few months old which was perfectly reproducing the notes of several species of birds? Is not his claim a reasonable one that while the perfection of the so-called imitation of the Mockingbird is not attained without examples to copy, the basic phrases which simulate the notes of other birds are as intrinsic a part of its inherited vocal ability as are those other interludes which have no analogies among other species?

Many Carolinian birds, such as the Cardinal, Carolina Wren, Tufted Tit, et cetera, are resident through their range, and there seems to be no reason why the habits of the Mockingbird in this respect should be different. Several of our recent records are of winter occurrences and we have the testimony of Bartram and Barton that the species was largely resident about Philadelphia in the old days. Wilson has been quoted as saying that the bird does not arrive from the South until April 20, but a careful reading of his account will show that this referred only to the exceptionally cold season of 1808-1809. It is therefore probable that the migration of the Mockingbird like that of the species mentioned above may have consisted of a wandering about in search of food and shelter, with a slight north and south movement such as the severity of the season demanded.

The occurrence of individual wintering birds, however, both in our district as well as farther north, even in New England, which disappear in spring; and of spring and autumn records of birds at localities where they were not present at other seasons, present an interesting problem. Where do these birds summer, and why are not their nestings reported? Perhaps they perform very considerable migrations and in directions we little suspect.

(1) The range of *Mimus polyglottos polyglottos* as given in the Fifth Edition of the A.O.U. Check List (1957) is as follows: Resident regularly north to eastern Nebraska, southern Iowa, central Illinois, central Indiana, central northern Ohio, southwestern and southeastern Pennsylvania, West Virginia, northern Maryland, central New Jersey, and southeastern Massachusetts. . .