

BIRDS OF THE AIR

“EYES AND NO EYES” SERIES

by ARABELLA B. BUCKLEY

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“EYES AND NO EYES” SERIES Book IV

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BY

ARABELLA B. BUCKLEY



**YESTERDAY'S CLASSICS
CHAPEL HILL, NORTH CAROLINA**

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CHAPTER I

BIRDS WE KNOW

I wonder how many birds you know by sight, and what you could tell about their nests and their lives?

There are between three and four hundred different British birds, and very few people know them all. But in any one place there are not more common birds than you could learn in a year. You can look for the rare ones afterwards.

The best way to begin is to write down those you are sure about, and say how you recognise them. You cannot mistake a Robin, with his red breast, his plump little body, and his brown wings. The mother robin's breast is not quite so red, and the young have no red at all. But when you have seen them with the cock-robin, you will soon know them by their shape.

But a Chaffinch has a red breast. How can you tell him from a robin? His breast is much browner than the robin's, and even at a distance you may know him by the white bands on his dark wings, and the yellow tips to some of his feathers. Then his body is longer, and he moves more gracefully than the robin, while his

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loud “*pink, pink,*” if you go near his nest, will tell you at once what he is.

The Lark you know by his slender brown body and white speckled throat, and by the way he soars, as he sings his sweet song. The common green Woodpecker is easily known by his bright colours, his curious feet, and his stiff tail, which he uses to jerk himself up a tree. And though a Nuthatch also goes up a tree by jumps, you would never take him for a woodpecker, for he is no bigger than a sparrow, and he has a short tail and blue-grey wings and a dingy red breast.

Then you know the cooing Wood-pigeon, the chattering Magpie, the soaring Hawk and his hooked beak, and the downy Owl. And I daresay you could tell me of many more.

The birds you know best will most of them be with us all the year round. But not all. The Swifts fly away to the south in August, and the Swallows and the Martins follow in October. When they are gone the Fieldfares come from the north, and feed in flocks on the worms in the damp fields, and on the holly berries when the ground is hard with frost.

The Swallow and the House Martin are so alike that, as they come and go together, you might not know them apart, unless you remember that a Swallow has a blue-black collar across his breast, and that the fork of his tail is longer than that of the Martin. You may be busy all the year round watching the birds, seeing

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when they come and go, what food they eat, how they fly, whether they sing in the morning or evening, and where they build their nests.

Many farmers and gardeners shoot little birds because they eat their corn and peas and fruit. But a large number of birds feed chiefly on insects. You ought to know which these are, for they are very useful in clearing away earwigs and caterpillars, as well as slugs and snails. If you look out early some morning and see a Thrush tapping a snail-shell against a stone to get at the snail, you will say he is a good gardener. You will not grudge him a little fruit in the summer.

Then there are the nests and the young birds to watch. You need not take the nests, nor rob the birds of their eggs. You will learn much more by pulling back the leaves and the twigs, and peeping gently into the nest. For then you can come another day and watch when the eggs hatch, and how the young birds grow. If you are careful not to disturb the bush nor touch the eggs, the mother will not desert them. Last year a pair of Thrushes built their nest in a hedge by the side of a path where people were always passing. But though I went often to look at it, the mother brought up all her four little ones. She would even sit still on the nest when I peeped in, while her mate sang on a tree close by.

Point out and describe six birds common in the neighbourhood.

CHAPTER II

THE SONG OF BIRDS

BIRDS sing when they are happy, and cry out when they are frightened, just as children do. Only they have songs and cries of their own. You can always tell when the little song-birds are happy, for each one trills out his joyous notes as he sits on a branch of a tree, or the top of a hedge.

In the early morning of the spring, you will hear singing in the garden almost before it is light. First there is a little chirping and twittering, as if the birds were saying “good-morning” and preparing their throats. Then, as the sun rises, there comes a burst of song.

Robins, Thrushes, Blackbirds, Chaffinches, and Wrens whistle away merrily, and many other little birds join in. While they are all singing together, it is not easy to tell one song from another, though the Thrush sings loudest and clearest of all.

Then they fly away to their breakfast and, as the day goes on, you hear one or two at a time. So you can listen to the notes of each song, and if you go near very quietly, you can see the throat of the bird swelling and

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quivering as he works the little voice-chords inside, which make the notes.

It is not easy to write down what a bird sings, for it is like whistling—there are no words in it. But people often try to imitate their songs in words. Listen to the Thrush. You can fancy he says “cherry-tree, cherry-tree, cherry-tree” three times. Then, after some other notes, he sings “hurry-up, hurry-up,” and “go-it, go-it.” For the thrush has a great many notes.

The pretty Yellowhammer, with its bright yellow head, sings “a little bit of bread, and no che-e-s-e.” The Chiff-chaff calls “chiff-chaff, chiff-chaff” quite distinctly. Any child can imitate the cuckoo, or the coo-oo-oo of the wood-pigeon.

As the days grow hotter, the birds sing less. They sit on the branches of the trees, or on the hedges under the shade of the leaves, or hop about in the wood.

Then when the evening comes, and long shadows creep over the grass, each bird looks out for his supper. When he is satisfied he sings his evening song of content, before he goes to sleep.

What a concert it is! Finches, tomtits, sparrows, wrens, robins, and chaffinches all singing at once. And above them all, come the song of the thrushes and blackbirds, the cooing of the wood-pigeon and the caw-caw of the rooks as they fly home from the fields. As the thrushes were the first to begin in the morning,

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except the lark, so they are the last to leave off at night, and often one thrush will go on long after all the others are quiet.

Then at last all seem to have settled down for the night. But no! If you live in Kent, or any part of the south or east of England, you may hear in May or June a sweet sound, like a flute, coming softly from many parts of the wood. This comes from the Nightingales, who, in the warm summer, will sing nearly all night.

They sing in the day as well, but their note is so soft that often you cannot hear it when more noisy birds are singing. In the still night you can hear the sweet song rising up six notes and then bubbling like a flute played in water. When you have once heard a nightingale sing you will never forget it. In Yorkshire or Devonshire you will not hear him, for he does not go so far to the North or to the West.

Birds sing most in the spring, for then they are making their nests, and the father bird sings to the mother while she is building, and when she is sitting on the eggs. You may often find out where a Robin's nest is hidden by seeing the cock-robin sitting on a branch singing to his mate. Most people too, have seen the Wood-pigeon puffing out his throat and cooing and bowing to the mother bird on her nest. For pigeons make love all the year round.

When the mother bird is sitting, the father bird sings for joy, and when the young birds are hatched he

THE SONG OF BIRDS

teaches them his song. Song-birds have very delicate throats. They have muscles, which quiver like the strings of a violin, and the young birds have to learn to work these muscles.

It is curious to hear a young Blackbird or Thrush beginning to try a tune. First he sounds one note, then two or three. They are not always in tune, but he tries again and again. So little by little he learns his father's song.

Listen to the song of birds—robins, thrushes, blackbirds, larks, nightingales, bullfinches and others, and try to imitate them by whistling.

CHAPTER III

THE NESTS OF BIRDS

IF you want to know how cleverly nests are made, you should collect a few which the birds have deserted, or from which the young birds have flown.

You will find a Hedge-sparrow's nest in many a hawthorn bush, and though it is a simple nest, I think you will find, if you pull it to pieces, that you cannot put it together again as well as the bird did.

A Chaffinch's nest is more finely woven. You will most likely find one in the apple trees in the orchard. It is made of dry grass and moss matted together with wool in the shape of a deep cup, and lined with hair and feathers. Outside, the bird will most likely have stuck pieces of grey or white lichen. Lichen is the papery-looking plant which grows on apple trees, and which children call grey moss. The pieces woven in help to hide the nest in an apple tree. When the Chaffinch builds in a green hedge she often uses green moss instead.

Now try to find a Thrush's nest. It may be in a laurel-bush or a fir-tree. It is large and quite firm, not soft like the hedge-sparrows nest. For the thrush

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plasters the inside with mud, or cow-dung, or rotten wood, till it is almost as hard as the inside of a coconut shell.

When you have looked at these nests, you will want to see one built next spring. But this is not so easy. For birds try to hide the cradles of their little ones, and do not like to work when anyone is near.

Rooks are the easiest to watch, for they build in high trees, and therefore are not shy. You may see them flying along with pieces of stick in their mouths, and bringing mud and clay to plaster them together. Sometimes you may see the old rooks staying behind in the rookery, to steal the sticks from the nests of the young rooks while they are away, instead of fetching them for themselves.

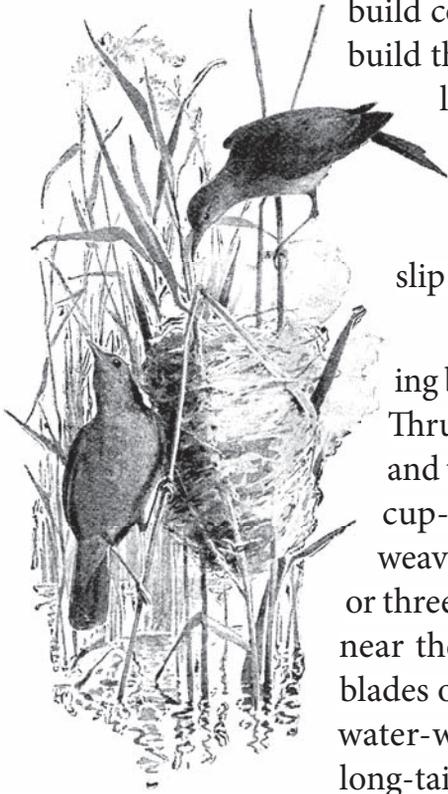
Birds do not all make the same shaped nests. The Lark makes her nest of grass in a rut or a furrow of the field. The green Plover or Peewit, whose cry you know so well, "pee-weet, pee-weet," lays a few bits of grass, or rush, in a marsh or in a rough field. Her little ones run about as soon as they come out of the egg.

The Swallows build their nests of mud and straw on the rafters of barns, or under the ledges of chimneys, in the shape of a shallow basin, and line them with feathers. But the Martins build under the eaves. They make their nests of clay stuck against the wall like a bag, with only a small hole at the top. It is very funny

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to see the tail of a martin sticking out, when she puts her head into her nest to feed the young ones.

The Woodpecker makes a hole in a tree for her nest, and lines it with chips of wood. The Nuthatch looks out for a hole in a branch, and lines it with flakes of bark and dry leaves. Then, if it is too big, she fills up the opening with clay, all except one little hole.



REED-WARBLERS' NEST

Rooks and Pigeons build coarse nests. The rooks build theirs of sticks and turf lined with grass and moss. The pigeon leaves hers so loose that the eggs almost slip through.

Then the little singing birds, the Warblers, the Thrushes, the Nightingales, and the Robins build lovely cup-nests. Reed-warblers weave their nest round two or three reeds, or other plants, near the water. It is made of blades of grass and lined with water-weed. The Wren, the long-tailed Titmouse, and the Chiff-chaff, build nests in the shape of a ball, with a hole in

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one side. The chiff-chaff lines hers with a beautifully soft layer of feathers.

Wrens build in all sorts of strange places, in walls and trees, in holes of rocks, on the tops of hedges and on the banks of rivers. If you look about near the nest in which the wren has laid her eggs you will often find one or two other nests built exactly like it, but *not lined with feathers*. They are called "cock's nests." We do not know why the birds build them. Perhaps one day you may find out if you watch. The chiff-chaff hides her nests in the hedges or banks, and the long-tailed titmouse loves to build in the gorse bushes.

Once two Wrens were watched building their nest in a juniper tree. They began at seven o'clock in the morning. The mother wren brought some leaves from a lime-tree. She put one leaf in a fork of the tree, and laid the others round it. Then she went back for more. So she went on all day, bringing in leaves, and matting them together with moss, and all the while the cock-wren sang to her from the top of the tree.

By seven o'clock in the evening she had made the outside of the nest, in the shape of a ball with a hole in one side.

Next day the two birds began work together at half-past three in the morning. They worked for eight days, carrying in moss and feathers. When they had done, the nest was a firm little ball, lined with a thick

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layer of soft feathers, for the wee wrens to lie in, when they were hatched.

Then the mother wren laid five small white eggs with a few red spots upon them, and sat for a whole fortnight, while her mate sang to her, and brought her insects to eat.

Examine nests. Mud-built—swallow, martin. Roughly woven—house-sparrow. Cup-nests—hedge-sparrow, chaffinch. Woven and mud-lined—thrush.

CHAPTER IV

BIRDS' EGGS

WHEN you have looked at several birds' nests, you will want to see what the eggs are like. Try first to find those which are near your home. Some are so well hidden, that you will have to watch where the old birds go in and out, before you can find them. Others, like the nests of rooks, magpies and jays, are easy to see, but not easy to reach.

Do not take the eggs. Each will hatch out into a happy little bird, and if you carried the egg home it would only be broken. Your teacher will very likely collect one of each kind, which will do to show the class for many years.

But look well at the eggs in the nest. Then you will know them again when you find them in another place. Count how many there are, and notice if any more are laid afterwards. Then reckon how long the eggs are being hatched, after the last one is laid. You will find it is about a fortnight for the small birds and a day or two longer for rooks and pigeons. Then you can watch the feeding of the young birds, which we shall talk about in the next two lessons.

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It is better not even to touch the eggs; for some birds, like the wood-pigeon, will desert their nests if the eggs have been handled. Other birds are not so particular. Mr. Kearton tells us that when he was a boy he used to find plovers' nests and amuse himself by turning the large end of the egg into the middle of the nest. As soon as the tidy mother came back, she always turned them round again with the points in the middle. The baby bird always comes out at the large end, so this gives them more room, as they hatch out.

If you have a laurel hedge in the garden you may find a Thrush's nest in it, with four to six beautiful blue eggs, about an inch long and spotted with black at the large end. The mother will scold you well, and perhaps will not leave the nest, and you will have to take your chance when she is away. You may find a Blackbird's nest not far off. You will know it from the thrush's nest because it is lined with fine roots and grass, so is not hard inside. The eggs are greener with red-brown spots. The Missel-thrush generally builds in a tree, and her eggs are a light buff colour spotted with reddish brown and pale lilac.

The Chaffinch will build close to your house, or in the apple trees of the orchard; and a pair of Bullfinches may make their nest in the ivy of the old garden wall, though they are shy birds. The chaffinch's eggs are a pale brown-green colour with brown spots (*see picture*, p. 16). They are about one-third the size of the thrush's egg. The bullfinch's are a pale blue, spotted with brown



THRUSHES AND NEST



COCK AND HEN CHAFFINCH, WITH THEIR NEST

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or purple. Be careful when you look at the bullfinch's nest, for though the mother will sit still, the father will be angry, and he may make her desert her nest, if he sees you.

You will have to get a ladder if you want to see a Martin's nest, for they build under the eaves of the house. And when you pull away a little of the nest and look in, make sure that you see the right eggs, for a sparrow will often take a martin's nest and lay her eggs in it. You can find out, by watching which bird goes into the nest. But if you cannot do this, you may know by the colour of the eggs. A martin's egg is white without any spots upon it. A sparrow's egg is grey with brown blotches on it. When the sparrow builds her own nest, it is made of straw or hay lined with feathers. It has about five or six eggs in it.

It is easier to look into a Swallow's nest than into a martin's, for it is not covered at the top, and is often put upon a rafter in a barn. It will have about five white eggs in it, with dark red patches on them. Watch these nests carefully, for when the eggs are hatched it is very pretty to see the old swallows teaching the young ones to catch flies (*see* picture, p. 42).

We must not forget the Robins, though I expect you know their eggs well. They are white, spotted with light red, and you may easily find them, for in the spring there is a robin's nest in almost every bank or hedgerow.

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You may look for a Tomtit's nest in all sorts of strange places, from a hole in a tree, to a flower-pot which has been thrown away. There will be a number of little white eggs in it speckled with red. The mother will hiss and peck at you to prevent you from taking them away. But in a few days she will not be afraid, for she is a bold little bird.

You must learn to look for other eggs yourselves. In the barn you may find the Owl's large white eggs, and sometimes young birds and eggs together. In a bank of a river, or a hole in a wall, you may find the nest of a Water-wagtail with greyish white spotted eggs. The Rook's bluish green eggs sometimes fall down from their nests; and the Jackdaws will build in your chimneys.

When you have spent some time hunting for nests and eggs, you will notice how cunningly they are hidden by their colour and their marks.

Wherever you find white eggs like those of the owl, the martin, the woodpecker, the kingfisher, and the pigeon, they are either quite hidden in a bank, a tree trunk, or a deep nest, or they are high up out of reach. Most other eggs are spotted, and they are either some shade of green or grey or brown, like the moss and leaves and twigs of the nest.

In any nest you can find, see how many of the eggs grow up into young birds. Choose one nest each, to watch and see which child can count up most young birds.