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THE WOODPECKERS

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Содержание

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FOREWORD: THE RIDDLERS

Long ago in Greece, the legend runs, a terrible monster called the Sphinx used to waylay travelers to ask them riddles: whoever could not answer these she killed, but the man who did answer them killed her and made an end of her riddling.

To-day there is no Sphinx to fear, yet the world is full of unguessed riddles. No thoughtful man can go far afield but some bird or flower or stone bars his way with a question demanding an answer; and though many men have been diligently spelling out the answers for many years, and we for the most part must study the answers they have proved, and must reply in their words, yet those shrewd old riddlers, the birds and flowers and bees, are always ready for a new victim, putting their heads together over some new enigma to bar the road to knowledge till that, too, shall be answered; so that other men's learning does not always suffice. So much of a man's pleasure in life, so much of his power, depends on his ability to silence these persistent questioners, that this little book was written with the hope of making clearer the kind of questions Dame Nature asks, and the way to get correct answers.

This is purposely a *little* book, dealing only with a single group of birds, treating particularly only some of the commoner species of that group, taking up only a few of the problems that present themselves to the naturalist for solution, and aiming rather to make the reader *acquainted with* the birds than *learned about* them.

The woodpeckers were selected in preference to any other family because they are patient under observation, easily identified, resident in all parts of the country both in summer and in winter, and because more than any other birds they leave behind them records of their work which may be studied after the birds have flown. The book provides ample means for identifying every species and subspecies of woodpecker known in North America, though only five of the commonest and most interesting species have been selected for special study. At least three of these five should be found in almost every part of the country. The Californian woodpecker is never seen in the East, nor the red-headed in the far West, but the downy and the hairy are resident nearly everywhere, and some species of the flickers and sapsuckers, if not always the ones chosen for special notice, are visitors in most localities.

Look for the woodpeckers in orchards and along the edges of thickets, among tangles of wild grapes and in patches of low, wild berries, upon which they often feed, among dead trees and in the track of forest fires. Wherever there are boring larvæ, beetles, ants, grasshoppers, the fruit of poison-ivy, dogwood, june-berry,

wild cherry or wild grapes, woodpeckers may be confidently looked for if there are any in the neighborhood. Be patient, persistent, wide-awake, sure that you see what you think you see, careful to remember what you have seen, studious to compare your observations, and keen to hear the questions propounded you. If you do this seven years and a day, you will earn the name of Naturalist; and if you travel the road of the naturalist with curious patience, you may some day become as famous a riddle-reader as was that OEdipus, the king of Thebes, who slew the Sphinx.

I
HOW TO KNOW A WOODPECKER

The woodpecker is the easiest of all birds to recognize. Even if entirely new to you, you may readily decide whether a bird is a woodpecker or not.

The woodpecker is always striking and is often gay in color. He is usually noisy, and his note is clear and characteristic. His shape and habits are peculiar, so that whenever you see a bird clinging to the side of a tree "as if he had been thrown at it and stuck," you may safely call him a woodpecker. Not that all birds which cling to the bark of trees are woodpeckers, – for the chickadees, the crested titmice, the nuthatches, the brown creepers, and a few others like the kinglets and some wrens and wood-warblers more or less habitually climb up and down the tree-trunks; but these do it with a pretty grace wholly unlike the woodpecker's awkward, cling-fast way of holding on. As the largest of these is smaller than the smallest woodpecker, and as none of them (excepting only the tiny kinglets) ever shows the patch of yellow or scarlet which always marks the head of the male woodpecker, and which sometimes adorns his mate, there is no danger of making mistakes.

The nuthatches are the only birds likely to be confused with woodpeckers, and these have the peculiar habit of traveling

down a tree-trunk with their heads pointing to the ground. A woodpecker never does this; he may move down the trunk of the tree he is working on, but he will do it by hopping backward. A still surer sign of the woodpecker is the way he sits upon his tail, using it to brace him. No other birds except the chimney swift and the little brown creeper ever do this. A sure mark, also, is his feet, which have two toes turned forward and two turned backward. We find this arrangement in no other North American birds except the cuckoos and our one native parroquet. However, there is one small group of woodpeckers which have but three toes, and these are the only North American land-birds that do not have four well-developed toes.

In coloration the woodpeckers show a strong family likeness. Except in some young birds, the color is always brilliant and often is gaudy. Usually it shows much clear black and white, with dashes of scarlet or yellow about the head. Sometimes the colors are "solid," as in the red-headed woodpecker; sometimes they lie in close bars, as in the red-bellied species; sometimes in spots and stripes, as in the downy and hairy; but there is always a *contrast*, never any blending of hues. The red or yellow is laid on in well-defined patches – square, oblong, or crescentic – upon the crown, the nape, the jaws, or the throat; or else in stripes or streaks down the sides of the head and neck, as in the logcock, or pileated woodpecker.

There is no rule about the color markings of the sexes, as in some families of birds. Usually the female lacks all the bright

markings of the male; sometimes, as in the logcock, she has them but in more restricted areas; sometimes, as in the flickers, she has all but one of the male's color patches; and in a few species, as the red-headed and Lewis's woodpeckers, the two sexes are precisely alike in color. In the black-breasted woodpecker, sometimes called Williamson's sapsucker, the male and female are so totally different that they were long described and named as different birds. It sometimes happens that a young female will show the color marks of the male, but will retain them only the first year.

Though the woodpeckers cling to the trunks of trees, they are not exclusively climbing birds. Some kinds, like the flickers, are quite as frequently found on the ground, wading in the grass like meadowlarks. Often we may frighten them from the tangled vines of the frost grape and the branches of wild cherry trees, or from clumps of poison-ivy, whither they come to eat the fruit. The red-headed woodpecker is fond of sitting on fence posts and telegraph poles; and both he and the flicker frequently alight on the roofs of barns and houses and go pecking and pattering over the shingles. The sapsuckers and several other kinds will perch on dead limbs, like a flycatcher, on the watch for insects; the flickers, and more rarely other kinds, will sit crosswise of a limb instead of crouching lengthwise of it, as is the custom with woodpeckers.

All these points you will soon learn. You will become familiar with the form, the flight, and the calls of the different woodpeckers; you will learn not only to know them by name,

but to understand their characters; they will become your acquaintances, and later on your friends.

This heavy bird, with straight, chisel bill and sharp-pointed tail-feathers; with his short legs and wide, flapping wings, his unmusical but not disagreeable voice, and his heavy, undulating, business-like flight, is distinctly bourgeois, the type of a bird devoted to business and enjoying it. No other bird has so much work to do all the year round, and none performs his task with more energy and sense. The woodpecker makes no aristocratic pretensions, puts on none of the coy graces and affectations of the professional singer; even his gay clothes fit him less jauntily than they would another bird. He is artisan to the backbone, – a plain, hard-working, useful citizen, spending his life in hammering holes in anything that appears to need a hole in it. Yet he is neither morose nor unsocial. There is a vein of humor in him, a large reserve of mirth and jollity. We see little of it except in the spring, and then for a time all the laughter in him bubbles up; he becomes uproarious in his glee, and the melody which he cannot vent in song he works out in the channels of his trade, filling the woodland with loud and harmonious rappings. Above all other birds he is the friend of man, and deserves to have the freedom of the fields.

II
HOW THE WOODPECKER CATCHES A GRUB

Did you ever see a hairy woodpecker strolling about a tree for what he could pick up?

There is a *whur-r-rp* of gay black and white wings and the flash of a scarlet topknot as, with a sharp cry, he dashes past you, strikes the limb solidly with both feet, and instantly sidles behind it, from which safe retreat he keeps a sharp black eye fixed upon your motions. If you make friends with him by keeping quiet, he will presently forgive you for being there and hop to your side of the limb, pursuing his ordinary work in the usual way, turning his head from side to side, inspecting every crevice, and picking up whatever looks appetizing. Any knot or little seam in the bark is twice scanned; in such places moths and beetles lay their eggs. Little cocoons are always dainty morsels, and large cocoons contain a feast. The butterfly-hunter who is hoping to hatch out some fine cecropia moths knows well that a large proportion of all the cocoons he discovers will be empty. The hairy woodpecker has been there before him, and has torn the chrysalis out of its silken cradle. For this the farmer should thank him heartily, even if the butterfly-hunter does not, for the cecropia caterpillar is destructive.

But sometimes, on the fair bark of a smooth limb, the woodpecker stops, listens, taps, and begins to drill. He works with haste and energy, laying open a deep hole. For what? An apple-tree borer was there cutting out the life of the tree. The farmer could see no sign of him; neither could the woodpecker, but he could hear the strong grub down in his little chamber gnawing to make it longer, or, frightened by the heavy footsteps on his roof, scrambling out of the way.

It is easy to hear the borer at work in the tree. When a pine forest has been burned and the trees are dead but still standing, there will be such a crunching and grinding of borers eating the dead wood that it can be heard on all sides many yards away. Even a single borer can sometimes be heard distinctly by putting the ear to the tree. Sound travels much farther through solids than it does through air; notice how much farther you can hear a railroad train by the click of the rails than by the noise that comes on the air. Even our dull ears can detect the woodworm, but we cannot locate him. How, then, is the woodpecker to do what we cannot do?

Doubtless experience teaches him much, but one observer suggests that the woodpecker places the grub by the sense of touch. He says he has seen the red-headed woodpecker drop his wings till they trailed along the branch, as if to determine where the vibrations in the wood were strongest, and thus to decide where the grub was boring. But no one else appears to have noticed that woodpeckers are in the habit of trailing their

wings as they drill for grubs. It would be a capital study for one to attempt to discover whether the woodpecker locates his grub by feeling, or whether he does it by hearing alone. Only one should be sure he is looking for grubs and not for beetles' eggs, nor for ants, nor for caterpillars. By the energy with which he drills, and the size of the hole left after he has found his tidbit, one can decide whether he was working for a borer.

But when the borer has been located, he has yet to be captured. There are many kinds of borers. Some channel a groove just beneath the bark and are easily taken; but others tunnel deep into the wood. I measured such a hole the other day, and found it was more than eight inches long and larger than a lead-pencil, bored through solid rock-maple wood. The woodpecker must sink a hole at right angles to this channel and draw the big grub out through his small, rough-sided hole. You would be surprised, if you tried to do the same with a pair of nippers the size of the woodpecker's bill, to find how strong the borer is, how he can buckle and twist, how he braces himself against the walls of his house. Were your strength no greater than the woodpecker's, the task would be much harder. Indeed, a large grub would stand a good chance of getting away but for one thing, the woodpecker *spears* him, and thereby saves many a dinner for himself.

Here is a primitive Indian fish-spear, such as the Penobscots used. To the end of a long pole two wooden jaws are tied loosely enough to spring apart a little under pressure, and midway between them, firmly driven into the end of the pole, is a point

of iron. When a fish was struck, the jaws sprung apart under the force of the blow, guiding the iron through the body of the fish, which was held securely in the hollow above, that just fitted around his sides, and by the point itself.

The tool with which the woodpecker fishes for a grub is very much the same. His mandibles correspond to the two movable jaws. They are knife-edged, and the lower fits exactly inside the upper, so that they give a very firm grip. In addition, the upper one is movable. All birds can move the upper mandible, because it is hinged to the skull. (Watch a parrot some day, if you do not believe it.) A medium-sized woodpecker, like the Lewis's, can elevate his upper mandible at least a quarter of an inch without opening his mouth at all. This enables him to draw his prey through a smaller hole than would be needed if he must open his jaws along their whole length. Between the mandibles is the sharp-pointed tongue, which can be thrust entirely through a grub, holding him impaled. Unlike the Indian's spear-point, the woodpecker's tongue is barbed heavily on both sides, and it is extensile. As a tool it resembles the Solomon Islander's spear. A medium-sized woodpecker can dart his tongue out two inches or more beyond the tip of his bill. A New Bedford boy might tell us, and very correctly, that the woodpecker *harpoons* his grub, just as a whaleman harpoons a whale. If the grub tries to back off into his burrow, out darts the long, barbed tongue and spears him. Then it drags him along the crooked tunnel and into the narrow shaft picked by the woodpecker, where the strong jaws

seize and hold him firmly.

III
HOW THE WOODPECKER COURTS HIS MATE

Other birds woo their mates with songs, but the woodpecker has no voice for singing. He cannot pour out his soul in melody and tell his love his devotion in music. How do songless birds express their emotions? Some by grotesque actions and oglings, as the horned owl, and some by frantic dances, as the sharp-tailed grouse, woo and win their mates; but the amorous woodpecker, not excepting the flickers, which also woo by gestures, whacks a piece of seasoned timber, and rattles off interminable messages according to the signal code set down for woodpeckers' love affairs. He is the only instrumental performer among the birds; for the ruffed grouse, though he drums, has no drum.

There is no cheerier spring sound, in our belated Northern season, than the quick, melodious rappings of the sapsucker from some dead ash limb high above the meadow. It is the best performance of its kind: he knows the capabilities of his instrument, and gets out of it all the music there is in it. Most if not all woodpeckers drum occasionally, but drumming is the special accomplishment of the sapsucker. He is easily first. In Maine, where they are abundant, they make the woods in springtime resound with their continual rapping. Early in April,

before the trees are green with leaf, or the pussy-willows have lost their silky plumpness, when the early round-leafed yellow violet is cuddling among the brown, dead leaves, I hear the yellow-bellied sapsucker along the borders of the trout stream that winds down between the mountains. The dead branch of an elm-tree is his favorite perch, and there, elevated high above all the lower growth, he sits rolling forth a flood of sound like the tremolo of a great organ. Now he plays staccato, – detached, clear notes; and now, accelerating his time, he dashes through a few bars of impetuous hammerings. The woods reëcho with it; the mountains give it faintly back. Beneath him the ruffed grouse paces back and forth on his favorite mossy log before he raises the palpitating whirr of his drumming. A chickadee digging in a rotten limb pauses to spit out a mouthful of punky wood and the brown *Vanessa*, edged with yellow, first butterfly of the season, flutters by on rustling wings. So spring arrives in Maine, ushered in by the reveille of the sapsucker.

So ambitious is the sapsucker of the excellence of his performance that no instrument but the best will satisfy him. He is always experimenting, and will change his anvil for another as soon as he discovers one of superior resonance. They say he tries the tin pails of the maple-sugar makers to see if these will not give him a clearer note; that he drums on tin roofs and waterspouts till he loosens the solder and they come tumbling down. But usually he finds nothing so near his liking as a hard-wood branch, dead and barkless, the drier, the harder, the thinner, the finer grained,

so much the better for his uses.

Deficient as they are in voice, the woodpeckers do not lack a musical ear. Mr. Burroughs tells us that a downy woodpecker of his acquaintance used to change his key by tapping on a knot an inch or two from his usual drumming place, thereby obtaining a higher note. Alternating between the two places, he gave to his music the charm of greater variety. The woodpeckers very quickly discover the superior conductivity of metals. In parts of the country where woodpeckers are more abundant than good drumming trees, a tin roof proves an almost irresistible attraction. A lightning-rod will sometimes draw them farther than it would an electric bolt; and a telegraph pole, with its tinkling glasses and ringing wires, gives them great satisfaction. If men did not put their singing poles in such public places, their music would be much more popular with the woodpeckers; but even now the birds often venture on the dangerous pastime and hammer you out a concord of sweet sounds from the mellow wood-notes, the clear peal of the glass, and the ringing overtones of the wires.

The flicker often telegraphs his love by tapping either on a forest tree or on some loose board of a barn or outhouse; but he has other ways of courting his lady. On fine spring mornings, late in April, I have seen them on a horizontal bough, the lady sitting quietly while her lover tried to win her approval by strange antics. Quite often there are two males displaying their charms in open rivalry, but once I saw them when the field was clear.

If fine clothes made a gentleman, this brave wooer would have been first in all the land: for his golden wings and tail showed their glittering under side as he spread them; his scarlet headdress glowed like fire; his rump was radiantly white, not to speak of the jetty black of his other ornaments and the beautiful ground-colors of his body. He danced before his lady, showing her all these beauties, and perhaps boasting a little of his own good looks, though she was no less beautiful. He spread his wings and tail for her inspection; he bowed, to show his red crescent; he bridled, he stepped forward and back and sidewise with deep bows to his mistress, coaxing her with the mellowest and most enticing *co-wee-tucks*, which no doubt in his language meant "Oh, promise me," laughing now and then his jovial *wick-a-wick-a-wick-a-wick-a*, either in glee or nervousness. It was all so very silly – and so very nice! I wonder how it all came out. Did she promise him? Or did she find a gayer suitor?

IV
HOW THE WOODPECKER MAKES A HOUSE

All woodpeckers make their houses in the wood of trees, either the trunk or one of the branches. Almost the only exceptions to this rule are those that live in the treeless countries of the West. In the torrid deserts of Arizona and the Southwest, some species are obliged to build in the thorny branches of giant cacti, which there grow to an enormous size. In the treeless plains to the northward, a few individuals, for lack of anything so suitable as the cactus, dig holes in clay banks, or even lay their eggs upon the surface of the prairie. In a country where chimney swallows nest in deserted houses, and sand martins burrow in the sides of wells, who wonders at the flicker's thinking that the side of a haystack, the hollow of a wheel-hub, or the cavity under an old ploughshare, is an ideal home? But in wooded countries the woodpeckers habitually nest in trees. The only exceptions I know are a few flickers' holes in old posts, and a few instances where flickers have pecked through the weatherboarding of a house to nest in the space between the walls.

But because a bird nests in a hole in a tree, it is not necessarily a woodpecker. The sparrow-hawk, the house sparrow, the tree swallow, the bluebird, most species of wrens, and several of the

smaller species of owls nest either in natural cavities in trees or in deserted woodpeckers' holes. The chickadees, the crested titmice, and the nuthatches dig their own holes after the same pattern as the woodpecker's. However, the large, round holes were all made by woodpeckers, and of those under two inches in diameter, our friend Downy made his full share. It is easy to tell who made the hole, for the different birds have different styles of housekeeping. The chickadees and nuthatches always build a soft little nest of grass, leaves, and feathers, while the woodpeckers lay their eggs on a bed of chips, and carry nothing in from outside.

Soon after they have mated in the spring, the woodpeckers begin to talk of housekeeping. First, a tree must be chosen. It may be sound or partly decayed, one of a clump or solitary; but it is usually dead or hollow-hearted, and at least partly surrounded by other trees. Sometimes a limb is chosen, sometimes an upright trunk, and the nest may be from two feet to one hundred feet from the ground, though most frequently it will be found not less than ten nor more than thirty feet up. However odd the location finally occupied, it is likely that it was not the first one selected. A woodpecker will dig half a dozen houses rather than occupy an undesirable tenement. It is very common to find their unfinished holes and the wider-mouthed, shallower pockets which they dig for winter quarters; for those that spend their winters in the cold North make a hole to live in nights and cold and stormy days.

The first step in building is to strike out a circle in the bark

as large as the doorway is to be; that is, from an inch and a half to three or four inches in diameter according to the size of the woodpecker. It is nearly always a perfect circle. Try, if you please, to draw freehand a circle of dots as accurate as that which the woodpecker strikes out hurriedly with his bill, and see whether it is easy to do as well as he does.

If the size and shape of the doorway suit him, the woodpecker scales off the bark inside his circle of holes and begins his hard work. He seems to take off his coat and work in his shirtsleeves, so vigorously does he labor as he clings with his stout toes, braced in position by his pointed tail. The chips fly out past him, or if they lie in the hole, he sweeps them out with his bill and pelts again at the same place. The pair take turns at the work. Who knows how long they work before resting? Do they take turns of equal length? Does one work more than the other? A pair of flickers will dig about two inches in a day, the hole being nearly two and a half inches in diameter. A week or more is consumed in digging the nest, which, among the flickers, is commonly from ten to eighteen inches deep. The hole usually runs in horizontally for a few inches and then curves down, ending in a chamber large enough to make a comfortable nest for the mother and her babies.

What a good time the little ones have in their hole! Rain and frost cannot chill them; no enemy but the red squirrel is likely to disturb them. There they lie in their warm, dark chamber, looking up at the ray of light that comes in the doorway, until at last they hear the scratching of their mother's feet as she alights

on the outside of the tree and clambers up to feed them. What a piping and calling they raise inside the hole, and how they all scramble up the walls of their chamber and thrust out their beaks to be fed, till the old tree looks as if it were blossoming with little woodpeckers' hungry mouths!

V
HOW A FLICKER FEEDS HER YOUNG [1]

As the house of the woodpecker has no windows and the old bird very nearly fills the doorway when she comes home, it is hard to find out just how she feeds her little ones. But one of our best naturalists has had the opportunity to observe it, and has told what he saw.

A flicker had built a nest in the trunk of a rather small dead tree which, after the eggs were hatched, was accidentally broken off just at the entrance hole. This left the whole cavity exposed to the weather; but it was too late to desert the nest, and impossible to remove the young birds to another nest.

When first visited, the five little birds were blind, naked, and helpless. They were motherless, too. Some one must have killed their pretty mother; for she never came to feed them, and the father was taking all the care of his little family. When disturbed the little birds hissed like snakes, as is the habit of the callow young of woodpeckers, chickadees, and other birds nesting habitually in holes in trees. When they were older and their eyes were open, they made a clatter much like the noise of a

[1] Based upon the observations of Mr. William Brewster.

mowing-machine, and loud enough to be heard thirty yards away.

The father came at intervals of from twenty to sixty minutes to feed the little ones. He was very shy, and came so quietly that he would be first seen when he alighted close by with a low little laugh or a subdued but anxious call to the young. "Here I am again!" he laughed; or "Are you all right, children?" he called to them. "All right!" they would answer, clattering in concert like a two-horse mower.

As soon as they heard him scratching on the tree-trunk, up they would all clamber to the edge of the nest and hold out their gaping mouths to be fed. Each one was anxious to be fed first, because there never was enough to go round. There was always one that, like the little pig of the nursery tale, "got none." When he came to the nest, the father would look around a moment, trying to choose the one he wanted to feed first. Did he always pick out the poor little one that had none the time before, I wonder?

After the old bird had made his choice, he would bend over the little bird and drive his long bill down the youngster's throat as if to run it through him. Then the little bird would catch hold as tightly as he could and hang on while his father jerked him up and down for a second or a second and a half with great rapidity. What was he doing? He was pumping food from his own stomach into the little one's. Many birds feed their young in this way. They do not hold the food in their own mouths, but swallow and perhaps partially digest it, so that it shall be fit for the tender little

stomachs.

While the woodpecker was pumping in this manner his motions were much the same as when he drummed, but his tail twitched as rapidly as his head and his wings quivered. The motion seemed to shake his whole body.

In two weeks from the time when the little birds were blind, naked, helpless nestlings they became fully feathered and full grown, able to climb up to the top of the nest, from which they looked out with curiosity and interest. At any noise they would slip silently back. A day or two later they left the old nest and began their journeys.

VI
FRIEND DOWNY

No better little bird comes to our orchards than our friend the downy woodpecker. He is the smallest and one of the most sociable of our woodpeckers, – a little, spotted, black-and-white fellow, precisely like his larger cousin the hairy, except in having the outer tail-feathers barred instead of plain. Nearly everything that can be said of one is equally true of the other on a smaller scale. They look alike, they act alike, and their nests and eggs are alike in everything but size.

Downy is the most industrious of birds. He is seldom idle and never in mischief. As he does not fear men, but likes to live in orchards and in the neighborhood of fields, he is a good friend to us. On the farm he installs himself as Inspector of Apple-trees. It is an old and an honorable profession among birds. The pay is small, consisting only of what can be picked up, but, as cultivated trees are so infested with insects that food is always plentiful, and as they have usually a dead branch suitable to nest in, Downy asks no more. Summer and winter he works on our orchards. At sunrise he begins, and he patrols the branches till sunset. He taps on the trunks to see whether he can hear any rascally borers inside. He inspects every tree carefully in a thorough and systematic way, beginning low down and following up with a

peek into every crevice and a tap upon every spot that looks suspicious. If he sees anything which ought not to be there, he removes it at once.

A moth had laid her eggs in a crack in the bark, expecting to hatch out a fine brood of caterpillars: but Downy ate them all, thus saving a whole branch from being overrun with caterpillars and left fruitless, leafless, and dying. A beetle had just deposited her eggs here. Downy saw her, and took not only the eggs but the beetle herself. Those eggs would have hatched into boring larvæ, which would have girdled and killed some of the branches, or have burrowed under the bark, causing it to fall off, or have bored into the wood and, perhaps, have killed the tree. Nor is the full-grown borer exempt. Downy hears him, pecks a few strokes, and harpoons him with unerring aim. When Downy has made an arrest in this way, the prisoner does not escape from the police. Here is a colony of ants, running up the tree in one line and down in another, touching each other with their feelers as they pass. A feast for our friend! He takes both columns, and leaves none to tell the tale. This is a good deed, too, since ants are of no benefit to fruit-trees and are very fond of the dead-ripe fruit.

And Downy is never too busy to listen for borers. They are fine plump morsels much to his taste, not so sour as ants, nor so hard-shelled as beetles, nor so insipid as insects' eggs. A good borer is his preferred dainty. The work he does in catching borers is of incalculable benefit, for no other bird can take his place. The warblers, the vireos, and some other birds in summer, the

chickadees and nuthatches all the year round, are helping to eat up the eggs and insects that lie near the surface, but the only birds equipped for digging deep under the bark and dragging forth the refractory grubs are the woodpeckers.

So Downy works at his self-appointed task in our orchards summer and winter, as regular as a policeman on his beat. But he is much more than a policeman, for he acts as judge, jury, jailer, and jail. All the evidence he asks against any insect is to find him loafing about the premises. "I swallow him first and find out afterwards whether he was guilty," says Downy with a wink and a nod.

Most birds do not stay all the year, in the North, at least, and most, in return for their labors in the spring, demand some portion of the fruit or grain of midsummer and autumn. Not so Downy. His services are entirely gratuitous; he works twice as long as most others. He spends the year with us, no winter ever too severe for him, no summer too hot; and he never taxes the orchard, nor takes tribute from the berry patch. Only a quarter of his food is vegetable, the rest being made up of injurious insects; and the vegetable portion consists entirely of wild fruits and weed-seeds, nothing that man eats or uses. Downy feeds on the wild dogwood berries, a few pokeberries, the fruit of the woodbine, and the seeds of the poison-ivy, – whatever scanty and rather inferior fare is to be had at Nature's fall and winter table. If in the cold winter weather we will take pains to hang out a bone with some meat on it, raw or cooked, or a piece of suet,

taking care that it is not salted, – for few wild birds except the crossbills can eat salted food, – we may see how he appreciates our thoughtfulness. Shall we grudge him a bone from our own abundance, or neglect to fasten it firmly out of reach of the cat and dog? If his cousin the hairy and his neighbor the chickadee come and eat with him, bid them a hearty welcome. The feast is spread for all the birds that help men, and friend Downy shall be their host.

VII
PERSONA NON GRATA

We shall not attempt to deny that Downy has an unprincipled relative. While it is no discredit, it is a great misfortune to Downy, who is often murdered merely because he looks a little, a very little, like this disreputable cousin of his. The real offender is the sapsucker, that musical genius of whom we have already spoken.

The popular belief is that every woodpecker is a sapsucker, and that every hole he digs in a tree is an injury to the tree. We have seen that every hole Downy digs is a benefit, and now we wish to learn why it is that the sapsucker's work is any more injurious than other woodpeckers' holes; how we are to recognize the sapsucker's work; and how much damage he does. We will do what the scientists often do, – examine the bird's work and make it tell us the story. There is no danger of hurting the sapsucker's reputation. The farmer could have no worse opinion of him; and, though the case has been appealed to the higher courts of science more than once, where the sapsucker's cause has been eloquently and ably defended, the verdict has gone against him. Scientists now do not deny that the sapsucker does harm. But his worst injury is less in the damage he does to the trees than in the ill-will and suspicion he creates against woodpeckers which do no harm at all. If you will study the picture and the descriptions in the Key

to the Woodpeckers, you will be able to recognize the sapsucker and his nearest relatives, whether in the East or in the West. But all sapsuckers may be known by their pale yellowish under parts, and by the work they leave behind. As the yellow-bellied sapsucker is the only one found east of the Rocky Mountains, we shall speak only of him and his work.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.