

Canadian Natural History.

Canadian Thrushes.

Now that the woods are once more assuming their summer foliage, and vocal with the sweet melody of singing birds, we know of no subject in the department of Natural History more in harmony with the season, or more appropriate to the "leafy month of June," than a brief account of some of our principal feathered songsters, a group of which our artist has very faithfully delineated in the accompanying illustration. The present time also affords a fitting opportunity for saying a word in favour of these charming choristers of the woods, and deprecating the wanton slaughter to which so many of them are doomed, in revenge of their inroads on our orchards and fruit gardens, their destroyers forging the ample compensation they make by the destruction of myriads of insects that, unless thus thinned out and checked in the early stages of their development, would increase to a fearful extent, and defeat the labours and hopes of the agriculturist by ravages far more extensive and serious than the depredations which his feathered friends make on the orchard or garden. In some of the continental countries, where, in consequence of the unrestricted slaughter of former years, the number of small birds has very greatly diminished, the effects of this suicidal policy have become so manifest and serious, in the alarming increase of destructive insects, that it has been found necessary to enact stringent laws for the continued preservation of these formerly denounced and persecuted members of the feathered race. Every encouragement is now given to their increase, and in many parts very striking results have followed, giving conclusive evidence of their utility, and indeed of the indispensable function they perform in the economy of nature. In Australia, too, efforts are being made with encouraging success to introduce from Europe, and acclimatize in that thriving colony, a number of these true friends of man, that reward his protection not only by their happy and grateful songs, but by the unconscious services of a more substantial kind which they render to the husbandman.

In this favoured region we already possess a great variety of native birds, some distinguished by their beautiful and brilliant plumage, and others by the sweetness of their song. The extensive natural order to which nearly all singing birds belong, the most numerous indeed of all the orders, and which may be considered the typical order of the class, namely, the *Perchers* (*INSESSORES*), comprehends all those birds that live habitually among trees, with the exception of the *Rapacious* birds, on the one hand, from which they may easily be distinguished, by the absence of all the peculiar characteristics, in beak and claw, and general configuration of birds of prey, and on the other hand, from the *Climbers* (*SCANSORES*), by the peculiar disposition of the toes, which, in all true *Perchers*, are three in front and one behind; while in *Climbers* two only are directed forward, and two are placed at the back. In *Perchers*, also, the hind toe is on the same level with the fore toes, an arrangement which peculiarly fits them for clinging to the small twigs and branches of trees, and which constitutes a distinctive mark between them and walking birds and waders. The subdivision to which the group in the illustration belongs is further characterized by a slight notch on the upper mandible, most strongly marked in the bill of the so-called butcher bird, and which assists in capturing its insect prey. This peculiarity gives the name to the sub-order *DENTROSTRICES*, or *tooth-billed*. Other points of resemblance constitute the closer likeness that unites the family of Thrushes—such as the arched and compressed bills, with less strongly marked notches; wings long and pointed; and their legs rather long and stout. Their flight is moderately rapid; and their advance on the ground is by a succession of leaps. This family is

very generally distributed over the globe; its several species being adapted to almost every variety of climate. Their food consists of berries in part, but very largely of worms, grubs and insects. They generally frequent the pastures and fields in search of food; but they nestle in thickets and woods. Many species are distinguished and almost unrivalled in the power and variety of their song, comparing not unfavorably in this respect with the closely allied family of warblers, of which the far-famed Nightingale is head and chief. In proof of the claims of this family to a reputation for excellence of song, we have only to refer to the English Thrush, and Blackbird, of the old world, and to the American Mocking Bird, of the new, the last of which has, perhaps, no compeer in the variety and sweetness of his imitative performances; whilst among Canadian Thrushes, two at least, the Song Thrush and the Wood Thrush, are no mean songsters, and the notes of most of the others are very pleasing and agreeable.

In the accompanying group the artist has represented six species of Thrush, all of them summer visitors, and most of them very well known in this country. The largest of these is, (1) the Song Thrush (*Mimus rufus*), called also sometimes the Brown Thrasher. This bird is about eleven inches long. The upper part of its body is of a bright reddish brown colour; the wings are barred with two streaks of white, relieved with black; the tips and inner vanes of the wings are dusky; the tail is very long, and rounded at the end, and of the same reddish brown colour as the back. The whole of the under parts are yellowish white; and the breast and sides under the wings are beautifully marked with long pointed spots of black, running in chains. The bill is long and stout, and beset with strong bristles at the base; black above and whitish below; the legs are very strong, and of a dusky clay colour. The iris of the eye is of a brilliant yellow. The female is distinguished by the peculiar markings of the species being slighter and less defined. In other respects the plumage is nearly alike. The eggs of this species, commonly five in number, are "thickly sprinkled with ferruginous grains on a pale blueish ground." The Song Thrush inhabits North America, from Canada to the point of Florida, and is a general favourite on account of the sweetness of its song. It is easily reared, and becomes very tame when kept in cages. Its food is similar to that of the rest of the family, and it is very usefully destructive among worms, caterpillars, and coleopterous insects. He has been accused of stealing seed corn, but, says Wilson, "for every grain of maize he pilfers I am persuaded he destroys five hundred insects."

The bird next in size (No. 2) is the well-known American Robin (*Turdus migratorius*), so called from the colour of its breast, reminding us in this respect of a much smaller and very different bird, the English Robin, with which every old countryman is so familiar. The Robin of this country is a true Thrush, and is about nine and a half inches in length. Its bill is yellow; the head, back of neck and tail are black, and the back ash colour. The wings are black, edged with lighter ash; the inner tips of the two external tail feathers are white. Three small spots of white border the eye; the throat and upper part of the breast are black, the former streaked with white; while the rest of the breast as far as the thighs is of a dark orange hue. The belly and vent are white, slightly waved with dusky ash.

This sprightly summer visitor usually builds its nest, a large one, not far from human dwellings, often in our orchards. The nest is plastered on the inside with mud; the hen lays five beautiful sea-green eggs. The food of this bird consists, like that of all the Thrushes, in large proportion of worms and caterpillars. He is one of our earliest songsters in spring. His song has some resemblance to the notes of the Song Thrush just mentioned, and if deficient in point of execution, possesses more simplicity. "The notes of the Robin in spring," observes Wilson, "are

universally known and universally beloved. They are, as it were, the prelude to the grand general concert that is about to burst upon us from woods, fields and thickets, whitened with blossoms and breathing fragrance. By the usual association of ideas we therefore listen with more pleasure to this cheerful bird than to many others possessed of far superior powers and much greater variety."

The next figure in the group, No. 3, will be easily recognized as the pert and familiar Cat-bird (*Mimus Carolinensis*), with which every Canadian is so well acquainted, and whose singular imitations are so strange and startling, that it is sometimes difficult to disabuse the uninitiated of the idea that some stray kitten is in the neighbourhood. It is unnecessary to give any detailed description of this well-known bird. It is about nine inches long, and to a spectator at a short distance appears nearly black; but on closer inspection the prevailing colour is found a deep slate above, and of a lighter shade of the same below, except the under tail coverts, which are very dark red. The tail, however, and the upper part of the head, as well as the legs and bill, are black. The female is scarcely to be distinguished from the male. She lays four or five eggs, which are of a greenish blue colour, without spots; and will rear two, and sometimes three, broods in a season.

The Cat-bird is one of the earliest morning songsters, beginning generally before break of day, and hovering from bush to bush with great sprightliness, when there is scarce light sufficient to distinguish him. His notes are more remarkable for singularity than for melody. They consist of short imitations of other birds and other sounds; but his pipe being rather deficient in clearness and strength of tone, his imitations fail where these are requisite. He is not easily discouraged, however, and perseveres in his efforts with praiseworthy diligence, seemingly undismayed by failure, and unabashed by the presence of a spectator even within a few yards of him. Wilson says of his vocal powers, that on attentively listening to him one can perceive considerable variety in his performance, in which he seems to introduce all the odd sounds and quaint passages he has been able to collect. Upon the whole, though we cannot rank him with the grand leaders of our vernal choristers, he well merits a place among the most agreeable general performers. This bird is, withal, a most affectionate parent and brave in defence of its young, whom it has been known to protect successfully against the attack of snakes.

Higher up in the group is (No. 4) one of the sweetest singers amongst them all, the Wood Thrush (*T. mustelinus*), a somewhat smaller bird than those already described, being about eight inches in length. The whole upper part of its body is of a brown or fulvous colour, brightening into reddish on the head, and inclining to olive towards the tail. The throat and breast are white, tinged with light buff colour, and marked with dark spots running in chains from the sides of the mouth downwards. The eggs, four or five in a nest, are of a uniform light blue, without spots.

This sweet and solitary songster inhabits the whole of North America from Hudson's Bay to the Peninsula of Florida. On his arrival in our northern regions, with the first return of warmer weather, he soon announces his presence in the woods, beginning his clear and musical notes with the earliest dawn of morning. Even in dark, wet and gloomy weather, when scarce a single chirp is heard from any other bird, the sweet notes of the Wood Thrush thrill through the dripping woods from morning to night; and it is scarcely fancy to say that the sadder the day the sweeter is his song. The favourite haunts of the Wood Thrush are low shaded hollows, through which a small brook or rill meanders, overhung with bushes or mantled with wild vine. He appears always singly or in pairs, and in disposition is shy, retired, and unobtrusive. With the modesty of true merit, he charms you with his song, but is content,