

Nature about the Farm

Cherry Birds—Tussock Moth—Ants and Aphids

EDITED BY C. W. NASH

BIRD NOTES

I recently had an enquiry from a fruit grower asking whether the Cedar Waxwing, or Cherry bird, as it is usually called, had the habit of feeding upon the unopened buds of the cherry. He states that for a short time this spring the birds were very destructive. If the identification of the birds is correct, this is, I think, an exceptional case, for though I have had the cherry birds under fairly close observation for nearly forty years, I have never found them addicted to this practice. If any of my readers have ever seen anything of the kind I should be glad to hear from them.

There are a few birds which will, in the spring (when insect food is scarce and before the Dandelions come in blossom), eat buds; among them being the Purple Finch and the House Sparrow. The Purple Finch, however, is never sufficiently abundant to cause any loss, but the House Sparrow, owing to its numbers, may do a good deal of mischief.

The Cedar Waxwing undoubtedly has a fondness for small fruit when ripe, particularly for cherries, hence its common name Cherry bird, but after all, it only attacks cultivated fruits in districts where wild fruit is absent. The natural food of this bird consists of insects and soft berries, wild cherries, elderberries, mountain ash berries, etc., forming the bulk of the vegetable food eaten. Its insect food comprises smooth caterpillars of all kinds, the common canker worm which infests apple trees, being greedily devoured when obtainable; leaf-eating beetles are also taken in large numbers. The Waxwing are also very expert caterpillar hunters, being about after winged insects in the manner of the swallows, though their flight is never long sustained. At other times they dart out from the tree tops after passing insects in the manner of the Flycatchers, and so, on the whole, certainly do more good than harm, for it is only when too many have gathered together in some particular cherry orchard that the damage they do is noticeable at all. The quantity of fruit consumed by each individual Waxwing does not amount to much, but the trouble is that these birds are gregarious at all times and sometimes visit a cherry orchard in such large flocks and remain where they are, feeding to their liking so long, that they really do seriously reduce the value of a crop. Where a man makes a specialty of growing these small fruits and finds himself visited by an excessive number of Cherry birds, he is undoubtedly justified in protecting his property from destruction. Shooting the birds in the trees is a very unsatisfactory way of getting rid of them for a charge of small shot fired through the branches of a fruit tree will do more harm than very many birds. The best way to protect the marketable fruit is to provide for the birds an unmarketable variety which they like better. This can be done by planting a few Russian Mulberry trees in out-of-the-way places; the birds will feed upon the fruit of these in preference to any of the cultivated fruits we value. In this way the commercial fruit can be well protected and the services of the birds as insect destroyers retained as well.

INSECT NOTES

The following is an extract from a Toronto daily paper: "The Park Commissioner will ask the Board of Control for another \$1,500 to be expended on exterminating the Tussock Moth. The other day Mr. Chambers stated that the pest was practically extinct in Toronto, but this morning he said that the recent hot weather had shown that the moth was very much alive."

I do not know what the Park Commissioner proposes to do at this season of the year with the \$1,500 he asks for, but I surmise that his intention is to go over the trees infested by this insect and spray them. If that is the way the money is to be expended, I can assure the Park Commissioner that he will be simply throwing it away. The caterpillars of the Tussock Moth are now fully fed and are descending from the foliage of the trees, in order to spin their cocoons and enter the chrysalis stage, therefore there remains but one thing to do, which is to carefully gather up all the cocoons possible before next April and destroy them. Briefly, the life history of the Tussock Moth is this: The female, which is a wingless moth, deposits her eggs upon the cocoon from which she has emerged; these eggs hatch early in May and the young caterpillars go up into the foliage of the trees and there feed until full grown. They attain their full growth about the middle of July or a little after, and then cease feeding entirely and enter the pupal stage. Spraying, therefore, with stomach poisons can only be effective during the early part of the season, that is, while the caterpillars are feeding. The life history of the Tussock Moth has been so frequently and so fully written up and the measures to be taken for its destruction have been so often explained that there is no excuse for any ignorance on the subject now. The prevalence of this pest in Toronto would probably not be of very much interest to the farmers of the country, if it was not for the fact that through the culpable neglect of the authorities here the insect has spread out into the surrounding country and has established itself in all the woods, plantations and orchards for many miles around the city. Extermination is now impossible and strenuous efforts will be required to keep it in check. So far I have not found the larvae of the Tussock Moth subject to the attacks of parasitic insects. Out of about four hundred chrysalids tested during the last two years, only one was parasitized.

A few days ago I solved a mystery which has been puzzling me since the spring of 1903. On the 24th of April of that year, on taking some soil from my compost heap, I turned over an old piece of tin, the underside of which was covered with snowy-white aphids; under the tin was a nest of very small red ants. These ants had, late in the previous autumn brought the aphids to their nest for protection during the winter. These white aphids live upon the roots of plants underground and are destructive and troublesome to get rid of, so I was anxious to discover what class of plants they were feeding upon, but though I watched them until they all disappeared from the ants' nest, I failed to trace them. Early this spring I again found them in the ants' nest, and again lost track of them, until the other day I happened to notice that some of my Asters looked stunted and I took one up. The roots of this plant were covered with red aphids and the soil all about it was tunnelled in every direction by the ants in attendance upon them. Not only were the little red ants there, but many black ones also, evidently obtaining honey dew from these root aphids in the same way as other species of ants obtain it from the green and black aphids which affect the leaves of other plants. After taking up the affected plants and puffing pyrethrum well about the roots and into the soil, I replanted them, and expect to have no more trouble from that source. Before winter sets in I shall examine the red ants' nest again to see if they have collected any more aphids to carry over winter. The connection between ants and aphids is very curious and this habit of certain species of ants which carry the aphids into their nests and protect them through the winter and then in the spring replace them upon the roots of their food plant, for the purpose of obtaining the so-called honey dew during the following summer, has never been so marvellous, and is hard to explain if we assume that the lower forms of life are guided by blind instinct alone.

CORRESPONDENCE

H. C. B., Oshawa.—I. You can obtain ferrets from G. Hope, 109 Queen St. W., Toronto. 2. Ferrets are worth from \$2.50 to \$4.00 each, according to quality, age, etc. 3. Doe ferrets are preferred by many people, as being more tractable and keener hunters than bucks, but there is really no rule in the matter, all depends upon the individuality of the animal and the care in handling it. 4. A doe ferret is worth more than one only one month old, unless the yearling has been spoiled by rough handling, or has some bad habits. 5. You had better put away any further questions you want answered specifically; a general treatise on the management of ferrets would occupy too much space to be given here.

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