

The Fruit Grower and the Robin

WITH the approach of the cherry season each year many fruit growers begin to worry over the devastation that may be wrought among the fruits by the robin. Some orchardists go so far as to assert that every robin should be killed; others look on this cherry lover with a more kindly eye and consider that the benefit derived from the same bird's destruction of insects more than repays them for the cherries he takes. Statistics from bird enthusiasts who have analysed the contents of robins' stomachs, show that only a small percentage of this bird's diet consists of cultivated fruits.

It is natural for living beings to prefer a mixed diet. The robin, being no exception to this law of nature, selects fruit to mix with his animal or insect diet. Cherries are ripe about the right time to furnish an appetizing food for the fully fledged spring brood, and if no other fruit is supplied he takes the cherry. If that fruit is to be found in great supply and of good quality it is but natural for him to break from his customary insect diet for a few days. At all times, however, it will be found that insects comprise the major portion of the food consumed.

Since the bird is a benefit to fruit men in so far as he devours the more destructive fruit enemies, the insects in various stages, should not something be done whereby robins can be kept in our orchards? Why not supply him with mulberries or wild cherries, or some such fruits, to satisfy his appetite for the fruit crop? A few trees near the groves or shrubberies which the birds frequent would do much to prevent them from taking the marketable crop.

THE HORTICULTURIST has received expressions of opinions from fruit growers in different sections of Ontario, as well as from Dr. Fletcher, of Ottawa. A few of them are as follows:

Dr. James Fletcher, of the Central Experimental Farm, Ottawa, who has given this subject much attention, writes: "I would most decidedly oppose any action on the part of fruit growers tending towards the destruction of the American robin, on the ground that these birds are beneficial, a consideration which affects the whole community. The only evidence against them is from fruit growers in the vicinity of towns. Such a question would have to be decided on the evidence of specialists who have studied the food habits of these birds, and not from the statements of any one class of the community who had been disappointed by the destruction of even the best specimens of one of their crops, unless these statements were backed up by proved facts concerning the food habits.

"Prof. F. E. L. Beal, Assistant Biologist of the United States Depart-

ment of Agriculture, in discussing How Birds Affect the Orchard, says, 'The robin has often brought itself into unenviable notoriety by its depredations upon small fruits. Sometimes people who grow a few choice cherries do not get even a sample of the fruit, and those who raise fine strawberries for family use secure only a few boxes. On the other hand thousands of fruit raisers in various parts of the country are never troubled by robins, although these birds may be just as abundant in their vicinity as elsewhere.

'An examination of the stomachs of 500 robins collected in various parts of the country shows that cultivated fruit forms less than eight per cent. of their diet, and that practically all of this is eaten in June and July, while wild fruits form more than 43 per cent. of the year's food. Complaints have come from localities that lack those wild fruits which the robins evidently prefer—near cities, where such fruits have been destroyed, and in the prairie regions where they rarely grow, except in restricted areas along rivers.'

"Prof. S. A. Forbes, of Illinois, who made a careful investigation of the food of this bird some years ago, found that enormous numbers of injurious insects were destroyed by robins. He found that the total percentage of injurious insects eaten was February, 18; May, 37; March, 37; April, 39; May, 55; June, 24; July, 10; August, 31; September, 7; while the percentages of fruits and seeds eaten were June, 58; July, 79; August, 56; September, 70; October, 56. In June cherries formed 47 per cent. of the food.

"Mr. A. W. Butler, Ornithologist to the Geological Survey of Indiana, sums up this matter as follows: 'It is safe to say that noxious insects comprise more than one-third of the robin's food. Vegetable food was found to be nearly 58 per cent. of that eaten, wild fruits forming 47 per cent., and varieties that were possibly cultivated a little more than four per cent. They ate 25 per cent. of cultivated fruit in June and July. Wild fruit was eaten every month in the year. Small fruits and cherries that ripen early are almost the only fruits that are eaten to any extent. By July, and after that, there is an abundance of wild fruits that are more to its taste. The robin takes 10 times as much wild as cultivated fruit. The wild plants upon which it feeds most are not those gathered by man or adopted by him for cultivation. It would be well to plant a few extra plants or trees for the birds, or to plant a few of some such trees as the Russian Mulberry, to the fruit of which robins are particularly partial.'

"The above facts," concludes Dr. Fletcher, "are only a few of many that

will have to be investigated by fruit growers who consider the robin an injurious bird."

AGAINST THE ROBIN

"Personally, I have no love for the robin," writes Mr. Chris. Firth, of Durham. "There are scores of other insectivorous birds that never touch fruits, and are never mentioned by writers on the subject. These birds are seldom seen chiefly because their nesting-places are destroyed. They are not driven away by the English sparrows, as most writers try to make out. There is no bird more libelled than this same little brownie, but he still lives, and probably will for some time to come.

"About 20 years ago, when I bought the place on which I live, it was a commons and one of the worst, not a tree on the part where I built my house. When the house was up I planted trees and shrubs all around where I thought they would be most effective as shelter, shade and ornament. Some evergreens are now nearly 30 feet high, and some of the isolated ones are beauties. They are mostly natives, such as balsams, spruce and pines. I still continue to plant. The consequence is a great variety of birds nest around my home. For 17 years I have permitted English sparrows to build in the roof of my house, just above my bedroom window, and on no occasion have I known them to interfere with other birds, some of which build within five yards of the house. These birds include warblers, chipping and song sparrows, catbird, kingbird, and others. The scarlet tanager I have not seen for years. The Baltimore oriole and rose-breasted grosbeak I seldom see.

"These are all more or less insectivorous birds. Their absence is due to the same cause—nesting places are destroyed. There is also another cause—the domestic cat. I don't keep them, and kill every one I find prowling around. Then there is the man with the gun who likes to be called a sport. If readers of THE HORTICULTURIST, and others, will plant more trees and shrubs, and then plant a few more, a great many of the birds would return and be of incalculable benefit to the fruit growers."

Mr. W. M. Robson, Lindsay: "It is easy to forget and forgive old feuds and depredations. If opinions were received from small fruit growers during the months of July and August, I fear the verdict would be against the robin. He does not possess compensating qualities equivalent to the destruction and damage done by him. He has a voracious appetite for cherries, strawberries, red currants, white currants, raspberries, peas and grapes. I am sorry to present such an indictment against one of the feathered tribe