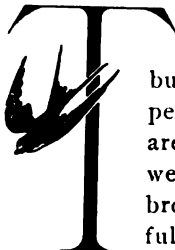


LEAFLET XXII.

THE BIRDS AND I.*

By L. H. BAILEY.

 HE springtime belongs to the birds and me. We own it. We know when the Mayflowers and the buttercups bloom. We know when the first frogs peep. We watch the awakening of the woods. We are wet by the warm April showers. We go where we will, and we are companions. Every tree and brook and blade of grass is ours; and our hearts are full of song.

There are boys who kill the birds, and girls who want to catch them and put them in cages; and there are others who steal their eggs. The birds are not partners with them; they are only servants. Birds, like people, sing for their friends, not for their masters. I am sure that one cannot think much of the springtime and the flowers if his heart is always set upon killing or catching something. We are happy when we are free; and so are the birds.

The birds and I get acquainted all over again every spring. They have seen strange lands in the winter, and all the brooks and woods have been covered with snow. So we run and romp together, and find all the nooks and crannies which we had half forgotten since October. The birds remember the old places. The wrens pull the sticks from the old hollow rail and seem to be wild with joy to see the place again. They must be the same wrens that were here last year and the year before, for strangers could not make so much fuss over an old rail. The bluebirds and wrens look into every crack and corner for a place in which to build, and the robins and chipping-sparrows explore every tree in the old orchard.

If the birds want to live with us, we should encourage them. The first thing to do is to let them alone. Let them be as free from danger and fear as you or I. Take the hammer off the old

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gun, give pussy so much to eat that she will not care to hunt for birds, and keep away the boys who steal eggs and who carry sling-shots and throw stones. Plant trees and bushes about the borders of the place, and let some of them, at least, grow into tangles; then, even in the back yard, the wary cat-bird may make its home.

For some kinds of birds we can build houses. Some of the many forms which can be used are shown in the pictures at the end of this Leaflet. Any ingenious boy can suggest a dozen other patterns. Although birds may not appreciate architecture, it is well to make the houses neat and tasty by taking pains to have the proportions correct. The floor space in each compartment should be not less than five by six inches, and six by six or six by eight may be better. By cutting the boards in multiples of these numbers, one can easily make a house with several compartments; for there are some birds, as martins, tree swallows, and pigeons that like to live in families or colonies. The size of the doorway is important. It should be just large enough to admit the bird. A larger opening not only looks bad, but it exposes the inhabitants to dangers of cats and other enemies. Birds which build in houses, aside from doves and pigeons, are bluebirds, wrens, tree-swallows, martins, and sometimes the chickadees. For the wren and the chickadee the opening should be an inch augur hole, and for the others it should be about one-and-a-half inches. Only one opening should be provided for each house or compartment. A perch or door-step should be provided just below each door. It is here that the birds often stop to arrange their toilets; and when the mistress is busy with domestic affairs indoors the male-bird often sits outside and entertains her with the latest neighborhood gossip. These houses should be placed on poles or on buildings in somewhat secluded places. Martins and tree-swallows like to build their nests twenty-five feet or more above the ground, but the other birds usually prefer an elevation less than twelve feet. Newly made houses, and particularly newly painted ones, do not often attract the birds.

But if the birds and I are companions I must know them more intimately. Merely building houses for them is not enough. I want to know live and happy birds, not dead ones. We are not to know them, then, by catching them, or stuffing them, or collecting their eggs. Persons who make a business of studying birds may shoot birds now and then, and collect their eggs. But

these persons are scientists and they are grown-up people. They are trying to add to the sum of human knowledge, while we want to know birds just because we want to. But even scientists do not take specimens recklessly. They do not rob nests. They do not kill brooding birds. They do not make collections merely for the sake of making them ; and even their collections are less valuable than a knowledge of the bird as it lives and flies and sings.

Boys and girls should not make collections of eggs, for these collections are mere curiosities, as collections of spools and marbles are. They may afford some entertainment, to be sure, but one can find amusement in harmless ways. Some persons think that the securing of collections makes one a naturalist, but it does not. The naturalist cares more for things as they really are in their own homes than for museum specimens. One does not love the birds when he steals their eggs and breaks up their homes ; and he is depriving the farmer of one of his best friends, for birds keep insects in check.

Stuffed birds do not sing and empty eggs do not hatch. Then let us go to the fields and watch the birds. Sit down on the soft grass and try to make out what the robin is doing on yonder fence or why the wren is bursting with song in the thicket. An opera-glass or spy-glass will bring them close to you. Try to find out not only what the colors and shapes and sizes are, but what their habits are. What does the bird eat? How much does it eat? Where is its nest? How many eggs does it lay? What color are they? How long does the mother bird sit? Does the father bird care for her when she is sitting? How long do the young birds remain in the nest? Who feeds them? What are they fed? Is there more than one brood in a season? Where do the birds go after breeding? Do they change their plumage? Are the mother birds and father birds unlike in size or color? How many kinds of birds do you know?

These are some of the things that every boy or girl wants to know ; and we can find out by watching the birds ! There is no harm in visiting the nests, if one does it in the right way. I have visited hundreds of them and have kept many records of the number of eggs and the dates when they were laid, how long before they hatched, and when the birds flew away ; and the birds took no offense at my inquisitiveness. These are some of the cautions to be observed : Watch only those nests which can

be seen without climbing, for if you have to climb the tree the birds will resent it. Make the visit when the birds are absent, if possible ; at least, never scare the bird from the nest. Do not touch the eggs or the nest. Make your visit very short. Make up your mind just what you want to see, then look in quickly and pass on. Do not go too often ; once or twice a day will be sufficient. Do not take the other children with you, for you are then likely to stay too long and to offend the birds.

Now let us see how intimately you can become acquainted with some bird this summer.