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WONDERS OF  
ANIMAL LIFE

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# THE WONDERS OF NATURE



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## WONDERS OF ANIMAL LIFE

ANIMAL LIFE IN THE BRITISH ISLES  
ANIMAL LIFE IN AFRICA  
ANIMAL LIFE IN THE EAST  
ANIMAL FRIENDS  
BIRD LAND  
ANIMAL LIFE IN THE NEW WORLD

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## CHAPTER I

### BIRDS IN THE GARDEN

THE Blackbird began it. He gave a long, soft whistle just as the first streaks of light stole across the sky.

The Linnet answered him with a little sleepy trill, and the wee Wren at once broke in with his shrill cheery song.

Then the Thrush flew to the very tip top of the tallest apple tree and shouted "*Wake up! wake up! wake up!*" And in a moment all the birds in the old garden burst into their happy morning song.

Such a noise! Each bird swelling out its little throat trying its hardest to sing louder than all the rest.

By the time the sun had shot up into the sky they were all rather tired of singing. One by one the birds' songs died away, and the cheery little warblers set about getting their breakfast, and attending to the business of the day.



There was plenty to do, for it was spring-time, when the birds are all as busy as busy can be building their nests—the little nurseries in which eggs are to be laid, and the tiny birdlings brought up.

The Thrush indeed had finished its nest some days ago, and Mrs Thrush was already sitting on four of the most beautiful peacock-blue eggs spotted and speckled with black.

The nest was a most substantial affair, hidden in the middle of an old holly bush. Mr and Mrs Thrush had spent much time and care upon it. It was made of dry grass, rootlets, and fine twigs woven closely together and mixed with a fair amount of mud to make all firm and strong. It had, too, a thick lining of mud which the birds had worked up into a kind of cement, smoothing and shaping it with their beaks and their own warm little bodies until it was like a deep clay bowl.

But a clay bowl, although it may make a splendidly strong nursery fit to stand the beating rains and fierce winds of early spring, would be a very cold, hard bed for baby birds, with never a feather on their plump little bodies, to lie upon; so over the whole of the inside of their nest Mr and Mrs Thrush spread

a kind of cork carpet made of tiny fragments of wet, rotten touch-wood which they worked up into a paste in their beaks, and then carefully plastered all over the clay.

While Mrs Thrush sits on her eggs, her mate cheers her up by singing to her from the trees close by. He brings her little presents too, a nice worm, or a plump snail which he has shelled ready for her, and sometimes he takes her place and keeps the eggs warm while she stretches her wings and takes a little exercise.



THE THRUSH.

The Thrush is a big, handsome bird in his soft brown coat and speckled waistcoat. He is most welcome in the garden, for although he sometimes pecks the strawberries and cherries, he does a great deal of good by destroying harmful insects and snails. The Thrush cannot crush the snail's shell with his

beak, so he carries it off to a favourite stone (called the Thrush's anvil) and on this he bangs it until it is all broken up. You may often hear the tap, tap, tap in the garden as the bird is busily pounding snails on his anvil to feed his hungry family, and the stone is generally surrounded by sticky fragments of their shells.

But it is chiefly for his joyous song that we love to have the Thrush in our garden. He sings almost all the year round except for a few weeks in July and August. Even on cold dull days in November and December he will perch on a bough and sing loudly and cheerfully that spring "is coming, is coming, is coming." He has a funny way of repeating little bits of his song three times over as if he were particularly pleased with it. At one moment he will shout loudly "did he do it, did he do it, did he do it." "You're there, you're there, you're there," then after a little pause will invite you to have "a cup of tea, a cup of tea, a cup of tea."

The Missel Thrush sometimes visits the old garden. He is bigger than his cousin the Song Thrush, and has some white streaks on his wings.

Very early in the year he arrives, before the

winter has really gone. He seems thoroughly to enjoy the sort of weather that other folk find most disagreeable, and is often to be seen on the coldest, wildest day perched on the topmost bough of a tree triumphantly singing his wild, free song as if he thought bitter winds and icy sleet were really the jolliest things possible.

From this strange habit the bird is sometimes called the "Stormcock." "Missel Thrush" is really short for "Mistletoe Thrush," and this name has been given to the gay songster because he is supposed to be particularly fond of mistletoe berries, but he does not really eat them more than many other birds do.

The Blackbird is the largest bird in the garden, and a fine fellow he is with his glossy black suit and bright yellow bill. He is bold and decidedly noisy in his ways. He struts about the lawn flitting his tail as if he were exceedingly proud of himself, and if he is startled flies off in a hurry with a loud "*chack! chack! chack!*"

Mrs Blackbird is not much like her mate. She has the same sturdy build and cocked-up tail, but is dressed in a dark brown suit of feathers, and her beak is brown too.

The Blackbird's nest is very much like the Thrush's nest, but is lined with a layer of soft, fine grasses instead of a carpet made from rotten wood. Five, or sometimes six, pale-green eggs spotted with dull red are laid in the nest, and Mr Blackbird takes his turn in sitting on them. When the young ones are hatched Father and Mother watch over them most anxiously and drive away all intruders. Should a cat come prowling near they dash about, flying round and round her with beating wings and loud cries, making such a noise and commotion that Mrs Pussy is generally glad to turn tail and scamper away.

The Blackbird's song is softer than the Song Thrush's, and he does not sing in the winter-time. His joyous, whistling song is seldom heard until the violets and daffodils are blooming in the garden.

Chief favourite among the birds is Robin Redbreast. He is such a bright, bold, friendly little fellow. He always seems so pleased to see you in the garden, hops about in front of you, or stands bolt upright on his very thin legs, and looks at you with his head a little on one side to see if you have not brought out a few crumbs for him. Then he flies up

on a bough just above your head and sings you a sweet little song of thanks.

Robin simply loves you to dig in the garden. He hops round you all the time, watching eagerly for the worms turned up by the spade. Tea in the garden he thinks delightful; he is ready and waiting for his share of cake crumbs and little bits of bread and butter.

In the morning Robin is generally waiting for the window to be opened. He often comes in



THE ROBIN.

to breakfast and perches on the back of a chair, and sometimes even hops on to the table. Mrs Robin is very friendly too. She is a pretty little bird, but she has a chestnut-coloured waistcoat instead of the bright red one Robin wears, and the young Robins' first waistcoats are speckled like the Thrushes.

The Robin's nest is made of dead leaves and

a little moss rather loosely put together, and lined with hair or feathers. The birds usually build in a hole, in a bank, or in an old ivy-covered wall; but they sometimes choose most funny places such as an old tin can, a broken flower-pot, an old kettle, or the spout of a pump. A pair of Robins once chose a letter-box to build their nest in. The people of the house were away at the time, and were much surprised on their return to find their letter box occupied by a Mother Robin and her family of five little speckled birds.

The Blue Tits are the dearest little birds—pretty tiny things in their bright blue caps and feathery suits of green and blue and white and yellow. They are always very busy and very excited. Now flitting about the old garden uttering their quick little cry *tit! tit! tit!* now climbing about the apple tree hunting over the leaves for tiny caterpillars and green flies; now swaying on the slender stalks of the late daisies, pecking at the seeds of the flower heads as if they had not a moment to spare; now swinging upside down on the end of a string, chipping away at a nut which has been hung up especially for them. They never stay long in one spot, but whisk about

from place to place, light as balls of thistle-down blown about by the wind.

The Tits build their nests in holes in trees, though now and then like Robin Redbreast they choose such strange places as old pumps or letter-boxes ; and if comfortable nesting-boxes are fixed up in the trees for the little birds they are sure to take possession of them, and will come back year after year to bring up their families in their old home.

In the hole in the tree, or in the nesting-box, the Tits make a thick, warm mattress of little bits of moss and wool and hair and a feather or two, pressing it down well and hollowing it out in the middle. On this nice, comfortable bed, six, eight, or sometimes as many as thirteen tiny, speckled eggs are laid, and Mother "Blue-Cap" snuggles down on the top of them until the happy day arrives when the baby birds come out of their shells.

The tiny parent birds have hard work to feed so many hungry youngsters. From early morn to quite late in the evening the little pair dart to and fro hunting for insects, which they carry to the nest and pop into the little yellow beaks which are always wide open to receive them. The poor Blue Tits grow



quite worn out and shabby-looking before the young birds are ready to fly.

When at last the important day arrives there is great excitement in the garden. The little Blue Tits are eager, yet half afraid, to leave



THE GREAT TIT.

their cosy home and launch themselves out into the big green world. They keep popping their blue heads out of the hole, then drawing back again, keeping up all the time their shrill, piping "*chee-chee-chee-chee ; chee-chee-chee-chee*"; while Father and Mother fly frantically backwards and forwards bringing a few last

mouthfuls of food to strengthen and encourage their children in their great adventure.

At last, one birdling bolder than the rest (or pushed from behind by his impatient brother and sister) tips right out of the nest. One by one the others follow, and soon the whole brood are fluttering excitedly about the orchard, all making as much noise as they possibly can.

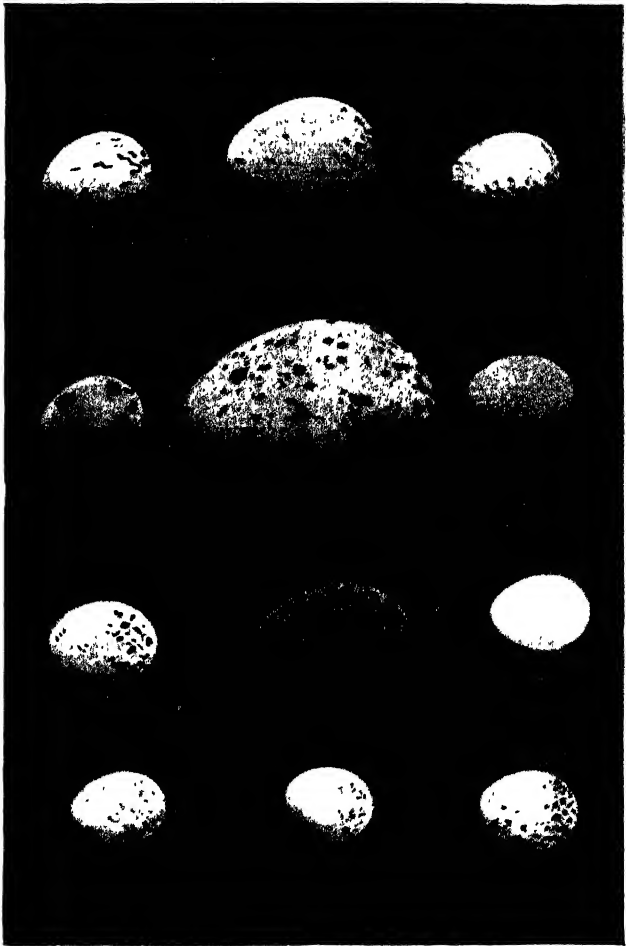
The Great Tits come to the garden too; they are bigger than the Blue Tits, bold and masterful in their ways, and inclined to bully their tiny relations and turn them out of the nest boxes. The Great Tit has a black cap, white cheeks and a yellow waistcoat with a jet-black stripe down the middle of it.

A most delightful little bird is the wee Wren. It is rather shy, and pops in and out of the bushes or piles of brush-wood like a little mouse, as it peers about for insects with its bright beady eyes. It is hardly bigger than a walnut, and is dressed in sober brown, but it carries its little tail in the air in the perkier way possible. For so small a bird the Wren has a surprisingly loud voice. One cannot help wondering where all the sound comes from as the tiny thing pours out its shrill, ringing

song, perched on a twig or the top of a post with head and tail in air.

Jenny Wren's nest is often placed in the thick ivy that covers the wall of the house. It is a beautifully made ball of moss and leaves, softly lined with feathers, and has a hole in the side through which the wee bird pops in and out. Wrens are very faddy about their nests; they nearly always begin several and leave them half-done before they make one they consider good enough to finish off.

Sparrows there are of course in the garden, and although they are rather destructive, they are friendly pert little birds and quite amusing in their ways, though they are rather selfish and will drive away other birds if they can. Sparrows make very untidy nests. They collect a large bundle of hay, grass or roots, and push it between the rain pipe and wall, in the gutter of the roof, or in any handy chink or hole. Sometimes the birds add all sorts of strange odds and ends to their nests, bits of rags and cotton and string, and pieces of torn-up letters and newspapers; they do not seem to think it matters what sort of bed the baby Sparrows have to lie on, and it is so carelessly made that the poor things often fall out of it.



SOME BRITISH BIRDS' EGGS.

- |    |            |    |             |    |               |
|----|------------|----|-------------|----|---------------|
| 1  | Greenfinch | 2  | Song Thrush | 3  | House Sparrow |
| 4  | Chaffinch  | 5  | Moor Hen    | 6  | Hedge Sparrow |
| 7  | Bullfinch  | 8  | Blackbird   | 9  | Martin        |
| 10 | Lannet     | 11 | Wren        | 12 | Great Tit     |



THE WONDERFUL NEST OF THE TAILOR BIRD

Flocks of Starlings come to the garden too, but they are not so welcome as the other birds, for they are greedy and noisy. They gobble up the food so fast that the Robins and Tits do not get their fair share when the noisy Starlings come to breakfast, so we are glad they do not stay with us all the year round.

Starlings are funny-looking birds with very long bills and short legs, on which they waddle about in the most amusing manner ; but they have handsome glossy coats which shine with greenish tints, and they are cheerful, hardy birds, happy and contented in any sort of weather. I have seen a Starling taking a bath in a puddle on the coldest, wettest, windiest day, and thoroughly enjoying it all.

The birds are very happy in the old garden. In the spring and summer there is always plenty of food, and no one disturbs their nests ; and in the winter there is always a good breakfast to be had of crumbs and little bits of fat, which the birds much enjoy. There are cocoanuts, too, for the Tits, and a lump of suet hanging from the bough of a tree on which they swing and peck away to their heart's content. And both in winter and summer there is always a dish of fresh water for thirsty birds to drink.



THE GOLDEN PHEASANT.

## CHAPTER II

### ALL ABOUT BIRDS

WHY is a bird different from all other living creatures ?

This sounds like a riddle, and I expect a great many little folk will think the answer is "because it can fly."

But, no, this is not right. Birds are not the only living things that fly. Insects fly, you know, and so do bats ; while there are some birds that cannot fly at all. We must try again.

“Because it lays eggs,” you say?

No, wrong again. Birds do lay eggs of course, but so do reptiles and fishes, and there is, too, a funny four-footed animal living in Australia, called the Duck-bill, that lays eggs which she hatches out by sitting on them like any old hen.

No, the right answer to the question “Why is a bird different from all other living creatures” is—“*because it is clothed with feathers.*” Other creatures may fly, lay eggs, or even build nests, as some of the fishes and many four-footed beasties such as mice and lemurs do, but no other kind of creature has a coat of feathers. Birds alone are dressed in this way.

Birds have three kinds of feathers. Next to the skin are soft, fluffy feathers called *down*, which make a nice warm undergarment for the little bird. Over these are the *clothing feathers*, which fit closely and overlap each other, making a splendid overcoat through which the raindrops do not penetrate. Then in the wings and tail are some long feathers called quills; these help the bird to fly and steer itself when in the air.

Most birds have two new feathery suits every year. In the spring and autumn the



shabby, worn-out feathers are *moulted*, and new ones take their place. Many birds even change the colour of their feathers, so that they look quite different in their summer and winter dresses.

Instead of a nose and a pair of lips, a bird has a hard, horny beak. It never has any teeth, and indeed does not want them, for its beak does just as well to peck fruit and seeds, and bite up insects, and chip holes in nuts so that the bird may get at the nice soft kernel.

A bird never has feathers on its beak and seldom on its feet; the feet are clothed instead with small horny scales. Most birds have four toes, but they do not always point in the same direction. Perching birds have three very long slender toes in front and a short one behind, so that they can grasp the twigs firmly and easily. All our little song birds, the Robins, Thrushes, Finches, Linnets and Nightingales, and most of the birds we see flying about in the country, are perching birds, and have feet arranged in this way.

Climbing birds, like the Parrots and the Woodpeckers, have two toes turned forwards and two toes turned backwards, which makes it much easier for them to climb about the trees.



**THE PARROT CAN TWIST ITS OUTSIDE TOE BACKWARD  
AND FORWARD AS IT PLEASES.**

Birds of prey have their toes arranged like the perching birds, but they are strong and short, and armed with great sharp claws with which they tear their prey.

Fowls and Turkeys and other scratching birds have thick, short toes with stout blunt claws; while Ducks and Swans and most swimming birds have webs between their toes, which enable them to swim well. So you see every kind of bird has just the sort of feet that are most useful to it.

All birds as you know are hatched from eggs. There is nothing more wonderful than the way in which the baby birds are gradually formed within their shelly cradles by the warmth of the mother bird, who sits so patiently upon them day after day. Then when the tiny things chip their way out of their shells, who so proud and happy as she.

Eggs are pretty things, and often beautifully coloured. They may be blue, green, pink, red, white or yellow, and are usually marked with streaks, spots, or blotches of another shade. For this reason some people are unhappily much too fond of collecting them, and think nothing of robbing the

parent birds of their treasures. This is a most cruel thing to do, and I do not think anyone who has once seen the way a poor little mother bird hovers for days about her empty nursery uttering the saddest, heart-broken little cries would ever steal birds' eggs again.

Baby birds, as a rule, are not at all pretty when they are first hatched. They have no feathers on their shapeless, squat little bodies, while their heads seem much too big and heavy, and wobble about on their thin scraggy necks in the most ridiculous way. But Father and Mother bird seem quite delighted with their peculiar children, which is a very good thing for the baby birds, for they are blind and helpless as well as ugly, and would soon die of cold and hunger if left to themselves.

The good, little parents work ever so hard to bring up their family. They fly about all day long hunting for soft insect food to fill the hungry mouths which are always agape and ready for more, and at night they brood over the nestlings and keep them warm.

The baby birds do not stay long in such an unfinished condition. In a week or ten days' time you would not know them, so completely

changed are they. Their feathers have grown, their bright eyes are open, and they are perfect little birds in every way; but they are not strong enough to fly for some days yet, and their parents have to work harder than ever to feed the youngsters who are growing up so fast.

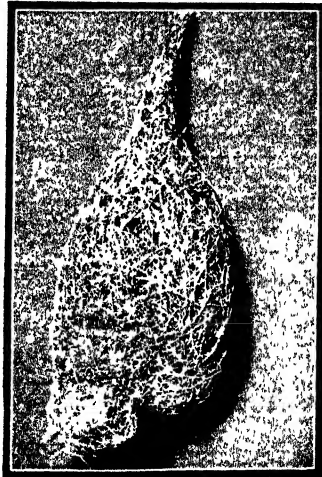
But at last they have their reward, the young ones leave the nest and start off to see the world. Some birds soon leave their parents, but others stay with them until the following spring, when they choose their mates and set about nest-building for themselves.

Chickens, ducklings and a great many hardy birds are not bare and helpless when they are first hatched, like the nestlings of the perching birds. They come out into the world provided with coats of fluffy down, and in a very short time are running about and picking up food; but they do not leave their mother until they are big enough and strong enough to look after themselves; they follow her about and run to hide under her wings at the first sign of danger.

All birds do not build nests for their little ones; a great many simply scoop a little hollow in the bare ground for their eggs. Others

collect a few dried leaves or sticks to make a rough sort of bed. A number of birds lay their eggs in holes in rocks or trees, or in the ground. Some dig these little nurseries out for themselves with beak and claws, but others take possession of a bunny hole or a handy burrow dug out by some industrious animal.

Nest - building birds do not all make their nests in the same way. Some use moss, others twigs, grass, leaves, hay, wool, hair, cotton, feathers or mud; while cobwebs, flowers and the seeds of plants are woven into the nests by little mother birds.



NEST MADE BY WEAVER BIRD.

The nests of some birds, like the Sparrow's nest, are nothing but a jumble of odds and ends put together anyhow; but other birds with no tools to work with except beak and claws,

make the most wonderful and beautiful little nurseries for the baby birds to live in. When we are staying in the country it is delightful to try to find some of these pretty nests and discover to what bird they belong; but we must always be careful not to touch the nests or disturb the little mother and frighten her away.

### CHAPTER III

#### BIRDS IN A COUNTRY LANE

WHEN we stay in the country there are many delightful things to do. There are all the animals in the farmyard to make friends with, hay-making parties and picnics to go to, woods to explore, hills to climb—we really have a splendid time out and about in the fresh air all day long. We are almost as free as gipsies.

Every walk is full of excitement and adventure. There is always something new to see, some fresh discovery to make. Now we find a curious flower, now a strange little wild animal darts across our path, and now it is a beautiful little bird's nest with fine

speckled eggs in it we find tucked away in a prickly hedge.

Have you ever tried to count how many different birds you see when you are out for a country ramble? You will be quite surprised to find how many there are round about.

As we go down the lane we hear the *spink! spink! spink!* of the Chaffinch as he flits along down the hedgerow just ahead of us. It is worth while following the Chaffinch to try to get a good look at him, as he is one of the prettiest of our wild singing birds. He has a chestnut-coloured coat and a bright pinkish-red waistcoat, a greyish-blue cap, and his black wings have white bars across them; altogether the chaffinch is one of the gayest, brightest little fellows of the country-side.

Country people sometimes call him the "Wet-bird," because he sings his song most loudly and persistently just before rain. It is a pretty, cheerful little song, made up of quick little runs and trills; but when he is startled or calling to his mate the Chaffinch always says *spink! spink!*

The lady Chaffinch is a pretty little bird too, but her waistcoat is pinkish-brown, and altogether she is more soberly dressed than her



mate. Her nest, which we may perhaps find in the hedge, or in some bush or bramble-patch, is a most beautiful little thing made of moss and down, bound round about with cobwebs and ornamented with those flat, grey-green



A BABY CHAFFINCH.

plants called "lichen," which grow on the trunks of old trees. Inside, the nest is lined with hair and soft feathers, and the tiny eggs it contains are a greyish colour with spots and splashes of reddish-brown.

The Bullfinch, too, is very fond of skimming about over the tall hedgerow, so we must keep a good look out for him.

Bully is a handsome, sturdy little bird, and you may know him from his cousin the Chaffinch by his black head and bright pink



BULLFINCH'S NEST.

cheeks; his waistcoat is pink too, and his back is grey instead of chestnut colour.

The Bullfinch has a sweet, low piping song which he warbles cheerily as he flits from one bramble spray to another. He is a clever little fellow and can be taught to whistle almost any tune. For this reason poor Bully

is sometimes caught and shut up in a cage ; but it is far more delightful to hear the soft free song of the happy bird, as he flits about in the sunshine, than the most wonderful tune whistled by a sad little prisoner.

Bully's nest is made of slender twigs and fine rootlets, often bound together with horse-hair. It is like a shallow saucer in shape, and it is really a wonder the tiny fluffy birdlings do not fall out of it more often than they do.

The Greenfinch is nearly always to be seen, or heard, in a country lane in the spring and in the summer-time. In the winter he takes himself off to the stubble fields, and corn stacks, where in company with his friends and relations, and flocks of sparrows, he manages to pick up enough grain to prevent him from starving in the cold, hard weather.

The Greenfinch has a funny way of sitting on the top of the hedge, drawling out his queer little song as if he were very much bored with everything. He is a pretty little bird with a greenish-coloured suit with bright yellow patches on his wings and tail.

All day long he sits on a bough  
Singing *chee-e-e, chee-ee-e !*

In his green and brown coat a most fine little fellow  
Is *he-ee-e* is *he-e-e-e*!

But he looks so bored as he sits up there,  
There are plenty of worms but what does he care,  
He'd rather have fruit any day for his fare,  
Oh dear *me-e-e*, ah dear *me-e-e-e*!

All the Finches have rather big heads, thick necks and short stout bills. They feed chiefly on the seeds of weeds, and in this way they do a great deal of good for the farmer, while in the spring and early summer they destroy quantities of tiresome caterpillars to feed the young one in the nests. But country people complain that the Finches, particularly the Bullfinches, spoil the fruit crop by pecking the flower-buds in the spring-time. Well, I am afraid Bully and his relations do spoil a great many buds by pulling them to pieces, but the birds mostly choose those which have a caterpillar hidden inside them, so in any case the buds would never ripen into cherries or plums. And if the little rascals do make mistakes sometimes, and peck quite sound buds to bits, I am sure we ought to forgive them, on account of the great good they do later on by clearing the orchards of harmful weeds and insect pests.

Popping about in the hedgerow we are

almost sure to see the Hedge-sparrow, a quiet little brown bird which in spite of its name is not closely related to the perky House-sparrow. The Hedge-sparrow is sometimes



BABY HEDGE-SPARROWS SCREAMING FOR FOOD.

called "Shuffle-wing," from the odd habit it has of quivering its half-open wings as it hops about hunting for worms and flies. Its neat little nest is placed rather low down but well hidden in the hedge, or sometimes in the thick ivy covering, an old wall or tree trunk, and in the nest are four or five of the bluest eggs with never a spot upon them.



THE BROWN OWL



NEST OF THE LONG-TAILED TIT

While we are watching little "Shuffle-wing," a Lark suddenly rises from the field on the other side of the hedgerow. Up and up it goes, singing its wonderful joyous song the while, until it is but a speck in the clear blue sky.

Let us watch over the gate leading into the field and we shall see the Lark come down again, for hidden in the long grass is the nest where Mother Lark is sitting on her speckled eggs.

Now the singer pauses in his upward flight and begins to descend, at first slowly with quivering wings, still pouring forth his song; then when nearing the ground he stops, folds his wings and falls like an arrow into the long grass.

If you mark the spot where the bird fell, and hurry up expecting to find the nest, you will be disappointed, for the Lark never drops straight down on to its nest. It always alights some distance away, and then runs quickly to it along the ground, hidden from our eyes by the long, waving grasses. You may hunt about all the morning and never find that nest, so let us go on over the common to that little wood we can see in the distance.



As we wander through the yellow gorse and purple heather, we must keep a good look out for the Yellow Hammer, the Linnet and the Goldcrest, and we shall not be long, I dare venture to say, before we hear the Yellow Hammer announcing to all comers that he has nothing to eat but “a-very-very-little-bit of bread-and no *chee-e-se*.” And there perched on the top of a furze bush we see a small brown bird with a bright yellow cap and a waistcoat to match.

Over and over again the Yellow Hammer trills out his funny little song, then suddenly away he darts to another bush and makes the same remark about his bread and *no* cheese all over again. All through the spring and summer, the little yellow bird is heard in the fields, on the commons, and even on the hedgerows by the side of a dusty road; then in the winter he joins the flocks of Green Finches and Sparrows, and may be seen hunting for grain in the stubble fields and rickyards.

The Yellow Hammer is sometimes called the Scribbling Lark because its purplish-coloured eggs are covered with a network of fine lines—just as if the little bird had scribbled all over them.

The Linnet is a neat-looking little bird dressed in sober greys and browns, but in the spring-time the cock bird wears a brighter suit tinged with crimson on the breast, and has a crimson spot upon its head. It skims about among the bushes, every now and then pausing to murmur its soft, low, musical song, or flutter about the branches of a shady tree, for the "Lintie," as the little bird is sometimes called, does not like to stay too long in the glare of the sun.

Linnets belong to the Finch family, so they have short stout bills, and feed chiefly on seeds and berries; and in the winter flocks of the little brown birds are to be seen flying low over stubble fields in search of grain.

The Goldcrest is the smallest of our British birds. It is as quick and restless as a Tit, always whisking about the furze-bushes on the common, hunting excitedly for the tiny insects on which it feeds, uttering the while its shrill, sharp little cry which sounds rather like the chirping of a Grasshopper. In the winter the tiny Goldcrest takes itself to the larch and fir woods, and sometimes even stays for a while in our garden, where it pops about among the evergreen trees and shrubs. It is

the prettiest little thing with a greenish-brown coat and yellowish waistcoat, and on its black head it has a strip of golden-yellow feathers which it can raise like a little crest.

The nest of the wee bird is often to be found slung from the branch of a fir tree or sometimes in a furze bush. It is a delicate little basket of moss, almost closed in at the top, and fastened to the twigs from which it hangs with spiders' webs and a few strands of wool.

## CHAPTER IV

### BIRDS IN THE WOOD

“Cuckoo! Cuckoo!” The Cuckoo is calling from the green woods. Everyone who has stayed in the country has heard the Cuckoo, but few have seen this strange bird; for although he spends most of the day shouting his peculiar song at the top of his voice until he often makes himself quite hoarse, it is not at all easy to tell exactly where the sound comes from, and the big brown and grey bird is generally well hidden in the leafy trees.

When he does come out into the open the

little Finches and other small birds often mob him and drive him away, for they think he is a hawk on the lookout for their baby birds.

When on the wing the Cuckoo does look rather like a Sparrow-hawk, for his breast is marked in much the same way with light and dark bars across it, and he has the same bold, swooping flight.

But the cuckoo is not a fierce bird, indeed he is rather timid, and he has no wish to carry off small birds. The cuckoo feeds on insects, and is particularly fond of big, fat, hairy caterpillars, which are much too prickly for most birds to swallow.

The Cuckoo does not live all the year round in our green woods; he spends the cold months in warmer lands across the sea. He reaches our shores about the middle of April, and loudly announces his arrival by shouting "cook-oo," from morning till night. By the time summer has come his voice is quite cracked and worn out, and his song changes to a hoarse "cuk-cuk-oo." After mid-summer he is seldom heard at all, and early in the autumn the cuckoo leaves us and flies away to sunny Africa.

An old country verse about the cuckoo says :

“In April, come he will.  
In May, he sings all day.  
In June, he changes his tune.  
In July, he says ‘good-bye.’  
In August, go he must.”

Cuckoos are really very lazy birds. They never build nests or take the least trouble



A YOUNG CUCKOO.

to bring up their children. Mrs Cuckoo just lays an egg on the ground, then picks it up in her bill and pops it into the nest of a Hedge-sparrow or some other small bird. Then away she flies and does not worry herself about it any more.

You would think a little Hedge-sparrow

would be very much surprised suddenly to find a big, strange egg in her nest. But she does not appear to notice it. Anyhow she sits on it and hatches it along with the rest.

So when the young Cuckoo breaks its shell it finds itself in a comfortable little nest with three or four baby Hedge-sparrows; and what does the ungrateful little creature do but at once set to work to turn out its foster brothers and sisters. Before it is two days old, even before its eyes are open, the Cuckoo contrives to empty all the other baby birds, and any eggs that may be still unhatched, out of the nest. It shuffles itself underneath them, hoists them one by one on to its broad back and heaves them overboard!

The baby Cuckoo is a dreadfully greedy bird. It is never satisfied, but keeps screaming for food from morning till night, and the little foster parent birds are kept so busy feeding the hungry stranger that they have no time to notice the strange way in which their own baby birds keep disappearing. The Cuckoo grows so fast that it soon fills and even overflows the little nest. It is twice as big as Father and Mother Hedge-sparrow, who fly frantically about trying to find enough food to fill the gaping beak

of this great, big, hungry child of theirs. They grow quite worn out with it all, and must I am sure feel thankful when the Cuckoo at last leaves the nest and flies away from them.

All through the summer the young Cuckoo enjoys its life, flying here and there and learning to shift for itself; then when autumn comes it starts off all alone on its long journey over the sea. There is no one to tell the bird it must leave the green woods and fly away across the blue water, or to show it the way to go; yet in some wonderful way the young Cuckoo knows quite well what to do. It sets out boldly for foreign lands and arrives quite safely on the shores of Africa.

“ Tap! tap! tap! ” do you hear that sound in the woods? It is not a woodman at work but a great Green Woodpecker.

See! There he is clinging to the trunk of an old oak tree, hammering away with his strong bill to get at the nice fat grubs that live beneath the bark.

The Green Woodpecker is a splendid bird, dressed in a dark green suit. His head and face are black, with a crimson crown and a fine pair of crimson moustaches, and when he flies he shows a light yellow patch just above his tail.

Watch him as he swings his big strong head backwards and forwards, using his long, straight bill like a pick-axe. He clings tightly to the tree with his sharp hooked claws, keeping his short stiff tail pressed firmly against it to give him extra support. Suddenly he stops and with a loud ringing "laugh" darts away to another tree, where he is soon busy *tap, tap, tapping* again.

The Woodpecker is a climbing bird; he does not perch, but clings to a branch or tree trunk in an upright fashion, and runs up the tree working round it in a spiral. He has a very long and very sticky tongue, which he pokes into the cracks and holes in the wood to fish out any insects that may be hiding there. Sometimes the Woodpecker comes down on the ground, and with beak and tongue scoops the little ants from their underground burrows.

In the spring-time when the bluebells and wind-flowers make a blue and white carpet under the trees, the Woodpecker is very busy boring a hole for its nest high up in a tree trunk or lofty bough. The bird is a splendid carpenter. First it chisels out a neat round hole about two and a half inches across and drives a tunnel far into the wood; then it works down-



wards, and hollows out a perpendicular shaft about two feet deep—and at the bottom of this shaft the eggs are laid on a bed of sawdust and chips of wood.

The Great Spotted Woodpecker also lives in the wood. He is a smaller bird and more shy in its ways than his big Green Cousin, so we do not often see him, though through the trees we may hear the curious drumming sound he makes as he hammers away at some dead branch. So quickly, one after another, fall the strokes of his beak that they make but a single continuous sound—like the roll of a drum, instead of the *tap! tap! tap!* of the Green Woodpecker.

Through the woods comes a loud, harsh, screeching cry! That is the call of the Jay. And see, there he goes, winging his way from one clump of trees to another. Although he has such an ugly voice the Jay is a handsome bird, dressed in soft brown. The feathers on his head stand up like a crest; they are black and white; and just below his eye is a black patch; while in his wings are some beautiful quill feathers barred with bright blue, black and white. When the Jay is moulting you may often pick these pretty feathers up in the woods.

“*Take two-oo cows, Taffy, take!*” coos the Wood Pigeon from a tall tree near by where his gentle mate sits on her glossy white eggs. The nest is nothing more than a rough kind of platform, made of a few twigs so loosely and carelessly put together that the eggs can often be seen through the bottom of it.

The Wood Pigeon is sometimes called the “Ring Dove,” because it has a white patch on each side of its neck, which at a little distance looks like a white collar. Although it is a very shy bird the Ring Dove sometimes leaves the quiet country and comes up to town, where it soon grows used to all the noise and often becomes quite tame. Even in the heart of a busy city the voice of the Ring Dove is often heard cooing over and over again the same little phrase—“*take two-oo cows, Taffy, take!*”

As we reach the edge of the wood a family of Long-tailed Tits come skimming down a leafy glade—twelve or thirteen little bits of birds hardly bigger than the Goldcrest, but with very long tails which stand stiffly out behind them. These tails seem much too big for such tiny birds, making the little things look absurdly like a party of enormous tadpoles, as they go bobbing up and down

through the air one behind another, giving their little, piping, excited cry the while.

Long-tailed Tits are the prettiest wee birds, dressed in feathery suits of black and white and rosy pink. They are just as quick and restless as the Blue Tits; they bob about from tree to tree, skim down the hedgerows and cling to the twigs in all sorts of attitudes, as they hunt for food, twittering away to each other all the time in the most friendly fashion. They are regular little acrobats.

The nest of the Long-tailed Tit is, I think, the most beautiful of all our British birds'. It is shaped something like an egg, with a hole in the side, and is made of moss, bits of leaves, lichens and feathers, all bound together with cobwebs, and silk from the cocoons of caterpillars. This pretty nest is generally placed in a thorn or bramble bush, but sometimes it is fixed in a fork of a tree or in the thick ivy covering the trunk.

Eight, twelve, or sometimes even sixteen, white eggs spotted with pink are laid in this dainty nest; and how all the wee birds manage to fit in without breaking their long tails is really a marvel.

## CHAPTER V

## BIRDS BY THE STREAM

Now let us leave the woods and make our way home by the little path by the side of a wandering stream, keeping a good look out as we go for the birds that love to spend their time down by the water.

If there are any clumps of those tall reeds which have dark red feathery heads growing in the stream, we may catch a glimpse of a slender little reddish-brown bird with a creamy-white breast climbing up and down the tall stems. This is the Reed Warbler, and if we are lucky we may perhaps find its pretty little nest slung above the water in the middle of a thick clump of reeds.

The nest is made of the grey cottony catkins and feathery plumes of last year's reeds, with a few bits of moss and wool worked into it, and is woven round about three or four stout stems, which pass right through the sides of the nest to keep it firm and steady when the reeds sway about. The tiny nest is wonderfully deep, too, so when the wind

blows and the cradle rocks the eggs or wee birds do not tumble out into the water.

Reed Warblers have a sweet little silvery song, which they warble nearly all day long

and even far into the night.



THE REED WARBLER'S NEST.

Many birds sing their sweetest just before they go to bed, and on warm bright summer nights the Song Thrush, the Reed Warbler, and the Wood Pigeon often go to bed very late indeed—

you may hear them singing long after the sun has set. But the most famous singer of the night is the Nightingale—though it is a mistake to think this little brown bird sings *only* after dark. It sings in the daytime too, but at night when almost all other birds are

silent the song of the Nightingale is more noticeable. As late as ten or eleven o'clock the little fellow pours out his wonderful



A BABY WILLOW WREN ASKING FOR MORE FOOD.

gurgling song as if his little heart were simply bursting with joy.

The little Willow Wren is often to be seen near the water side popping about in the willows, alders and birches that grow by the banks of the stream. It is a dainty little greenish-brown bird with a white throat, and in some parts of the country is always called "Peggy Whitethroat." The nest of moss, dried

grass and dead leaves is found in the tangle of grasses and weeds on the bank, but sometimes "Peggy" hides it in a hay field, under a hedge, or on the ground in a wood. The nest is roofed over and has a hole in the side, through which Peggy pops in and out; and when her wee babies are hatched their fluffy heads are to be seen peeping out of this little window, eagerly watching for Mother to come home and pop something nice into their wide open yellow beaks.

Walking about near the edge of the pond is the Water Wagtail, a handsome black and white bird with a long tail. He is busy hunting for insects, and won't at all mind your watching him so long as you stand still.

Mr Wagtail is a bold, brisk, amusing little fellow; now he steps about sedately, now he makes quick, sudden little darts along the ground, now springs into the air after a passing fly. All the time his tail keeps wagging, and his head bobbing up and down just like one of those toy wooden birds when you pull its string.

Wherever there is a stream or a pond we are sure to see one, or generally two of these little black and white birds, for they nearly always go about in pairs. We may meet them,





THE CRESTED VULTURE



too, after a summer shower, stepping about the lane (for Wagtails never hop) or hunting for insects in the farmyard.

Look ! a bright blue streak flashes by, low over the water. It is the Kingfisher, and we are lucky to see him because people *will* shoot this beautiful bird, so, sad to say, it is growing very rare.

Backwards and forwards the Kingfisher darts over the stream, returning again and again to a favourite perch, usually a low bough, overhanging the water. Sometimes he sits motionless for quite a long time watching the fishes and other little water creatures swimming about below ; then, suddenly, with a resounding "smack" he dives into the stream and comes up again with a small fish held fast in his long, strong bill. Returning to his perch the Kingfisher whacks his prize two or three times on the bough, gives it a little shake, and swallows it head first.

The Kingfisher is an odd-shaped bird with a big head, a long bill, a short stumpy tail and short legs set very far back ; but he is the most gaily coloured of all British birds in his feathery suit of glittering blue and green and chestnut red, and it is a joy to watch him

fishing in the stream or flashing over the still water.

Early in May the Kingfisher looks about for a comfortable hole in the bank close down by the water, and if he cannot find one to suit him he bores out one for himself with his useful beak. In this hole Mrs Kingfisher lays her eggs on a little heap of fishbones, which one would think must make rather an uncomfortable bed for the baby Kingfishers. But the little birds don't seem to mind, and as soon as they are able they crowd together at the entrance of the burrow watching for Father and Mother, who keep returning to the youngsters with a nice minnow or a little water beetle in their beaks.

“Croo-croo.” What is that strange croaking sound coming from behind that big clump of reeds? That is a little Moorhen, and if we keep *very* quiet perhaps she will come out and show herself.

See, there she is swimming in and out of the reeds as if she were playing hide and seek. Now she leaves the water and begins pecking about on the bank, and we see she is a small, compact bird in a neat brownish-green suit. She has a bright red patch on her forehead,

a white streak in her wings, and a few white feathers near her tail.

Ah! she has seen us, and at once the shy bird slips into the water and hides herself among the reeds. Very likely she has her nest there, but she would be very much upset if we were to discover it.

The Moorhen's nest is a sort of flat rush-basket, which sometimes floats upon the water well hidden among the reeds, but is sometimes placed on an old tree stump or a bough overhanging the stream. The basket sometimes holds as many as thirteen speckled eggs; it is a wonder how the little hen manages to cover them all; but eight or nine eggs is a more usual number.

Baby Moorhens are the funniest little mites—just sooty-black balls of fluff. They are wide-awake directly they pop out of their shelly cradles, and almost at once they jump into the water and begin paddling about, calling "Joey-joe, Joey-joe," in a great state of excitement at finding themselves in such a big, wet world. The little chicks have a splendid time, swimming in the water, running over the water-lily leaves, and snapping at the flies and water insects. They follow their

mother wherever she goes, and if anything startles them down they all dive at once, and stay such a long time under water you wonder what can have become of the wee things. Look carefully and you will see three, four, six tiny beaks sticking up above the surface of the stream—the cunning little Moor-chicks are hiding beneath the water, clinging with their tiny claws to the water-weeds with only just the tips of their beaks in the air to enable them to breathe.

In hard winter weather the Moorhens often leave the stream and pools, and wander inland in search of food. Sometimes they grow quite tame and may be seen feeding with ducks and hens in farmyards.

We may see the Coot swimming in the stream or running about on the banks. It is rather like its cousin the Moorhen, but is a larger bird with grey and black plumage and a white patch, instead of a red one, on its forehead. We must keep our eyes open, too, for the funny little Dabchick—a shy, restless little bird that is always diving under the water and popping up again in another place. One never knows where it will re-appear next.

This queer little bird is dressed in smoky

brown and has a white throat and breast. Its toes are curiously flattened out, which makes it move rather awkwardly on dry land, although in the water the Dabchick is wonderfully nimble. Its voice I am afraid cannot be called "sweet," though it is certainly loud. Some people are rude enough to say it is like a creaking gate!

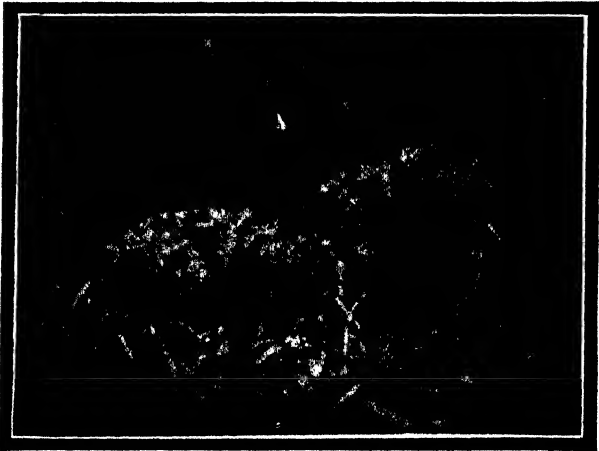
Another name for the Dabchick is the "Little Grebe;" it is also called "the Ducker," because it is always ducking under water; and "Tom Pudding," though *why* Tom Pudding I really cannot say.

Now it is time to turn our steps homeward; so we will cross the stream by a little wooden bridge, climb over the stile, and follow the path across the meadow.

The meadow is somewhat marshy, and in the springtime is gay with golden kingcups, while here and there are clumps of reeds and tufts of coarse, tangled grasses.

This is just such a spot as the Lapwing loves. Let us go cautiously, for I shall be much surprised if a pair, at least, of these splendid birds have not a clutch of speckled eggs or a brood of fluffy, baby Lapwings somewhere about the field.

“Wee-e-e wit! Wee-e-e wit!” Look, there flies a Lapwing just over your head, wheeling and tumbling and going through all sorts of antics in the air. It makes such a noise and commotion one would think the



BABY LAPWINGS.

bird was trying to attract our attention. And that is exactly what it is doing. Depend upon it there are some baby Lapwings somewhere about, and the cunning old bird is trying to lead us away from them.

See, there is another Lapwing flying quietly off in the opposite direction. That is the hen

bird, and while her mate does his best to attract us she will make her way back to her tiny chicks. But she will not go straight to them. Oh, dear no! See, she drops to the ground, runs a little way, then stops and begins pecking about as if she had no fluffy babies or anything else to worry about. Then she takes another little run, stops again, and perhaps preens her glossy feathers—one would think she has nothing in the world to do but amuse herself.

Yet all the time Mother Lapwing is gradually nearing the place where the little chicks crouch motionless upon the ground, but not until she sees you have ceased to watch her will she call to them. Then the little things will run to her and nestle under her wings.

Lapwings are also called "Peewits" and "Green Plovers"; they are handsome, sprightly birds with glossy coppery-green feathers on their backs, white waistcoats, white faces, black caps and black bibs. Mrs Lapwing has a white spot in the middle of her bib, but Mr Lapwing's is all black, and both birds have some long feathers on their heads which they can raise so that they stand up like a crest.

Lapwings do not make regular nests. They



just scoop a little hollow, like a shallow saucer, in the bare ground. The birds are often robbed of their eggs, as "Plover's eggs" are considered a rare treat. But fortunately for the Lapwings they are not at all easy to find; for although the large, speckled eggs are not hidden in any way, they match the ground on which they lie so well that it is difficult to distinguish them from the stones and clods of earth round about.

"Caw! caw! caw!" A party of Rooks flies over our heads on its way home to the clump of tall elm trees in the park close by. A Rook is often called a "Crow," and indeed the birds are first cousins, and very much alike, but there is one way in which you may always distinguish one from the other. Crows are black from head to foot; while Rooks have a whitish patch at the base of the bill. Rooks, too, are sociable birds; you always see them flying about in large flocks, while Crows are not fond of company, and you never see more than two of them together.

## CHAPTER VI

## FEATHERED TRAVELLERS

WHAT becomes of the Swallows in the winter time ?

We see them first early in April. "Spring has come, the Swallows have returned," we say.

All the summer long they are with us, twittering softly round the house, sweeping low over the ground, skimming over the ponds and streams, darting aloft into the blue of the sky—twisting, turning, wheeling, most graceful and clever on the wing of all the birds of the air.

In the autumn they gather together in flocks. We see great numbers sweeping through the air, or perched all along the telegraph wires and on the house tops.

Then suddenly all are gone. Every Swallow disappears. We see them no more until spring comes again.

Years ago many people thought that the Swallows all dived into ponds, and spent the winter fast asleep, buried in the mud at the bottom of the water. But of course they

were quite wrong. No birds, not even true water birds like Ducks and Moorhens, could possibly live for months (or even for ten minutes) stuck fast in the mud under the water. We know now that the Swallows fly far, far away over the sea to warm sunny lands. Some stay in Spain, others journey on to the south of Africa, and some even reach the shores of India. There they spend a long happy holiday rejoicing in the hot sunshine, and the abundance of insect food, while cold winter reigns in England and there are no flies left to eat.

But as soon as winter has passed, and Jack Frost has packed up his icicles and taken his departure from our land, the Swallows all gather together again and set out once more for home.

Year after year the little feathered travellers journey backwards and forwards over the sea, flying a hundred miles and more in a single hour. Sometimes the Swallows alight and rest for awhile on a ship in mid ocean, then on they go again, and they actually find their way back to the very same spot where they built their nests and brought up their young ones the year before.

One of the first things the Swallows do on their return to the old home is to examine the old nests to see if, with a little patching up, they will serve again as nurseries for new broods of baby Swallows. But the birds are in no hurry as a rule to begin building. They need a little rest after their

long tiring journey, so they generally spend a week or two in flying about, visiting their old haunts and snapping up the insects as



SWALLOW.

they whizz through the air. They chase each other in play, sometimes they quarrel and even fight on the wing, and their soft twittering changes to sharp squeaks of anger. Then as the days grow warmer the Swallows set to work in earnest to mend the old nest, or, if it is too dilapidated, to make a new one.

Swallows are sometimes called "Chimney Swallows," because they will always build their nests in an old chimney if they can find

one, but if there is no comfortable roomy chimney to be had the birds choose an old barn or a cowshed. They always build their nests *inside*, not outside, some building. I once knew a pair of Swallows which built their nest in a schoolroom; all the morning while the children were learning their lesson the birds flew in and out of the window, which was always left open for them, bringing little pellets of mud in their beaks which they carefully plastered on the wall just under the ceiling. Now and again the birds would bring in a few short lengths of straw, and work these well into the mud to bind it and prevent it crumbling away. When the nest was finished it looked like half a large clay saucer stuck on the wall. This was lined with straws and horsehair, and on the top of all the Swallows made a beautiful soft feather bed for the tiny white eggs to rest on.

So the baby Swallows were hatched and brought up in the schoolroom, and they twittered away while the children were saying their lessons as if they were trying to learn them too. But before long the little birds left the nest and flew away out of the schoolroom to learn lessons of their own. They have

to exercise their wings to make them strong, so that they may be ready, when the time comes, for their first long flight over the sea. The little birds learn to twist and turn and dart and sail through the air, and to catch and eat their food while they are flying. Swallows never hunt for worms and caterpillars; they live entirely on flies, dancing gnats and fluttering moths, which they snap up with their beaks without pausing in their flight.

The bird that builds under the eaves of our houses is not the Swallow but the House Martin, and although the two birds are very much alike it is quite easy to distinguish one from the other. The Swallow is a larger bird than the House Martin, and its wings and tail are longer and its tail more forked. The Swallow has a white throat and waistcoat, but the feathers on its back are a deep blue-black from its head to the tip of its tail, while the Martin has a broad white band right round its body.

The Martin's nest, like the Swallow's, is made of mud, but instead of being shaped like an open saucer it is closed in at the top, and has a hole in the side through which the birds go in and out.

Everyone welcomes the House Martins when they arrive in the springtime from over the the sea, and we are always delighted when the pretty gentle little birds build their nests under our house roof. All the summer long we hear their soft happy twittering as the busy Martins fly backwards and forwards, first with mud and straw and feathers for their nursery, and later with food for the sweet baby birds. Then when autumn comes and father, mother and children all make ready to leave us, and start out on their long journey, we feel quite sad as we wish them "Good-bye."

Last to come and first to go of all our feathered travellers is the Swift or "Blackswallow" as it is sometimes called. Not until the middle of May do we hear its shrill scream as it darts and sweeps through the air, mounting higher and higher until it is lost to sight among the clouds. Then quite early in August it is gone again.

The Swift is very much like a Swallow, but is a larger bird, and is clothed from head to tail with sooty-black feathers—except for a small grey tuft under its chin. Its wings are very long and narrow, and its legs are short and weak, so the Swift cannot perch and has

great difficulty in walking on the ground; but in the air the bird is quite at home; it spends almost the whole of its time on the wing—soaring, sweeping and dashing about, screaming loudly all the while all through the hot summer months.

The Swift's nest is just a little heap of feathers and straws and dusty rubbish pushed into a hole in a wall or the side of a high cliff. The bird snaps up all sorts of odds and ends blown about by the wind as it flies swiftly by, carries them off to its nesting place, and arranges them while clinging to the wall, or the steep side of the cliff, so firmly with its strong claws that it does not lose its footing even when a high wind is blowing.

The Swallows, the Martins, and the Swifts are not the only "feathered travellers." Most birds move about from one place to another at the different seasons of the year, and a great many take long journeys over the sea every spring and again in the autumn. As our summer visitors—the Swallows, the Nightingales and the Cuckoos—leave us and fly away to warmer lands, the winter visitors—the Fieldfares, the Redwings, and the Wild Ducks and Geese—begin to arrive, coming in from



the still colder countries in the North. Some birds do not stay with us, but pay us a short passing call as they wend their way north or south; these we call "Birds of Passage." Others—the Thrushes, Blackbirds, Tits and Robins—are with us all the year round, and we say they are "resident birds," yet even our resident birds do not always stay in the same spot. The Robin who sings to you in the winter to thank you for his good breakfast is not the same Robin that hopped about in the garden in the summer time. *He* has gone on to the South for a change of air while our winter Robin has come down from the North. Then when spring returns our old friend "Bobby" will come back to us, while our winter Robin flies north again.

CHAPTER VII

FIERCE HUNTERS OF THE AIR

“WHOO-WHOO-OO-OO! Whoo-whoo-oo-oo!”  
 The big Brown Owl is abroad. Mother birds nestle their little ones closely under their wings, for old Mr Owl would very much like a plump young pheasant or a baby chick for supper; but so long as the wee chicks do not sit up too late they need not fear, for Owls do not come out to hunt for food until after the sun has set—what time all young birds should be safe in bed.

By day the Brown Owl hides in a hollow tree or in an old ivy-covered tower near the woods. Then quite late in the evening he comes forth and flies slowly and silently through the 'cool air. His wings make no sound as he flies, and his thick feather coat is so soft and downy that, although he is such a big fellow, the Owl floats along as lightly as a ball of thistle-down.

Although the Owl cannot bear the light of day, and is quite dazed and bewildered if he is routed out of his hole when the sun is

shining, like a cat, he can see quite well in the dark ; and as he skims along overhead his big round eyes are open wide, watching the ground below. Suddenly down he pounces on a mouse, as it scurries along in a great hurry about something or other, and seizing the poor little thing with his long hooked claws he carries it off in triumph. Then perching on a bough of a handy tree the Owl proceeds to bolt his supper whole. If, however, he catches a rat or any other animal too big to swallow all at once the Owl tears it to pieces with his sharp, hooked beak and terrible claws.

We seldom see "old Mr Brown," though we may often hear him hooting in the night, for he does not come out until quite late in the evening, and his dusky coat makes him practically invisible as he flies about in the darkness among the trees in the wood. But the Barn Owl gets up earlier, so we may sometimes see him in the twilight, flitting like a grey shadow backwards and forwards over a field as he busily hunts for rats and mice, and other small creatures that venture out after the sun has set.

The Barn Owl sometimes makes his home

in a hollow tree, but, as a rule, he prefers to live in a barn, a church tower, or some old ruined building. There he sits in a dark, cosy corner dozing and snoring and blinking, while outside the sun is shining, the birds are singing and the world is wide awake. Then at night fall, when most folks are growing sleepy, he wakes up and goes a-hunting.

The Barn Owl does not hoot like the Brown Owl; he is usually quite silent as he skims lightly through the air; but when excited he suddenly gives a startling screech, or makes a sharp spitting noise something like the noise a cat makes when she is chased by a dog.

Baby Owls are just round balls of fluff. You may sometimes discover their hiding-place by the snoring, hissing noises the queer little creatures make. But if you disturb them in their nursery the little Owls are very cross and indignant; they hiss and spit at you, fling themselves on their backs and strike at you spitefully with their sharp little claws.

Hiding in the depths of a dark fir wood, sitting motionless on a high branch in a tree, we may sometimes find the curious Long-eared Owl. He is smaller than the Barn Owl, but looks much bigger than he really

is as he always sits bolt upright, making himself as tall as possible. His long tail, too, adds to his length, and so do two long tufts of feathers which he wears on the top of his



THE LONG-EARED OWL.

head, and from which the bird has gained its name of "Long-eared Owl" or "Horned Owl."

Instead of laying her eggs in a hollow tree or some dark hole or corner, Mrs Long - eared Owl looks about for an old, roomy nest which once belonged to a Crow or

Magpie or a Wood-pigeon, and uses this as her nursery; and very funny it is to see the queer little faces of the baby Long-eared Owls peering over the edge of the nest

in the evening, watching for Father and Mother to come home bringing them something to eat.

In the summertime the "Little Owl" comes over the sea to visit us, and often it likes our green woods so well that it stays with us altogether. Sometimes, too, though very rarely, the Great Eagle Owl flies over from its home in the North of Europe. This bird is the giant among the Owls. It is quite two feet long, and so strong that it can carry off hares and rabbits, and even baby fawns and young lambs, in its talons—so it is a good thing the Eagle Owl does not visit us very often.



THE LITTLE OWL.

Owls have the funniest solemn-looking faces. Round each eye is a circle of stiff feathers arranged like a flat rosette, which always reminds me of a pen-wiper with a large round button in the middle of it.

An Owl's foot, too, is peculiar. It can twist its outside toe backwards and forwards just as it pleases. When perching it turns this odd toe backwards, clasping its perch as a Parrot does, with two toes in front and two behind; but when standing on the ground the Owl turns its toe the other way about, and so it has three toes in front and one behind like ordinary birds.

The Owls have gained a bad character because they come out at night and make such alarming hooting and screeching noises, and gamekeepers are always setting traps for them because they believe the big birds steal the young pheasant chicks. But this is quite a mistake, Owls very seldom get the chance of catching a young chick for supper; they are really quite harmless and even useful birds, as they kill many troublesome mice and rats. Owls only eat those little creatures that venture out after dark. They snap up large moths and beetles that fly by night,

## FIERCE HUNTERS OF THE AIR 71

swoop down on frogs as they sit croaking by the pond; and the larger Owls even catch little fishes as they swim near the surface of the water in the moonlight.

Owls hunt by night, but Hawks and Eagles hunt by day. They are the Lions and Tigers of the air. Strong, fierce birds with powerful hooked beaks and great sharp talons with which they tear their prey to pieces.

King of birds is the Golden Eagle, a magnificent bird that has its home

among the rocky mountains of Europe and Asia. It is a splendid sight as it sails proudly through the air, the feathers on its head and neck shining like gold in the sunlight. It circles slowly round or seems to hang almost motionless on outstretched wings high in the sky, then suddenly it darts swift as an arrow



THE GOLDEN EAGLE.



after a flying bird, or drops like a stone on some luckless animal below.

The Golden Eagle pursues and kills all sorts of birds, both great and small, and pounces down on rabbits, hares, lambs and fawns, and



HARPY EAGLE.

carries them off to its home high up on the rocky mountain side. It is so bold and fierce that it will attack a wolf or a stag, and sometimes even a man.

An Eagle's nest is called an "eyry"; it is a rough heap of sticks, grass, roots, moss, heather, and sometimes seaweed, piled up on

a rocky ledge, so high up that it is quite impossible to reach it. In this lofty nursery the little Eaglets are hatched, and are safe from all foes while their parents go out hunting.

Another big, fierce Eagle is the great Harpy Eagle of South America, where it is called the

“Winged Wolf.” This huge bird preys on monkeys, pigs, foxes and fawns; but although it is so large and strong the Harpy Eagle is rather a coward; it will even fly from a couple of crows should these bold birds attack it.

There are no Eagles in England now, though a Golden Eagle may sometimes pay us a rare visit, and the Sea Eagle is occasionally seen on the northern coasts catching fish, and hunting the wild sea-birds.

But in most parts of the country we may see the Kestrel or “Windhover” hovering far above our heads, its wings steadily beating the air, or stretched out motionless, so that the bird appears to be suspended from an invisible string. All the while its eyes are fixed on the ground below, watching for mice or other little creatures. Then as soon as the Kestrel spies its quarry, down it drops like a stone upon it, seizes it in its claws and carries it off.

The Kestrel is the most common of our British Hawks. It is a handsome bird with a bold bright eye and a reddish-brown coat marked with darker streaks, while its head and neck are a blue-grey colour, and its waist-coat yellowish-white.

The Sparrow Hawk, too, we may see, chasing a Sparrow or a Chaffinch, or some other small bird near the edge of a wood. It is a fierce dashing little hunter not unlike the Kestrel in appearance, but its back is a blue-grey colour, and its breast has dark brown bars running across it.

Smallest of British Hawks is the bold little Merlin or Stone Falcon. It lives on the moors in Wales and Scotland, as well as in the North of England, where it dashes swiftly about over the heather in pursuit of small birds, or sits in its favourite position perched upon a jutting rock or big boulder.

Hawks are just like tiny Eagles. They are quite as bold and fierce in their ways as their big relation. But Vultures are birds of prey of quite another kind; they might well be called the Hyænas of "Bird land," for like the slinking Hyænas Vultures seldom kill for themselves. They live chiefly on dead animals and any bad decaying stuff they find lying about, although they will often attack a sickly lamb or goat.

They are great ugly birds with bald heads and scraggy neck, and they always look dreadfully untidy with their feathers ruffled up

anyhow ; but although they are most unpleasant birds, Vultures do a great deal of good by clearing away all sorts of things which would otherwise poison the air.

Largest of the Vultures, indeed largest of all flying birds, is the Condor of South America, a huge creature measuring nine or ten feet from tip to tip of its outstretched wings. It is a most wonderful sight to see twenty or thirty of these great Condors wheeling and circling together over the plains, waiting to swoop down on some dead or dying animal.

## CHAPTER VIII

### SOME ODD BIRDS

THERE are a great many odd-looking birds in the world. Some have such very long thin legs that they look as if they were striding about on stilts ; others such short ones that they can only waddle along in the most ridiculous manner. Their bills, too, vary in the most remarkable way, and are all sorts of shapes and sizes. While some birds have long narrow bills, others have broad flat ones ;

some bills curve up, others curve down ; some are blunt, others sharp as a dagger ; some are so enormous one wonders how their owners can possibly manage to hold up their heads,



DARBY AND JOAN.

and some are ornamented with all sorts of queer-looking knobs and lumps.

Nearly all the most extraordinary birds live in other countries far away over the sea, but we may make the acquaintance of some of them when we pay a visit to the Zoo. There we may see Mr and Mrs Pelican sitting side by side like a funny old Darby and Joan.

They are not always so good-tempered and affectionate though, they quarrel dreadfully sometimes, and peck each other most spitefully. Poor Darby is in danger of growing quite bald because Joan pulls so many feathers out of his head.

A most odd-looking couple they are with their large, heavy bodies, long necks, and large wings, which they are fond of spreading out to air as they sit solemnly on a stone or on the edge of their pool of water.

The most peculiar thing about a Pelican is its huge bill. It is very long and flat, and has a hooked tip, while the lower half is really a large skin bag supported on a framework of bone. This peculiar bill the bird uses as a kind of fishing-net to scoop up fishes out of the water; for in its own home, in the South of Europe or North Africa, the Pelican lives near rivers, lakes or swamps, and spends a great deal of its time in fishing. Although it waddles about in the most awkward fashion when it is on dry land, the Pelican can fly well, and is a splendid swimmer.

Another funny bird is the Spoonbill, a large long-legged fellow with a great bill shaped just like a spoon. At one time Spoon-

bills lived in the Fens of Norfolk and Suffolk, and even now a stray visitor sometimes comes to us from across the sea, although they no longer stay and build their nests in our Island



THE SPOONBILL.

home. But in many parts of Europe, Asia and North Africa these quaint birds make their homes in the swamps, by the side of lakes, or by the seashore; there they stalk about on their long legs in shallow water, spooning up frogs and shrimps, and other good things with their useful bills.

Then there is the Shoe-bill, a most extraordinary bird with a very big head and an enormous bill something the shape of a shoe — such as the famous old

woman of the nursery rhyme might have lived in.

The Shoe-bill has very long legs and stands over four feet high. It is a rare bird, very seldom seen, as it lives in the dismal swamps of the Nile in Africa, where few people dare venture. But the Shoe-bill can walk quite safely over the soft yielding mud, as the four toes on its feet spread out widely and prevent the great bird from sinking down, down in the swamp, like "the girl that trod on a loaf."



THE SHOE-BILL.

The Horn-bill is just as peculiar in its way. Its huge beak is quite out of proportion to the size of its head, and on the top of it is a queer-looking kind of helmet.

Horn-bills are large, clumsy birds with



long necks and tails, and short legs and wings. Altogether they are most odd-looking things, and they behave in a very odd manner too. Horn-bills live in the hottest parts of Asia and Africa, and make their nests in hollow



THE HORN-BILL.

trees. Then when Mrs Horn-bill is safely within sitting upon her eggs, Mr Horn-bill collects a quantity of mud and plasters up the entrance so that she can't come out again. And there poor Mrs Horn-bill is kept prisoner until she has hatched her eggs, and the baby birds' feathers have grown.

But Father Horn-bill does not neglect his wife and family; he remains on guard outside the nest, and passes in food to them through a small hole which he left for the purpose in the mud wall. Then when he considers the children are strong enough to make their appearance in the outside world, he breaks down the wall and lets them out—and how glad Mother Horn-bill must be to stretch her wings again.

Most dignified birds are the long-legged Storks. They march about slowly and sedately, or stand for ever so long on one leg looking most wise and important—as if they were thinking very deeply about something and did not wish to be disturbed.

The White Stork is certainly a fine-looking bird, dressed all in white except for the long, black flight feathers in his wings, while his legs and long-pointed bill are red.

In the summer-time the Storks make their home in many parts of Europe, and in most countries, particularly in Holland and Denmark, the people are as delighted when they arrive as we are at the return of the Swallows. Large boxes are placed on the house-tops to induce the birds to build their nests there—

for it is considered a very fortunate thing to have a family of Storks living on one's house, though a Stork's nest, which is just a large untidy pile of sticks and reeds, looks very funny up on the roof, or on top of the chimney stack.

Mother Stork makes herself quite at home up on the house-top—for Storks come back year after year to nest in the same place. As soon as her nursery is ready she lays four or five fine eggs and proceeds to sit on them, while Father Stork stands on one leg close by, very stiff and solemn like a sentry on guard. He is very attentive to his wife, bringing her such tempting dainties as a plump frog, a small fish, or a little snake, when she feels hungry, and taking his turn on the nest while she stretches her legs and wings; at times, too, he cheers her up by throwing back his head and loudly clapping and clattering his beak—which is the best he can do in the way of a song, for Storks have no voices. They can make no sound except by clapping the two halves of their beaks together.

When autumn sets in the Storks gather together in large flocks, and great is the bustle and excitement, the flapping of wings, and clapping of beaks, as fresh family parties

continue to arrive on the meeting ground. Then when all have assembled the Storks rise and fly away far over land and sea until they reach the sunny shores of Africa. There they pass the winter, and thoroughly enjoy themselves wading about in the pools and river mud, gobbling up frogs and lizards and small snakes, of which they find an abundant supply.

The Cranes are rather like the Storks, though they do not belong to the same bird family. They are tall graceful birds and have a very proud air, as they march solemnly about on their long thin legs. Cranes are not dumb like the Storks; they have a loud trumpet-like voice, and they are most accomplished dancers. It is the funniest sight to see a pair of these stately birds advancing and retiring with little mincing steps, bowing low to each other until the tips of their beaks touch the ground. Then they will leap high into the air, and hop and skip about in such a comical way, I am sure no one could help laughing at them.

Still more curious are the Flamingoes, which remind one of brilliant-coloured swans mounted on very high spindly legs. Their feathers are a rosy pink, though they fade a

good deal just before the birds moult. Their necks are so long and snaky that they could tie them into a knot if they like, and their curious-shaped bills are bent sharply downward to the middle.

Flamingoes, as one can tell by their long legs, are wading birds. They live on weeds and shell-fish chiefly, and when feeding in shallow pools twist their long necks so that their heads are upside down, using the upper half of their beaks as a spoon to scoop their food out of the mud and water.

So you see however peculiar a bird's bill may appear to be, there is sure to be some special reason for it. The long dagger-like bill of the Stork is a splendid tool for digging frogs and other small creatures out of the mud; the pouched bill of the Pelican is a fine fishing-net—and so on. A bird's bill and wings and legs are always shaped so as best to suit its particular way of living.

For example, I am sure you must have noticed what a curious beak and odd-looking feet a Parrot has. The upper half of its beak is hinged at the base and overhangs the lower half like a hook, while two of its short toes turn forwards and two backwards, and Polly



FLAMINGOS.

uses both beak and feet when climbing about the cage.

Now Parrots live together in large flocks in the hottest parts of both the Old and New World; and although they have strong wings



PENGUINS AT HOME.

and can fly well, they spend most of their time in the trees, where they climb about the branches, and live on fruits and leaves and seeds. They can clasp the small boughs with their feet as easily as a monkey can, and their funny beaks serve them as extra hands.

Water birds such as Ducks and Swans have

webbed feet to enable them to swim well. Those beautiful sea-birds the splendid Gulls and graceful Tern we see flying about over the sea, or floating light as corks upon the waves, have webbed feet and powerful wings, and are just as much at home in the air as on the water; but the Penguins—those strange sea-birds that live in the cold seas round the South Pole—have given up flying altogether. Their wings are nothing but little flappers which they use as paddles in the water, so although they cannot skim through the air they are the most accomplished swimmers and divers in bird land.

There are a great many most interesting sea-birds, but there is no room for an account of them in this little book. If, however, you would like to learn something more of these winged children of the sea, there is a little blue book called "The Sea-Birds"<sup>1</sup> which will tell you all about them.

<sup>1</sup> "The Sea-Birds." Wonders of the Sea Series (Oxford University Press).



## CHAPTER IX

## RUNNING BIRDS

ALL birds that fly, whether they are large or small, whether they have long legs or short legs, and no matter what shape their bill may be, have the same kind of breast-bone. It is large and broad, and has a ridge like the keel of a boat, and to this ridge are fixed the strong muscles by means of which birds move their wings. Even Penguins, that do not fly, have this curiously-shaped breast-bone; for they cleave the water instead of the air, and need strong muscles to move their wings, which are used as paddles. So Penguins are classed with the "flying birds."

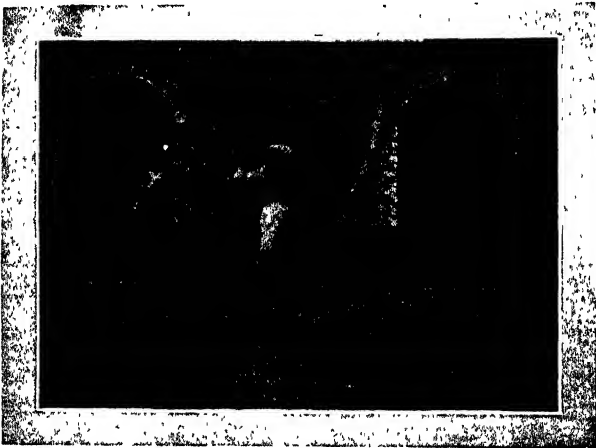
But there are some birds that have flat breast-bones with no ridge or keel to it. These birds do not fly, but they can run very fast, and so are called "Running Birds." They are mostly very big birds with strong, stout legs, and such very small wings that they are quite useless for flying, though they sometimes act as sails, helping the bird to speed faster over the ground.

Largest of the running birds, and indeed largest of all living birds, is the Ostrich, a gigantic fellow that lives in the hot sandy deserts of Africa and Arabia. A full-grown cock Ostrich often stands eight feet high, which is taller than the tallest man, and its legs are as stout and firm as the legs of a horse. If all the birds and beasts had a race the Ostrich would win easily, were it not for its curious habit of running round in a circle, so if the race was over a straight course the bird would never arrive at the winning post. If an Ostrich ran straight forward it would be quite impossible to overtake it, as it speeds over the plain faster than a galloping horse, its long legs covering twenty-five feet or more in a single stride; but as it runs in a circle hunters are able to cut it off in its headlong flight, and capture the bird by flinging a lasso over its head.

In one way the Ostrich is different from all other birds, for it has only two toes on its feet. Both toes are turned forward; they are very strong and thick, and have short, broad claws, while underneath they are padded with soft, thick elastic cushions.

Ostriches go about in small family parties

consisting of a cock bird and four or five hens. The hens are very friendly to one another, and they generally all lay their eggs in the same nest, which is just a hole scooped out in the sand. Twenty or thirty eggs are sometimes



THE OSTRICH.

placed in a single nest by the hens belonging to one family, and then the birds take very little trouble about them; indeed, if it were not for Father Ostrich the eggs would probably never hatch at all, but Father Ostrich sits on them all night long to keep them warm, and protect them from Jackals and other prowling

animals who would like to eat them up. The hens will sometimes sit on the eggs in the day time for a little while, but then their attentions are not required, for in the hot burning sand of the desert no brooding is necessary; so the birds usually cover them up with a little sand to hide them from foes, and leave them to be hatched by the sun.

Later on when the young Ostriches are growing up several family parties join together and form quite large flocks; which, strange to say, are fond of keeping company with herds of Zebras, Giraffes or Antelopes and roaming with them over the desert.

Ostriches have very strange appetites; they principally eat green food, fruit and seeds, but they like a small bird, or a lizard by way of a change, and they swallow quantities of sand and large stones to help them digest their food; while tame Ostriches which are kept in pens will gobble up all sorts of extraordinary things such as long nails, bones, pennies, in fact anything they can pick up, and this curious diet seems thoroughly to agree with the peculiar birds.

There are large ostrich farms in Africa, for, as you know, ostrich feathers are very

valuable. Twice a year the plumes are cut, and this does not hurt the birds, for the feathers soon begin to grow again. The Ostriches on a farm often grow very tame, but farmers have



THE CASSOWARY.

to be careful with them, for the big birds sometimes become very bad-tempered and kick out most viciously with their great strong legs.

In South America there is a bird called the Rhea which is very much like the

Ostrich, only it is a much smaller bird and has three toes on its feet; and although the Rhea is often called the "American Ostrich," it does not belong to the same family as the giant bird of Africa.

Two other big "running birds" are the

Cassowary and the Emu. Both live in Australia and are alike in several ways. Their wings are even smaller than the wings of an Ostrich, and they have very curious hairy-looking feathers. Both are tall, long-legged, long-necked birds, standing when full-grown about five feet high; but while the Emu's head and neck are simply covered with short feathers in the ordinary bird fashion, the Cassowary's head and neck are bare, and the skin is coloured scarlet, purple and bright blue. Besides this, the Cassowary wears a large horny helmet on its head, which is usually black, and hanging from its neck are brightly-coloured wattles—altogether the Cassowary is a remarkably queer-looking bird.

The smallest of the running birds is the Kiwi. It is no bigger than a good-sized hen, and is the oddest little thing you ever saw. It is covered with hairy-looking feathers and has no wings at all, its bill is very long and thin, and round the base of it a quantity of long bristles stick out in all directions.

The Kiwi lives only in New Zealand. It is a very shy bird, and hides away in the daytime in holes in the ground among the roots

of trees ; but in the evening it comes out, and in the dim light looks like a queer little dwarf as it runs quickly about taking very big strides with its sturdy little legs. It hunts for food by poking about in the ground with its bill, making a funny sniffing noise all the time as if it were trying to smell out the worms hiding in the earth.

At night the Kiwi gives a loud whistling cry, but if you disturb it in the day-time it growls like a cross little dog. It has a funny way, too, of yawning, opening its beak very wide in the most ridiculous way, while if you annoy it the Kiwi will ruffle up its feathers, snap its beak and kick out viciously at you with its feet.

The Maoris of New Zealand are very fond of Kiwis, and eat them roasted or boiled as we do fowls, and in olden times the native chiefs used the hairy feathers of the little birds to adorn their state mantles.







