

Volume 4

41°

42°

43°

44°

45°

46°

Focus: Upper NY
Bird Enemies
Displacement
The Woodshed
Fall Gear Review
Groundswell



BIRD ENEMIES

John Burroughs

How surely the birds know their enemies! See how the wrens and robins and bluebirds pursue and scold the cat, while they take little or no notice of the dog! Even the swallow will fight the cat, and, relying too confidently upon its powers of flight, sometimes swoops down so near to its enemy that it is caught by a sudden stroke of the cat's paw. The only



case I know of in which our small birds fail to recognize their enemy is furnished by the shrike; apparently the little birds do not know that this modest-colored bird is an assassin. At least, I have never seen them scold or molest him, or utter any outcries at his presence, as they usually do at birds of prey. Probably it is because the shrike is a rare visitant, and is not

found in this part of the country during the nesting season of our songsters. But the birds have nearly all found out the trick the jay, and when he comes sneaking through the trees in May and June in quest of eggs, he is quickly exposed and roundly abused. It is amusing to see the robins hustle him out of the tree which holds their nest. They cry "Thief, thief!" to

The life of birds is beset with dangers and mishaps of which we know little.



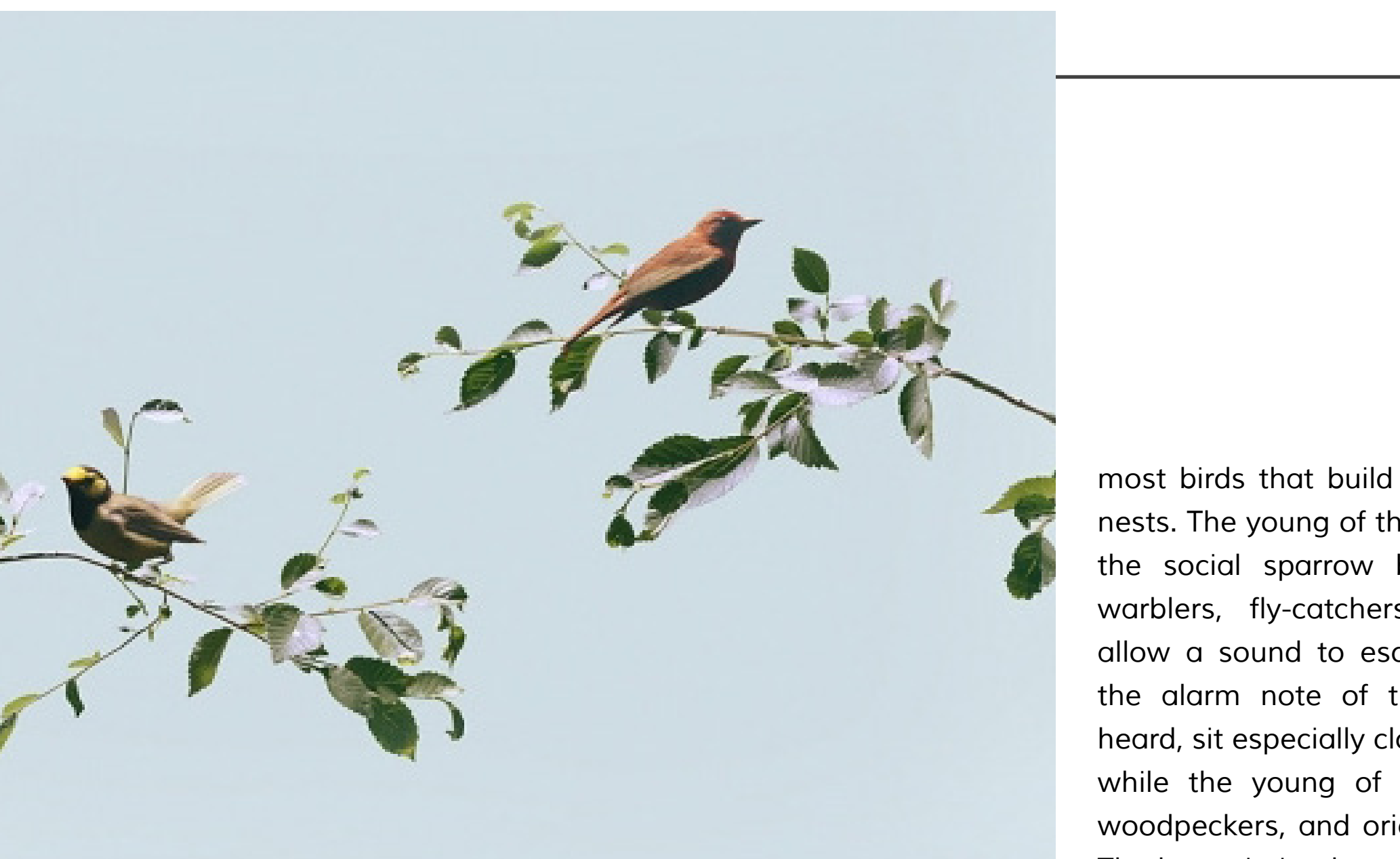
the top of their voices as they charge upon him, and the jay retorts in a voice scarcely less complimentary as he makes off.

The jays have their enemies also, and need to keep an eye on their own eggs. It would be interesting to know if jays ever rob jays, or crows plunder crows; or is there honor among thieves even in the feathered tribes? One season I found a jay's nest in a small cedar on the side of a wooded ridge. It held five eggs, every one of which had been punctured. Apparently some bird had driven its sharp beak through their shells, with the sole

intention of destroying them, for no part of the contents of the eggs had been removed. It looked like a case of revenge; as if some thrush or warbler, whose nest had suffered at the hands of the jays, had watched its opportunity, and had in this way retaliated upon its enemies. An egg for an egg. The jays were lingering near, very demure and silent, and probably ready to join a crusade against nest-robbers.

The great bugaboo of the birds is the owl. The owl snatches them from off their roosts at night, and gobbles up their eggs and young in their nests. He is a veritable ogre to them, and his presence fills them with consternation and alarm.

One season, to protect my early cherries I placed a large stuffed owl amid the branches of the tree. Such a



racket as there instantly began about my grounds is not pleasant to think upon! The orioles and robins fairly "shrieked out their affright." The news instantly spread in every direction, and apparently every bird in town came to see that owl in the cherry-tree, and every bird took a cherry, so that I lost more fruit than if I had left the owl in-doors. With craning necks and

horrified looks the birds alighted upon the branches, and between their screams would snatch off a cherry, as if the act was some relief to their outraged feelings. The chirp and chatter of the young of birds which build in concealed or inclosed places, like the woodpeckers, the house wren, the high-hole, the oriole, is in marked contrast to the silence of the fledglings of

most birds that build open and exposed nests. The young of the sparrows,—unless the social sparrow be an exception,—warblers, fly-catchers, thrushes, never allow a sound to escape them; and on the alarm note of their parents being heard, sit especially close and motionless, while the young of chimney swallows, woodpeckers, and orioles are very noisy. The latter, in its deep pouch, is quite safe from birds of prey, except perhaps the owl. The owl, I suspect, thrusts its leg into the cavities of woodpeckers and into the pocket-like nest of the oriole, and clutches and brings forth the birds in its talons. In one case which I heard of, a screech-owl had thrust its claw into a cavity in a tree, and grasped the head of a red-headed woodpecker; being apparently unable to

draw its prey forth, it had thrust its own round head into the hole, and in some way became fixed there, and had thus died with the woodpecker in its talons.

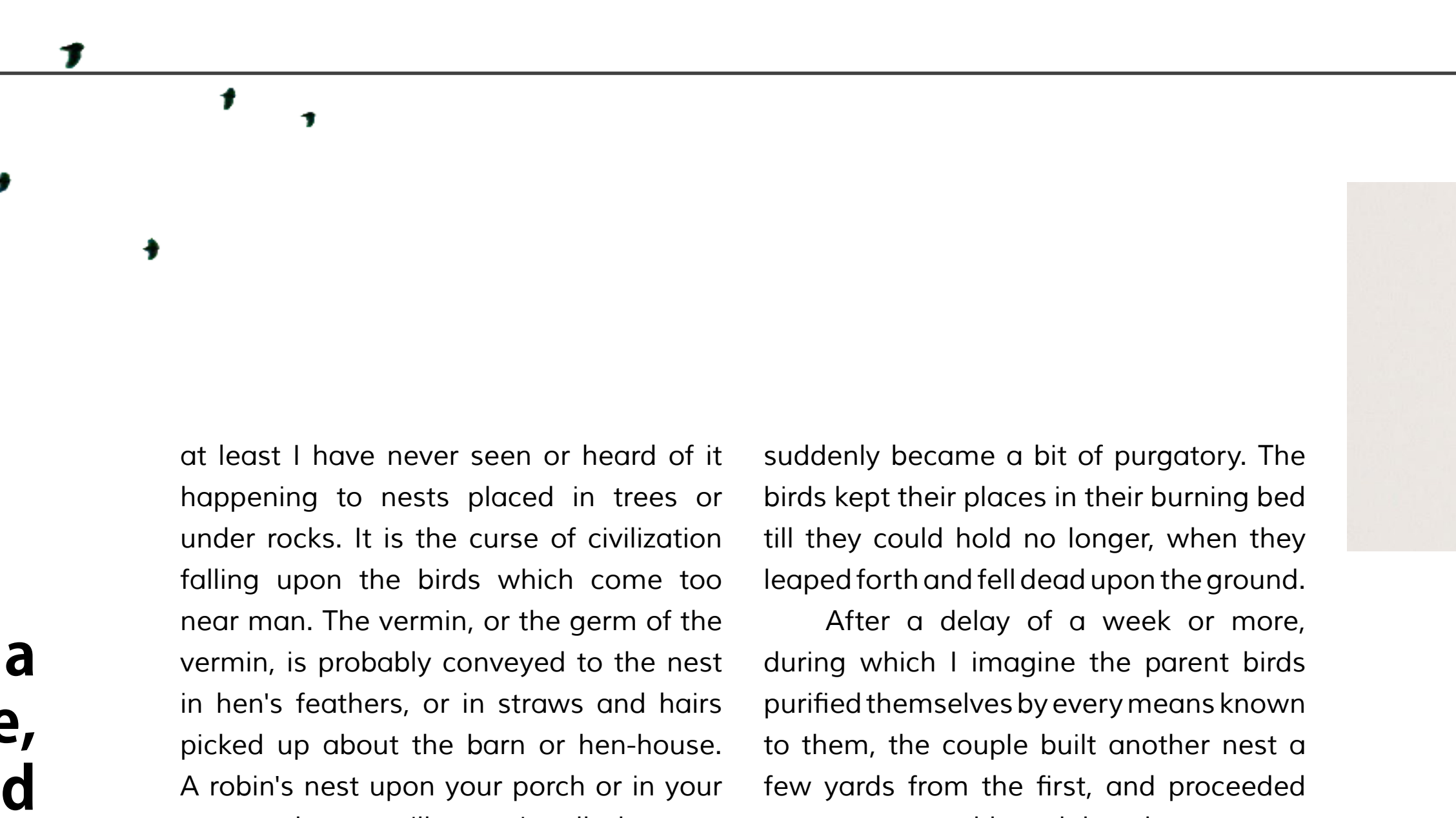
The life of birds is beset with dangers and mishaps of which we know little. One day, in my walk, I came upon a goldfinch with the tip of one wing securely fastened to the feathers of its rump, by what appeared to be the silk of some caterpillar. The bird, though uninjured, was completely crippled, and could not fly a stroke. Its little body was hot and panting in my hands, as I carefully broke the fetter. Then it darted swiftly away with a happy cry. A record of all the accidents and tragedies of bird life for a single season would show many curious incidents. A friend of mine opened his box-stove one fall to kindle a fire in it,



To what extent the cat-bird is a nest-robber I have no evidence, but that feline mew of hers, and that flirting, flexible tail, suggest something not entirely bird-like.

when he beheld in the black interior the desiccated forms of two bluebirds. The birds had probably taken refuge in the chimney during some cold spring storm, and had come down the pipe to the stove, from whence they were unable to ascend. A peculiarly touching little incident of bird life occurred to a caged female canary. Though unmated, it laid some eggs, and

the happy bird was so carried away by her feelings that she would offer food to the eggs, and chatter and twitter, trying, as it seemed, to encourage them to eat! The incident is hardly tragic, neither is it comic. Certain birds nest in the vicinity of our houses and outbuildings, or even in and upon them, for protection from their enemies,



but they often thus expose themselves to a plague of the most deadly character. I refer to the vermin with which their nests often swarm, and which kill the young before they are fledged. In a state of nature this probably never happens;

at least I have never seen or heard of it happening to nests placed in trees or under rocks. It is the curse of civilization falling upon the birds which come too near man. The vermin, or the germ of the vermin, is probably conveyed to the nest in hen's feathers, or in straws and hairs picked up about the barn or hen-house. A robin's nest upon your porch or in your summer-house will occasionally become an intolerable nuisance from the swarms upon swarms of minute vermin with which it is filled. The parent birds stem the tide as long as they can, but are often compelled to leave the young to their terrible fate. One season a phoebe-bird built on a projecting stone under the eaves of the house, and all appeared to go well till the young were nearly fledged, when the nest

suddenly became a bit of purgatory. The birds kept their places in their burning bed till they could hold no longer, when they leaped forth and fell dead upon the ground.

After a delay of a week or more, during which I imagine the parent birds purified themselves by every means known to them, the couple built another nest a few yards from the first, and proceeded to rear a second brood; but the new nest developed into the same bed of torment that the first did, and the three young birds, nearly ready to fly, perished as they sat within it. The parent birds then left the place as if it had been accursed. ■



BIRD ENEMIES



John Burroughs

How surely the birds know their enemies! See how the wrens and robins and bluebirds pursue and scold the cat, while they take little or no notice of the dog! Even the swallow will fight the cat, and, relying too confidently upon its powers of flight, sometimes swoops down so near to its enemy that it is caught by a sudden stroke of the cat's paw. The only case I know of in which our small birds fail to recognize their enemy is furnished by the shrike; apparently the little birds do not know that this modest-colored bird is an assassin. At least, I have never seen

them scold or molest him, or utter any outcries at his presence, as they usually do at birds of prey. Probably it is because the shrike is a rare visitant, and is not found in this part of the country during the nesting season of our songsters. But the birds have nearly all found out the trick the jay, and when he comes sneaking through the trees in May and June in quest of eggs, he is quickly exposed and roundly abused. It is amusing to see the robins hustle him out of the tree which holds their nest. They cry "Thief, thief!" to the top of their voices as they

The life of birds is beset with dangers and mishaps of which we know little.



charge upon him, and the jay retorts in a voice scarcely less complimentary as he makes off. The jays have their enemies also, and need to keep an eye on their own eggs. It would be interesting to know if jays ever rob jays, or crows plunder crows; or is there honor among thieves even in the feathered tribes? One season I found a jay's nest in a small cedar on the side of a wooded ridge. It held five eggs, every one of which had been punctured. Apparently some bird had driven its sharp beak through their shells, with the sole intention of destroying them, for no part of the contents of the eggs had been removed. It looked like a case of revenge; as if some thrush or warbler, whose nest had suffered at the hands of the jays, had watched its opportunity, and had in this way retaliated upon its enemies. An egg for an egg. The jays were lingering

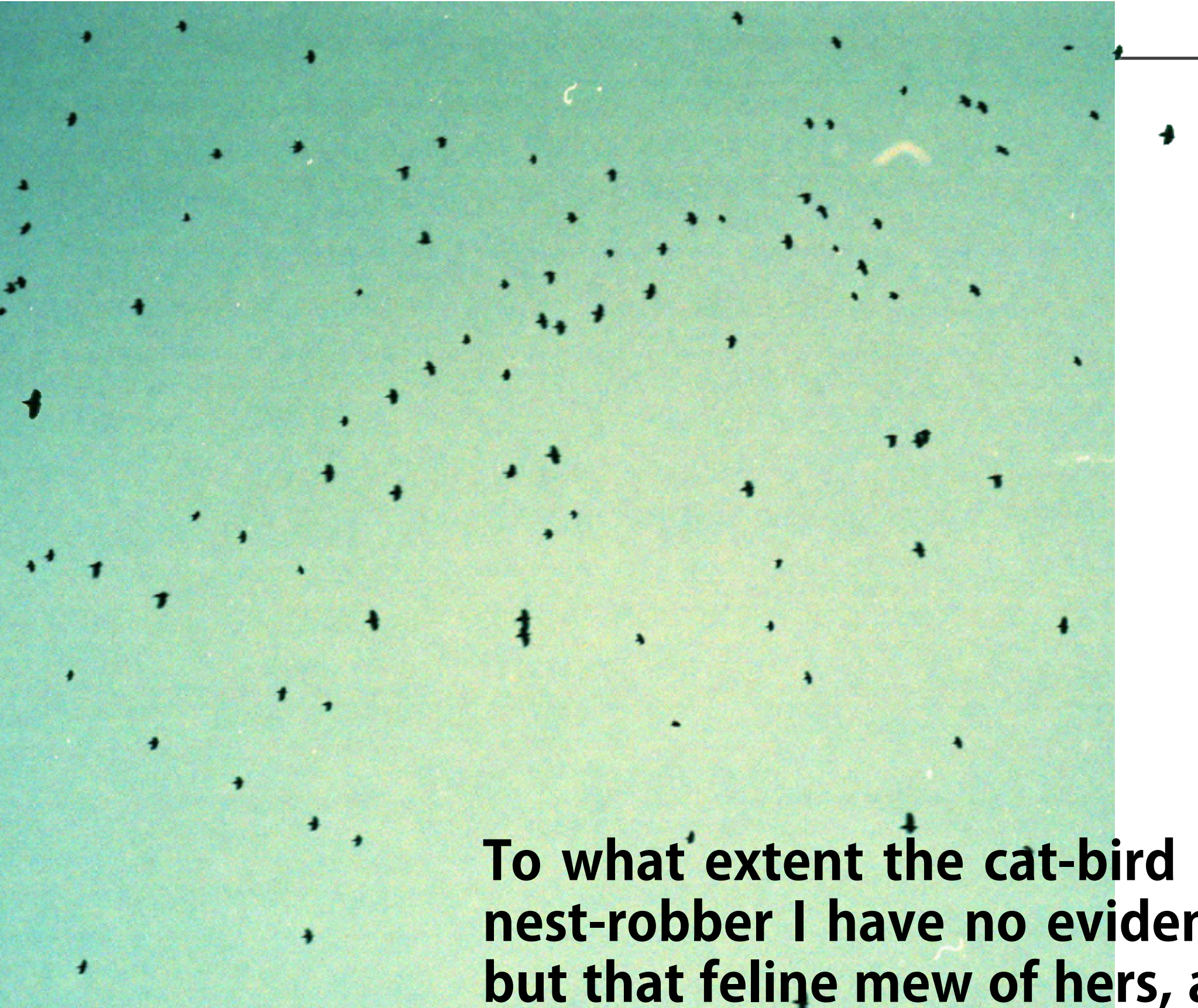
near, very demure and silent, and probably ready to join a crusade against nest-robbers. The great bugaboo of the birds is the owl. The owl snatches them from off their roosts at night, and gobbles up their eggs and young in their nests. He is a veritable ogre to them, and his presence fills them with consternation and alarm. One season, to protect my early cherries I placed a large stuffed owl amid the branches of the tree. Such a racket as there instantly began about my grounds is not pleasant to think upon! The orioles and robins fairly "shrieked out their affright." The news instantly spread in every direction, and apparently every bird in town came to see that owl in the cherry-tree, and every bird took a cherry, so that I lost more fruit than if I had left the owl in-doors. With craning necks and horrified looks the birds alighted upon the branches, and between their screams would snatch off a cherry, as if the act was some relief to their outraged feelings. The chirp and chatter of the young of birds which build in concealed or inclosed places, like the woodpeckers, the house wren, the high-hole, the oriole, is in marked contrast to the silence of the fledglings of most birds that build open



and exposed nests. The young of the sparrows,--unless the social sparrow be an exception,--warblers, fly-catchers, thrushes, never allow a sound to escape them; and on the alarm note of their parents being heard, sit especially close and motionless, while the young of chimney swallows, woodpeckers, and orioles are very noisy. The latter, in its deep pouch, is quite safe from birds of prey, except perhaps the owl. The owl, I suspect, thrusts its leg into the cavities of woodpeckers and into the pocket-like nest of the oriole, and clutches and brings forth the birds in

its talons. In one case which I heard of, a screech-owl had thrust its claw into a cavity in a tree, and grasped the head of a red-headed woodpecker; being apparently unable to draw its prey forth, it had thrust its own round head into the hole, and in some way became fixed there, and had thus died with the woodpecker in its talons. The life of birds is beset with dangers and mishaps of which we know little. One day, in my walk, I came upon a goldfinch with the tip of one wing securely fastened to the feathers of its rump, by what appeared to be the silk of

some caterpillar. The bird, though uninjured, was completely crippled, and could not fly a stroke. Its little body was hot and panting in my hands, as I carefully broke the fetter. Then it darted swiftly away with a happy cry. A record of all the accidents and tragedies of bird life for a single season would show many curious incidents. A friend of mine opened his box-stove one fall to kindle a fire in it, when he beheld in the black interior the desiccated forms of two bluebirds. The birds had probably taken refuge in the chimney during some cold spring storm, and had come down the pipe to the stove, from whence they were unable to ascend. A peculiarly touching little incident of bird life occurred to a caged female canary. Though unmated, it laid some eggs, and the happy bird was so carried away by her feelings that she would offer food to the eggs, and chatter and twitter, trying, as it seemed, to encourage them to eat! The incident is hardly tragic, neither is it comic. Certain birds nest in the vicinity of our houses and outbuildings, or even in and upon them, for protection from their enemies, but they often thus expose themselves to a plague of the most deadly character.



To what extent the cat-bird is a nest-robber I have no evidence, but that feline mew of hers, and that flirting, flexible tail, suggest something not entirely bird-like.

I refer to the vermin with which their nests often swarm, and which kill the young before they are fledged. In a state of nature this probably never happens; at least I have never seen or heard of it happening to nests placed in trees or under rocks. It is the curse of civilization falling upon the birds which come too near man. The vermin, or the germ of the vermin, is probably conveyed to the nest in hen's feathers, or in straws and hairs picked up about the barn or hen-house. A robin's nest upon your porch or in your summer-house will

occasionally become an intolerable nuisance from the swarms upon swarms of minute vermin with which it is filled. The parent birds stem the tide as long as they can, but are often compelled to leave the young to their terrible fate. One season a phoebe-bird built on a projecting stone under the eaves of the house, and all appeared to go well till the young were nearly fledged, when the nest suddenly became a bit

of purgatory. The birds kept their places in their burning bed till they could hold no longer, when they leaped forth and fell dead upon the ground. After a delay of a week or more, during which I imagine the parent birds purified themselves by every means known to them, the couple built another nest a few yards from the first, and proceeded to rear a second brood; but the new nest developed into the same bed of torment that the first did, and the three young birds, nearly ready to fly, perished as they sat within it. The parent birds then left the place as if it had been accursed. ■

