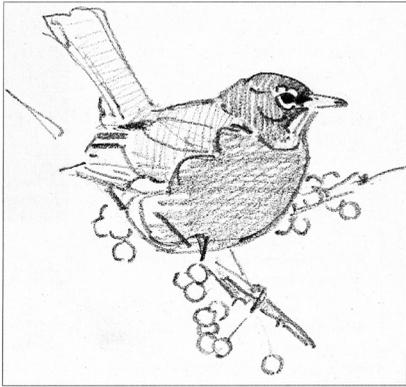


Bygone Birds

I grew up in a town famous for its old trees and gardens and also for its birdlife. There was a landscaped hillside visible from my bedroom, and one of my earliest memories is of the vast rolling chorus of robins, doves, and thrushes, and the unidentifiable (at least to me) squeaks, squawks, chips, buzzings, and peeps that would pour in my window like a waterfall on spring mornings.

I never thought about this great choral expression; it was just there, part of my world.



My family had come north from the Eastern Shore of Maryland, and, on summer visits to the rural settings of the old family farms and town gardens, the dawn chorus of birds was equally loud—as was the daylong winsome calling of the bobwhites and the noisy barking of crows in flocks that would dip across the cornfields. At night on my cousin's river farm, I lay awake listening to the dark quock of night-herons sounding out from the riverbanks, and by day we lived with the eternal circling cries of ospreys. I even

used to see bald eagles there, a rare event back then.

After that I lived in deep woods in northwestern Connecticut, where there were vast migrations of wood-warblers each spring and fall. That was owl country; the odd caterwauls of barred owls rang out from the nearby swampy lowlands in autumn and again in spring. I would hear the ghostly whinny of the screech-owl all through the summer, and the deep booming of the great horned owl on late winter nights, along with other shrieks and calls. Also on summer nights there, I used to be awakened by the mysterious night song of the ovenbird, along with the shrills and snarls and cries of things I couldn't identify—probably bobcats.

When I first moved to Massachusetts thirty or so years ago, I lived in an

old house surrounded by farms. Each spring, the scrubby pasture just north of the house was loud with the calls of prairie warblers and blue-winged warblers. All along the brushy edges of the property, yellow warblers and yellowthroats nested. The indigo buntings would be singing madly by June, and every day the woodland edges were pierced with the sharp call of the great crested flycatcher. I used to see kingbirds in a nearby orchard; while the woods to the west, just beyond the garden wall, were alive with the songs of veeries, wood thrushes, ovenbirds, and black-and-white warblers, as well as ruby-crowned kinglets and parula warblers. And east of the house, hay fields dropped down to the marshes of Beaver Brook in a series of terraces, over which barn swallows and tree swallows coursed from dawn to dusk. Wood ducks, hooded mergansers, marsh wrens, green herons, and even the occasional bittern and sora rail used to appear in the marshes from time to time.

At dawn last spring, I heard the song of a black-billed cuckoo. That got me thinking about local birds. How long ago had it been since I last heard a black-billed cuckoo in the yard? For that matter, how long had it been since I had heard the plaintive dawn song of the wood pewee? Or the night wailing of the whip-poor-will? This year, other than the music of a black-billed cuckoo, and one ovenbird, plus the usual array of garden birds such as blue jays and song sparrows, it was a silent spring. Furthermore, I have revisited most of the places I lived in the past and have noted the same phenomenon. The woods and fields have gone to development, and no birds sing.

All this is anecdotal evidence, but it's a story you hear over and over. And now the facts of a massive worldwide decline of birds are everywhere in the scientific news. It appears that the whole class of aves, a group that emerged some 150 million years ago, for a variety of reasons, is at a low ebb.

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