go, now dark, now flashing white in the sunlight as they swung in long curves out over the ice. Then back they would rush toward the decoys, thundering over the blind so close one could almost reach up and pick them out of the air. And higher than the circling lake ducks the mallards and blacks in singles or doubles flew by, turning a skeptical eye on the ice crusted blocks below.

As darkness fell we picked up and trudged homeward. Through the gathering twilight we saw the coots still standing in their small dark clump, the ducks rising, circling, settling only to rise again and the gulls drifting lazily like small white clouds through the murk.

That night the thermometer fell still lower. And when we came back in the still, bitting cold of the early dawn the lake was an unbroken sheet of geaming ice. Gone were the leads and the ducks that used them. Gone too were the coots, except for the dark bodies of the two that would never fly again. Only the gulls were left, drifting effortless against the chill blue of the sky.

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REMINISCENCES OF WISCONSIN BIRDS

By SAM ROBBINS*

I thought I had experienced most of the thrills one can get out of watching and studying birds, but the other day as I browsed through my old records, I began to recognize something new. It was a rediscovery of the thrill of finding unusual birds, but it was more than that. It was the rediscovery of old thrills, mellowed by time, and given added significance by being placed in a historical setting. Some experiences that seemed exciting at the time have been nearly forgotten; others come back so vividly that I could almost point out the exact branch of a certain tree on which a special bird sat five years ago.

July 1, 1937

Well do I remember my first summer in Wisconsin, spent on a small farm in Black Earth. My cousin Francis Jones and I became increasingly disturbed about a strange bird call that kept coming from the bushes of the nearby swamp. We had made several half-hearted attempts to find the bird, but the soggy footing was discouraging, and we were unsuccessful. Then one day in a fit of inspiration we determined to go after the bird in earnest, and not come back until we'd found it. It took inspired determination, because we had to chase the elusive creature all the way across the swamp and half way back again before finally spotting a small, inconspicuous brown bird on a low branch. It looked like a flycatcher, but what kind? It looked like an alder flycatcher, but it sounded nothing like the alder flycatchers I had frequently heard in New England. Then it was that we found in Peterson's field guide mention of different songs of this species, one heard in the east, the other in the middle-west. The latter description fitted our bird perfectly.

Many times since, I have heard this song, but more significant perhaps has been the recognition of the "eastern" song several times since then in Dane, Walworth, and Grant Counties, but never in the same

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place where “western” birds are singing. If examination should prove the existence of subspecific differences in the alder flycatcher, Wisconsin would be within the overlapping ranges of the eastern and western forms.

October 15, 1939

What’s this? A flock of chipping sparrows? I thought they had left a month ago. Such were my thoughts when I flushed a flock of twelve little sparrows on the university campus. But on closer observation, these sparrows showed the striped crowns and chestnut cheek patches of clay-colored sparrows. They stayed several days, and the next year there were three in the same place on October 7. I have often wondered if this species, which is not often seen in Madison—especially in fall—does occur regularly in October at this one spot, but I have not been able to check every year.

October 25, 1939

Just ten days later I was pleasantly surprised to see a handsome Holboell’s grebe in the University Bay. I should have been more surprised, but I was used to seeing an occasional one in New England, and did not realize how rare a bird it was in Wisconsin. This is one bird that has given me even greater pleasure in reminiscence than it did at the time of observation. It was a closer view than I had ever before had at an individual of this species. I suppose that is why I recall the bird so vividly—swimming slowly, almost motionlessly along, with head held high and erect by a long, showy white neck.

May 6, 1940

Never was I more surprised than on this morning when a little warbler flitted in front of me, and landed on a tiny branch of spruce not five feet away, staring at me face-to-face. No mistaking the brilliant yellow throat of this bird! Not when I had to climb a cemetery fence four times to get a good look at a similar bird when it was first recorded in Massachusetts. It was a sycamore warbler! I had no idea that this was the first twentieth century record of this species in Wisconsin, but I knew it must be very rare. This was one time when I certainly wished someone else was with me. I led a party of several observers out to the same spot later in the day, but the precious bird was nowhere to be found.

May 8, 1940

Another fruitless search for the sycamore warbler with Earl Mitchell. But we did hear a peculiar song that I had heard two days before, and could not recognize. It was a harsh, rasping series of notes, resembling the song of the black-throated blue warbler slightly, but clearly different. Today we tracked it down, and discovered that the song emanated from a clay-colored sparrow. I have always enjoyed learning a new bird song as much as seeing a new bird. This was no exception. Most of my subsequent records of this species have come from recognizing the song I learned this day.

May 11, 1941

“Century Day” is always a memorable occasion, even if one doesn’t come across any spectacular birds. So it was this day. We saw nothing exceptional, but it was an experience to tour the choicest spots in Dane County from dawn to dark with the Bargers. Seeing 122 species in one day was quite a thrill in itself.
May 17, 1941

The Bagers and I couldn’t have picked a better spot to pause for a picnic lunch on the way to Wyalusing State Park. We picked it because it was a very pretty place, at the base of some bluffs on the north side of the Wisconsin River in Richland County. But no sooner had we stopped than two large birds appeared over the bluff just above us, and after a glance we all called out together, “Turkey vulture!” A pair of these handsome birds kept us company while we ate, and it was a rare treat to watch them glide and soar around the edge of the bluff. Finally they moved on, and so did we—heading for other interesting experiences at Wyalusing Park.

May 18, 1941

We toured the park all morning with the music of prothonotary, blue-winged, cerulean and Kentucky warblers, and alder, yellow-bellied and acadian flycatchers ringing in our ears. But there was one special bird we were secretly hoping to find: a worm-eating warbler. We were not at all sure there was one there. At least we found no indication of its presence as we trudged wearily up the hill back to our camping site, in preparation for the return trip to Madison. But we decided to try just one more path. We trudged hopelessly on when suddenly from the hillside came a very unfamiliar song. I suppose a music critic might have called it “the song of the chirping sparrow as interpreted and rendered by a warbler.” Never was I more certain of the identification of a bird I had never heard before; “It’s the worm-eater” left my lips almost before the song had stopped. Mr. Barger, who is familiar with this bird, confirmed the identification. And as if to make doubly sure, the songster promptly and obligingly flew into a tree right overhead, in full view, and gave forth again with his warbled trill.

April 5, 1942

The song sparrow is a common bird, but it never seemed to frequent my aunt’s back yard often. So I was mildly surprised when I thought I heard one scolding there this afternoon. So vociferous and determined was the chipping that I finally decided to go out and see what the trouble was. I was puzzled at first, because I could find no cause for such a rumpus; but then I caught a glimpse of the bird flitting from bush to bush. Strange; song sparrows aren’t usually active like that. And look at the size of that tail! That must be one of the big wrens! The date was much more suitable for the Bewick’s than the Carolina wren, but I always associated a showy white-fringed tail with the Bewick’s, and I could see no white on this bird’s tail. Long and diligently did I pursue the little creature in several neighboring back yards, trying to study that elusive tail from all angles, and finally I got a glimpse of a little inconspicuous bit of white. Since then, I have heard about Bewick’s wrens that showed no white at all on their tails, but I didn’t know this at the time. This was my first, and so far my only, Bewick’s wren.

April 12, 1942

Who would not be thrilled at his first sight of a handsome whistling swan? That was certainly one of the highlights of the annual W. S. O. convention in Green Bay for me. The weather had been warm, and there was some uncertainty about the swans lingering this late, but when we arrived in Green Bay we were reassured that the swans were still
there. It was a sight never to be forgotten—to look out over the water to see 19 of these huge, graceful white birds swimming majestically along.

May 8, 1942

While passing by a small cemetery to join a group of friends on a picnic at Sunset Point, my attention was suddenly caught by a loud, clear warbler song that I had never heard before. That called for investigation. Crawling under the cemetery fence, I walked slowly forward until I stood under the tree where the little warbler was singing. He would have to be in the top of the tallest tree, and there I was without my binoculars! I didn’t even have pencil and paper to take notes on what I could see. Disconsolately I gave up trying to get a good look at the bird, hoping to find someone who could give me some paper and a pencil. Then as I lay flat on my back, crawling under the fence again, the luck suddenly changed. A bus stopped across the street and several friends heading for the same picnic got off. My unorthodox position drew some hearty laughs, but I got the precious equipment, and sat down by the roadside to take notes on the bird’s song, which continued to fill the air every few seconds. While thus busily engaged, I heard a car stop beside me, and looked up, expecting to find a policeman wondering what on earth I was doing. But to my amazement the “policeman” turned out to be N. R. Barger. After catching a brief glimpse of the bird, he drove off, reappearing in a few minutes armed with a wife, telescope and two pairs of binoculars. Then we could see the brilliant yellow throat, gray back, and white eye-stripe of a beautiful male sycamore warbler. Unlike the bird two years ago, this one obligingly sang consistently for some time—long enough to allow many of the Madison ornithologists to assemble and appreciate him.

May 9, 1942

Almost anything would have been an anti-climax the day after the finding of the sycamore warbler. But I still have a vivid picture of the handsome male Harris’ sparrow that perched on top of a high bush, and showed off his splendid finery to the Bargers and me. It was the first one I had ever seen, and is still the only one. This, plus the sycamore warbler, plus a turkey vulture and other unusual birds in Wyalusing State Park, made a most exciting ornithological weekend.

May 17, 1942

Another “century day”—this time in a party of some of Wisconsin’s best young ornithologists: Elton Bussowitz, Earl Mitchell, and Joe Hickey. Our total swelled to 135 this day, including an energetic but fruitful search for a lark sparrow, the unusual sight of a short-eared owl, the distinctive chatter of a yellow-breasted chat, and many other interesting birds. There is nothing particularly beneficial to science about running up as large a day’s list as possible, but it provides great fun and sport to try it once a year. The largest known day’s list for a party in Dane County is 144; some day someone will reach 150.

May 16, 1943

The Bargers and Koehlers and I were out gunning for 150 species today, but from the start there was a high wind which ruined whatever chance we might have had. Few birds were singing; most of them kept down out of sight. Yet by happening across a few little bunches of
warblers huddled in sheltered spots—notably a fine Brewster's warbler on the University of Wisconsin campus—we managed to do fairly well. After finishing with the sandpipers and ducks at Lake Barney and Dushak's Pond, we took stock of what we had found. We were thoroughly surprised to find that our day's total had swelled to 140. It was too late in the day to hope for 150, but we might tie or break the record of 144. What did we lack that we might be able to find? Chipping sparrow! The stiff wind had kept them off the wires, and had discouraged their singing. Well, it was getting dark; not much chance of getting one now. But we might hear a whip-poor-will, an owl, the winnowing of the snipe, or the flight song of the woodcock. We drove back to the University Arboretum, and listened intently. In the dusk three huge birds flew heavily overhead. "Great blue heron!" we exclaimed joyfully. Then in the distance came the faint but welcome song of the whip-poor-will. Closer by came the distinctive "peent" of the woodcock. It was dark now, and apparently we would have to be contented with 143, when suddenly out of the darkness came the loud, clear whistle of a solitary sandpiper. This species we had missed earlier in the day, and now it enabled us to tie the all-time record. It was as welcome as the Brewster's warbler we had found on the campus, the Kentucky warbler and Acadian flycatcher we heard at Mazomanie, or the Wilson's phalarope we had seen at Lake Barney.

August 21, 1943

Mid-August is not a particularly auspicious time to look for interesting land birds around Madison, but after a three months' dearth of field trips, anything was worth while. As I strolled along the edge of Lake Wingra, my attention was attracted to a strange bird song. It was unfamiliar, yet I was positive that I had heard that song somewhere before. What was it? Where had I ever heard it? Over and over again it sang: "Chic-er-pee-o-chic," until suddenly it dawned on me that that was the song of the white-eyed vireo. I had heard it while visiting my brother in Maryland last spring. Only a glimpse of the bird could I catch before he flew off, but it was enough to confirm the identification.

But this was not all. A little farther on, a small yellowish bird with a long tail ducked into a thicket. This, investigation proved, was a yellow-breasted chat—the first one I had ever seen in Wisconsin except for those at the Wisconsin River bottoms in Mazomanie. Two birds I had not found in Madison in four years of searching—within the space of a few minutes!

Most of my ornithological adventures come from the Chicago area now, but occasional trips back to Wisconsin continue to provide excitement. The pair of turkey vultures that circled around Ferry Bluff in Sauk County, along the Wisconsin River, made May 6, 1945, a memorable day.

Just one week later Milwaukee's Lake Park was literally teeming with migrant warblers and sparrows, the likes of which I had never seen before. Juncos, chipping, field, clay-colored, white-crowned, white-throated, Lincoln's, swamp, and song sparrows swarmed all over the lawns, interspersed with wood, willow, olive-backed and gray-cheeked thrushes. Warblers seemed to fill every tree and bush—the magnolia, black-throated blue, Cape-May, orange-crowned, golden-winged, Blackburnian, and even the rare cerulean warbler was represented. The after-
noon's adventure produced 80 species, including 23 species of warblers!

These are all precious memories. To recall them and muse about them is to re-live some of the most exciting moments of the past, and to experience anew some of life's real thrills. These and many other experiences will remain with me always, and as time goes on, I hope that many others will take their places beside these that have already come my way.

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The Student's Page

Edited by MRS. N. R. BARGER

Would you like to watch birds feed this winter? There is a very easy way to do this and perhaps many of you have already discovered what fun it is to watch birds eat. The method I am thinking of is doing it right in your cozy homes through a window with a feeding tray placed in a sheltered sunny spot.

There are many types of feeding trays but the one I want to tell you about is like the one illustrated which can be fastened to a window sill. It has a slanting glass roof and the back is open so that you can fill the tray sections simply by opening your window. If your house has storm sashes, however, you will have to go outside to clean and refill the tray. This kind of feeding tray makes bird watching much more fascinating because you can watch the birds at close range. After the birds have become accustomed to feeding at your tray, you can come directly to the window to observe them.

The illustrated tray is recessed under the glass roof so that rain, sleet and snow are kept out of the shelf. It has an outer perch which is particularly convenient for the birds to land upon before hopping into the feeder. Cleats are nailed across the feeding tray forming boxes or sections which help to keep the seeds on the tray during stormy weather.

If this sort of tray is too complicated for you to build you can have a simpler one like a shelf with a ledge around it, but as stated before, it is a big advantage to have a roof to keep out the rain and snow. Feeders can be bought, but don't you think it is a great deal more fun to plan and build a tray yourself?

I'll never forget the thrill I had one day last fall seeing seven chickadees come all at once to feed at our tray. They came all winter long in threes and fours and occasionally in groups of five but never again seven at one time. To me chickadees are most welcome since they are always