

BIRDS OF AMERICA.

FERRUGINOUS MOCKING-BIRD.

† ORPHEUS RUFUS, *Linn.*

PLATE CXLI.—MALE, FEMALE, AND NEST.

READER, look attentively at the plate before you, and say if such a scene as that which I have attempted to portray, is not calculated to excite the compassion of any one who is an admirer of woodland melody, or who sympathizes with the courageous spirit which the male bird shews, as he defends his nest, and exerts all his powers to extricate his beloved mate from the coils of the vile snake which has already nearly deprived her of life. Another male of the same species, answering the call of despair from his “fellow creature,” comes swiftly downwards to rescue the sufferers. With open bill he is already prepared to strike a vengeful blow at the reptile, his bright eye glancing hatred at his foe. See a third grappling with the snake, and with all its might tearing the skin from its body! Should this alliance of noble spirits prove victorious, will it not remind you that innocence, although beset with difficulties, may, with the aid of friendship, extricate herself with honour?

The birds in the case represented were greatly the sufferers: their nest was upset, their eggs lost, and the life of the female in imminent danger. But the snake was finally conquered, and a jubilee held over its carcass by a crowd of Thrushes and other birds, until the woods resounded with their notes of exultation. I was happy in contributing my share to the general

jor, for, on taking the almost expiring bird into my hand for a few minutes, she recovered in some degree, and I restored her to her anxious mate.

The Brown Thrush, or Thrasher, by which names this bird is generally known, may be said to be a constant resident in the United States, as immense numbers are found all the year round in Louisiana, the Floridas, Georgia, and the Carolinas. Indeed some spend the winter in Virginia and Maryland. During spring and summer they are met with in all our Eastern States. They also enter the British provinces, and are sometimes seen in Nova Scotia; but I observed none farther north. It is the most numerous species found in the Union, excepting the Robin or Migratory Thrush. Those which breed in the Middle and Eastern Districts return to the south about the beginning of October, having been absent fully six months from that genial region, where more than half of the whole number remain at all seasons. They migrate by day, and singly, never congregating, notwithstanding their abundance. They fly low, or skip from one bush to another, their longest flight seldom exceeding the breadth of a field or river. They seem to move rather heavily, on account of the shortness of their wings, the concavity of which usually produces a rustling sound, and they travel very silently.

No sooner has the bird reached its destined abode, than whenever a fair morning occurs, it mounts the topmost twig of a detached tree, and pours forth its loud, richly varied, and highly melodious song. It scarcely possesses the faculty of imitation, but is a steady performer; and, although it sings for hours at a time, seldom, if ever, commits errors while repeating the beautiful lessons set to it by Nature, all of which it studies for months during spring and summer. Ah! reader, that I could repeat to you its several cadences, all so full of sweetness and melody, that one might imagine each last trill, as it dies on the ear, the careful lullaby of some blessed mother chanting her babe to repose;—that I could imitate its loudest notes, surpassed only by those of that unrivalled vocalist, the Mocking-bird! But, alas! it is impossible for me to convey to you the charms of the full song of the Brown Thrush; you must go to its own woods and there listen to it. In the southern districts, it now and then enlivens the calm of autumnal days by its song, but it is generally silent after the breeding season.

The actions of this species during the period of courtship are very curious, the male often strutting before the female with his tail trailing on the ground, moving gracefully round her, in the manner of some pigeons, and while perched and singing in her presence, vibrating his body with vehemence. In Louisiana, the Brown Thrush builds its nest as early as the beginning of March; in the Middle Districts rarely before the middle of May; while in Maine, it seldom has it finished before June. It is placed without much

care in a briar bush, a sumach, or the thickest parts of a low tree, never in the interior of the forest, but most commonly in the bramble patches which are every where to be met with along the fences or the abandoned old fields. Sometimes it is laid flat on the ground. Although the bird is abundant in the barrens of Kentucky, in which and in similar places it seems to delight, it has seldom been known to breed there. In the Southern States the nest is frequently found close to the house of the planter, along with that of the Mocking-bird. To the eastward, where the denseness of the population renders the bird more shy, the nest is placed with more care. But wherever it is situated, you find it large, composed externally of dry twigs, briars, or other small sticks, imbedded in and mixed with dried leaves, coarse grass, and other such materials, thickly lined with fibrous roots, horse hair, and sometimes rags and feathers. The eggs are from four to six, of a pale dull buff colour, thickly sprinkled with dots of brown. Two broods are usually raised in the Southern States, but rarely more than one in the Middle and Northern Districts.

They breed well in aviaries, and are quite tractable in a closer state of confinement. The young are raised in the same manner, and with the same food, as those of the Mocking-bird. In cages it sings well, and has much of the movements of the latter bird, being full of activity, petulant, and occasionally apt to peck in resentment at the hand which happens to approach it. The young begin their musical studies in autumn, repeating passages with as much zeal as ever did Paganini. By the following spring their full powers of song are developed.

My friend BACHMAN, who has raised many of these birds, has favoured me with the following particulars respecting them:—"Though good-humoured towards the person who feeds them, they are always savage towards all other kinds of birds. I placed three sparrows in the cage of a Thrush one evening, and found them killed, as well as nearly stripped of their feathers, the next morning. So perfectly gentle did this bird become, that when I opened its cage, it would follow me about the yard and the garden. The instant it saw me take a spade or a hoe, it would follow at my heels, and, as I turned up the earth, would pick up every insect or worm thus exposed to its view. I kept it for three years, and its affection for me at last cost it its life. It usually slept on the back of my chair, in my study, and one night the door being accidentally left open, it was killed by a cat. I once knew a few of these birds remain the whole of a mild winter in the State of New York, in a wild state."

The Brown or Ferruginous Thrush is the strongest of the genus in the United States, neither the Mocking-bird nor the Robin being able to cope with it. Like the former, it will chase the cat or the dog, and greatly tease

the racoon or the fox. It follows the *Astur Cooperii* and the Goshawk, bidding them defiance, and few snakes come off with success when they attack its nest. It is remarkable also, that, although these birds have frequent and severe conflicts among themselves, yet when the least alarm is given by an individual, a whole party of them instantly rush forth to assist in chasing off the common enemy. When two nests happen to be placed near each other, the males are seen to fight furiously, and are joined by the females. On such occasions, the males approach each other with much caution, spreading out, and often jerking up, down, or to either side, their long fan-like tail, generally betaking themselves to the ground, and uttering a note of defiance, until one of them, perceiving some advantage afforded by its position or some other circumstance, rushes to the charge. The attack once fairly made, the fight seldom ends until one has beaten the other, after which the vanquished rarely attempts to retaliate, and peace is made between the parties. They are fond of bathing and of dusting themselves in the sand of the roads. They bathe in small puddles during the heat of the sun, and then remove to the sandy paths, where they roll themselves, dry their plumage, and free it of insects. When disturbed on these occasions, they merely run off and hide themselves under the nearest bushes, to return as soon as the intruder has retired.

During the period of incubation, the male is heard from the top of a neighbouring tree, singing for hours at a time. It ascends to this pinnacle by leaping from branch to branch, and selects several trees for the purpose, none of them more than a hundred yards from the nest. Its song over, it dives towards its favourite thicket, seldom descending by the assistance of the branches. Both male and female sit on the eggs. Their mutual attachment, and their courage in defending their nest, are well known to children living in the country. They resent the intrusion even of man, assaulting him, and emitting a strong guttural note resembling *tchai, tchai*, accompanied by a plaintive *weō*, and continued until the enemy retires. Should he carry off their treasure, he is sure to be followed a great way, perhaps half a mile, both birds continually crossing his path, and bestowing on him the reproaches he so richly deserves.

The food of this Thrush, which is also known by the name of French Mocking-bird, consists of insects, worms, berries, and fruits of all sorts. It is fond of figs, and wherever ripe pears are, there also may it be found. In winter, they resort to the berries of the dogwood, the sumach, and holly, and ascend to the tops of the tallest trees in search of grapes. At this season, they are easily caught in traps, and many are exposed for sale in the southern markets, although few of the old birds live long in captivity. Some planters complain of their propensity to scratch the ground for the purpose

of picking up the newly planted corn; but I am of opinion that the scratching has reference exclusively to worms or beetles, their strong legs and feet being well adapted for this purpose; and, generally speaking, they are great favourites, as they commit few depredations on the crops.

This species, as well as the Robin and some others of this family, suffer greatly during the autumnal moults, and when in cages at this season, become almost naked of feathers. The young acquire the full beauty of their plumage during the first winter.

It is abundant in the Texas, and breeds there. It was not observed by Mr. TOWNSEND on the Rocky Mountains, or any where beyond them. According to Dr. RICHARDSON, the vicinity of the Saskatchewan river forms its northern limits. Dr. T. M. BREWER writes me as follows:—"Your account of the habits of the Brown Thrush does not leave me any thing to add. I will therefore only trouble you with the following test of the ability of this bird to detect the intrusion of eggs not belonging to it. I found this summer, 1837, a nest containing three eggs, which I removed, leaving in their place three Robin's eggs, and retired to wait the issue. In a few moments the female approached, gave the contents of the nest a hasty survey, and immediately flew off. She returned in a short time in company with her mate, and both flew to the nest apparently in the greatest rage, took each an egg in their *claws*, and dashed it against the ground at the distance of more than a rod from the nest, the female repeating the same to the other egg. This done, they continued for some time to vent their rage on the broken eggs, tossing them about, and at the same time manifesting their displeasure in every possible way. They afterwards forsook the nest. The eggs measure an inch and an eighth in length, six and a half eighths in breadth. They never raise more than one brood in a season here."

FERRUGINOUS THRUSH, *Turdus rufus*, Wils. Amer. Orn., vol. ii. p. 83.

TURDUS RUFUS, Bonap. Syn. p. 75.

ORPHEUS RUFUS, *Fox-coloured Mocking-bird*, Swains. and Rich. F. Bor. Amer., vol. ii. p. 189.

FERRUGINOUS THRUSH or THRASHER, *Turdus rufus*, Nutt. Man., vol. i. p. 328.

FERRUGINOUS THRUSH, *Turdus rufus*, Aud. Orn. Biog., vol. ii. p. 102; vol. v. p. 441.

Bill and tail more elongated than in the other species, wings shorter. Upper parts light brownish-red; inner webs of quills dusky. Wings crossed by two white bars margined anteriorly with black, being on the tips of the first row of small and secondary coverts; lower parts yellowish-white, the breast and sides marked with triangular dark brown spots. Female smaller.

Male, $11\frac{1}{2}$, 13.

VOL. III.



Ferruginous Mocking Bird
 Males 1, 2, 3, Female 4.



Audubon, John James. 1841. "Ferruginous Mocking-Bird, Orpheus rufus, Linn. [Pl. 141]." *The birds of America : from drawings made in the United States and their territories* 3, 9–13. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.319254>.

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