

## Long-tailed Chat

One writer says, "The chat's coming in the spring is like the arrival of a brass band." <sup>It is certain that</sup> ~~In fact,~~ he (fairly) takes the town- that is, his voice does. <sup>But</sup> For he has a decided dislike of appearing on the platform in person. He likes to sit behind a thin screen of bushes and fairly shout in <sup>your</sup> ~~many~~ ears, but if you hesitate and approach his bush you will hear his song continued from the bush behind, but seldom get a glimpse even of his flitting. One suspects that he likes this "leading-on" game and he will keep it up as long and as far as you will.

The chat is the largest of the warblers, the eastern phase being the yellow-breasted chat, and the western being the long-tailed chat. His outward appearance is described thus: upper parts olive-green tinged with gray, top of head bluish-gray, long tail greenish, under parts yellow becoming buffy-white on belly. But how little you know the bird by this finger-print system.

Few people ever meet or <sup>have</sup> ~~get~~ the chance to get acquainted with this American songster that really has no equal. Like Tom Sawyer, he is a born show-<sup>man</sup> ~~off~~. He is an irrepressible conversationalist- mostly with himself- and singer, with a large repertoire excelled <sup>only</sup> by the mockingbird <sup>perhaps</sup>. He sings most of the day and far into the night, and has other topsy-turvey twists in his make-up.

Frank Chapman says of him: "After an acquaintance of many years with the chat I frankly confess that his true character is a mystery to me. While listening to his strange medley and watching his peculiar actions, we are certainly justified in calling him an eccentric, but that there is method in his madness no one who studies him closely can doubt."

"Is the odd jumble of whistles, chucks, and caws uttered by one bird in that copse yonder, or by half a dozen different birds in as many places? Approach cautiously, and perhaps you may see him in the air -- a bunch of feathers twitched downward by the queer, jerky notes which animate it. One might suppose so peculiar performance would occupy his entire attention, but nevertheless he has seen you; in an instant his manner changes, and the happy-go-lucky clown, who a moment before was turning aerial somersaults, has become a shy, suspicious haunter of the depths of the thicket, whence will come his querulous chüt, chüt as long as your presence annoys him."

While we have so many different song birds that one may hear from daybreak till the sun sets, it is unusual and rare to hear a bird that sings till midnight or later. When we were in southern California, we could never forget the inspiring night song of the mockingbird. But it never moves north. A few birds like the owls, ~~and the~~ nighthawks, and herons hunt in the darkness instead in daylight. Occasionally in the suburbs of Portland ~~once in a great while~~ one catches the single outburst of a white-crown sparrow. In the spring time and especially on moonlight nights one may hear the vocal somersaults and whimsy terms of the long-tailed chat.

Birds are a big topic today whether feathered or mechanical ones. The mechanical flyer has attained to astonishing heights in perfection and power, and this in a fairly short time, as evolution of a species goes. Even as we wait for news, the history of the world may be changed in the twinkling of an eye by the performance of this great new bird of the air. No such great test or responsibility has rested on the feathered hosts that conquered the clouds eons ago, but down through the ages they have gone about their business ~~of~~ day by day, year by year of keeping the balance of nature on the earth to man's benefit. Quietly they ~~go~~ <sup>do</sup> about their <sup>daily labor</sup> ~~business~~ of ridding the fields, farms and forests of insect pests that if left unchecked would be as momentous as ~~a~~ great wars. And the birds have another mission that is seldom mentioned, not economically critical, not startling. <sup>What</sup> What would a garden be without the song of a bird? <sup>What</sup> What would the woods be but lifeless and silent without these cheery folks?

I was looking out of the window down through the tall firs and on to the Willamette River where a late, red-gold moon had fallen into the water whose current was trying to dissolve the brilliant ball and carry it away. One minute it was round. The next its even curve was broken into ragged edges and glittering shafts of light that rippled away down stream. But it wasn't the moon or the river that held me at the window at midnight. It was the voice of a bird that came up clear and ringing through the stately firs. The chat had come to our woods, <sup>too</sup>.