

Welcome Back, Stranger

Seeing the American robin again for the first time. By Emma Marris

There are approximately 50 American robins in my front yard, a noisy, colorful flock centered on my crab apple tree. They have been partying for at least 24 hours, gorging themselves on the fruit and singling lustily.

These festive aggregations are a common feature of spring throughout the United States as the birds migrate north. Robins are big, colorful thrushes that do well in our current human-dominated era. They like the same sorts of habitats we do: lots of grass and a few trees and shrubs. The expanding suburban landscape has increased their numbers in the last several decades.

We often mistake rarity for value and disdain the common. Robins are sometimes victims of this reflexive snobbery. I too have caught a bird in the corner of my eye, only to turn away once I identified it as “just a robin.” So in celebration of the flock that is visiting me, I looked up American robins in four bird books: one from 1827, one from 1922, one from 1988, and one from 2019.

“The first land-bird seen by me, when I stepped upon the rugged shores of Labrador, was the Robin, and its joyful notes were the first that saluted my ear,” writes John James Audubon in 1827’s *Birds Of America*. He then goes on to be disappointed that “numberless Indians” did not at once spring out of the woods to be his volunteer guides to the natural history of North America. Returning to the robins, Audubon tells us about their migratory flocks in March, adding, “Several persons may at this season stand round the foot of a tree loaded with berries, and shoot the greater part of the day, so fast do the flocks of Robins succeed each other. They are then fat and juicy, and afford excellent eating.” Back then, people ate robins on toast! The idea seems faintly disgusting now. But appreciating their flavor was not incompatible with appreciating them when alive. “Every one knows the Robin and his song,” Audubon writes. “Excepting in the shooting season, he is cherished by old and young, and is protected by all with anxious care.”

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With his 1861 children’s poem *Robin Redbreast*, the Irish poet William Allingham created confusion over the robin’s plumage that has lasted ever since. In 1922’s *Western Birds*, author Harriet Williams Myers tried to set the record straight by pointing out that the robin’s breast is “by no means red” but actually a sort of brick-orange. Fair enough. Myers also says they are among the earliest spring arrivals to the West Coast, “enlivening the dreary month of March by their songs.” Myers bemoans that robins were, in her day, still frequently mown down in large numbers by market hunters. She expresses a hope that passage of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, just four years earlier, will end the “needless slaughter of our Robins.” And lucky for all of us, it did.

In 1988’s *The Birder’s Handbook* by Paul Ehrlich, David S. Dobkin, and Darryl Wheye, we learn that the robin often has two rounds of chicks each year, sometimes three. Though adults love fruit, they feed their nestlings primarily insects. (It is for this reason that having a messy yard and planting native species that insects like is arguably better for birds than putting out seed. Many baby birds need high-protein insects to thrive.) The book also mentions a post-Migratory Bird Treaty Act threat to the species: spraying DDT to combat Dutch elm disease in the 1950s. Luckily, robins came through that as well.

In 2019’s *How to Know the Birds* by Ted Floyd (for which I provided an enthusiastic blurb), robins are the second bird introduced to the reader. Floyd challenges our reflexive dismissal of the species as ordinary and unremarkable. And indeed, now that we know all they have been through, their easy abundance today seems all the more wonderful. “The robin is one of the truly marvelous birds of our continent,” Floyd writes. “The migrations of robins are stirring; their adaptability to different habitats is staggering; their easily observed family life is endlessly fascinating and, with no apologies for sentimentalism, heartwarming.”

Soon the merry revelers outside my window will pair up, build nests, breed, and lay three or four of the most beautiful eggs in the world, a blue so striking that we have named the color after it: robin’s egg blue. Note that finding a broken blue egg on the ground does not mean tragedy has occurred; the mother robin often pitches the



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shells out of the nest after her young have hatched. But not all nests are “successful”—rates vary from place to place. If a baby robin makes it to adulthood, it may live up to 13 years, flying north and south, partying and breeding and parenting—a nice long life for a songbird. Albatrosses can make it to 40, and they look like wise elders from the moment they lose their juvenile plumage. Robins don’t live nearly as long, nor look nearly so serious. They sing and gorge themselves on fruit and wrestle together in the treetops. They seem to be having a pretty good time. They

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are common but astonishing. I am so glad they didn’t all end up on toast, and that they are flourishing in my front yard. I feel honored by their visit. 🐦

In Montana, robins arrive each spring in March and April and return to Mexico from September through November. Some robins stay in Montana all winter in residential areas, especially if temperatures stay moderate. According to the North American Breeding Bird Survey, robin numbers in Montana are steadily growing.