ORNITHOLOGY

NATURE RAMBLINGS
by Frank Thone

Leaving Home

> THE FLIGHT of birds toward the south, as winter approaches, was one of the first objects of naturalists' curiosity. In the ancient world, when people traveled much less than the birds, all sorts of speculations arose over their annual disappearance. Big, conspicuous birds like storks were seen by occasional travelers in Egypt, and the inference was correctly made that they were the same storks that had been nesting in the countries north of the Mediterranean during the summer.

Smaller birds, however, had a way of mysteriously vanishing over night, and some astonishing notions arose about what became of them. Even Aristotle turned a credulous ear to the report that swallows dived to the bottoms of ponds and spent the winter wrapped in balls of mud. It's a curious thing, but there is no known case of a bird hibernating in any way. Bats do, but birds don't.

Sure as birds start toward the south in autumn, some human songster will start tuning up on that old sentimental favorite about "When the swallows homeward fly." It's nice music, but poor ornithology. Swallows, and all other southward-migrating birds, are not going home in the fall; they are leaving home. Home is where the nest is. They leave home to avoid the hardships of winter, and come back home in the spring to raise new families.

At least a beginning was made, about a quarter-century ago, toward a solution of the mystery of what starts birds southward. It isn't chilly weather, for many migrations begin while it is still quite warm. It turns out to be the shortening days. This was experimentally demonstrated by several researchers, who kept wild birds in cages for a few weeks, artificially controlling the length of daylight hours. It proved possible to confuse the poor birds utterly, starting them northward instead of southward, simply by adding electric illumination to the daylight period and giving them longer days, like those of spring, instead of the shortening days of autumn.

Another curious thing about birds wintering in the south is that species from our Atlantic and Pacific coasts often occupy the same areas in Central America. Yet when spring comes they somehow sort themselves out all right, and each kind gets back to its proper nesting grounds without apparent confusion or difficulty.

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Deterioration of most *insecticides* is negligible, if they are stored properly; protection from freezing of liquid sprays, and from dampness in the case of powders are the primary precautions.