



The Early Worm

► ROBINS, when they appear on their northward migration, are universally taken as the first authentic sign of spring. No one can resist robins. They are anything but shy; you always know when they hit town. They are as shoutingly optimistic as Walt Whitman, as cheerfully conspicuous as a convention of Legionnaires or Shriners. They are the go-getters among birds.

What they go-get, in early spring at least, seems to be mostly earthworms. How they spot them nobody seems to know. But you'll see a robin make a few dirt scattering dabs with his beak, then haul the luckless annelid up and gobble it down. When we see a robin in a tug-of-war with a worm, we all forget the traditional American sympathy for the underdog and root for the robin.

Actually, if we were mindful of our own selfish interests as human beings, we'd be pulling for the worm—maybe even throwing clods at the robin to make him desist from his murderous assault. For earthworms are among the most useful of all wild animals, in terms of their importance to human welfare. The millions of them that inhabit the topsoil of every fertile field make a mass contribution to our agriculture that would be hard to estimate in dollars and cents.

For untold ages, earthworms have been doing for the soil what man has begun to do only with his latest inventions—plow and fertilize it at the same time. They make innumerable burrows, which go to considerable depths. They hide in these during the daytime and reach out of them at night to seize and drag back fragments of leaves for food. The partly digested remains of this material, mixed with earth that has passed through their bodies and deposited as "worm casts" at the mouths of the bur-

rows, are a major factor in enriching the soil with humus. The burrows themselves provide means for soil aeration, help mightily in getting water into the ground that would otherwise be lost as runoff, and make root penetration much easier.

Although robins and other birds do take considerable toll of earthworms, it

is to be doubted that their inroads do any real damage to agricultural interests. There are so many worms, and they multiply so rapidly, that these small gaps in their ranks are hardly noticeable. Nevertheless, when we see a worm vanishing down a robin's gullet we might at least spare a sympathetic thought for the poor thing.

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