

"First Robin" Usually Winter Boarder

Ornithology

The robin, so generally considered the harbinger of spring by folk in the northern states, really does not mind zero weather at all as long as he is well fed. The "first robin" reported early in the spring, really may be a bird that never was more than a dozen miles away during the coldest of the cold waves.

Norman A. Wood, veteran curator of birds at the University of Michigan museum, has records dating back to 1880, in which there is entry after entry of red-breasts being seen on New Year's day, within 20 miles of the University, and with the thermometer down around the zero mark. The availability of food, not the rigors of low temperature, largely determine the extent of the southern

migration of robins, he explains.

His records indicate that a flock of several hundred robins wintered in the vicinity of one of southern Michigan's small lakes during 1912, with temperatures of from 14 to 20 below zero being recorded for January and February. The following New Year's day, 40 were counted in one flock. Unpicked berry patches nearby provided food.

Such patches, or apple orchards in which the fruit has been left to rot on the tree limbs in the fall, supply the birds well until March brings a thaw, he said. Insectivorous birds, on the other hand, cannot sustain themselves when ice and snow cover the ground and therefore invariably fly south, or perish.

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Squirrels Swim Mississippi

Zoology

The old cowboy boast, "I've swum the Mississippi and I've clumb the Great Divide" is made good by such small animals as squirrels, according to Superintendent W. T. Cox, of the Upper Mississippi Refuge.

Many animals swim the Mississippi River from bank to bank, undoubtedly doing it of their own free will. Gray squirrels, fox squirrels, and red or pine squirrels are among the animals most frequently found boldly essaying to cross from the Wisconsin or Illinois bank to the distant Minnesota or Iowa shore.

Hundreds of the squirrels are seen struggling through the swift, muddy current. For the first few hundred yards after taking to the water these animals keep their bushy tails sticking straight up as if to keep them dry. Later, as the animals become wearied, their tails dragging in the water make progress slow and steering difficult.

An interesting feature of the squirrel migration is that the animals in nearly every case seem to have a destination in view. When allowed to crawl up an oar into a boat, as they are perfectly willing to do, they will ride along if the boat is going in a direction that suits them, but if not, they will soon jump out and resume swimming. Woodchucks, raccoons, skunks, and other animals not ordinarily seen in the water occasionally strike out boldly and swim the Mississippi.

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Stone Age Grasshopper

Archæology

One of the oldest representations of an insect in art has come to light in the archæologically famous cave of the Three Brothers in the commune of Montesquieu-Avantes. It is a grasshopper crudely carved out of a bit of ancient bison bone now in the possession of Comte Begouen, father of the three youths who first discovered the cave of prehistoric wonders, and for whom it is named.

It is the first time that an insect of this type has been found in the art of the Old Stone Age, according to Comte Begouen, and presents a considerable puzzle to archæologists to explain, since such insects were rare in the cold climate that prevailed in France in the Magdalenian epoch when the carving was probably made.

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Fossil Pearls Found

Paleontology

Ten pearl-like fossils found by geologists of the University of California in rocks laid down about 25,000,000 years ago have proved under test to be real pearls, conforming in structure with the modern variety, and having as their source molluscs related to the present pearl oyster.

The pearls were uncovered while the University men were searching for fossils of the Cretaceous period near Redding, Calif. In spite of their 25,000,000 year burial from the time when dinosaurs were making their last stand on earth, the pearls still maintain a little of their luster.

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NATURE RAMBLINGS

By FRANK THONE

Natural History



Earliest Flowers

This is the season of catkin-blossoming trees. There are still a few pussy-willows to be found, the birches are trailing their long, caterpillar-like flower-clusters, and the first really warm day brings a shower of "red neckties" from all the gentry of the cottonwood groves.

Botanists reckon trees that bear their flowers in long, pendulous clusters after this fashion as the primitives of the woody plant world. A catkin is about the simplest assemblage of flowers that one can well imagine. There are no bright petals, no green sepals; only the bare necessities of pollen-producing or seed-bearing structures, strung irregularly or in a spiral along the central stem or axis.

Some of the catkin-bearing trees have only male, or pollen-producing, flowers on one individual; and only female, or pistillate flowers, that eventually bring forth the seed, on another. This is the case with the willows and poplars, and explains why some cottonwoods do not "shed cotton", but instead litter up the lawn and walks with "red neckties" or "caterpillars". In other species, like the birches, male and female catkins are borne on the same tree, but only the male flower-clusters are conspicuously trailing objects. The female catkins show up very little in the spring, and have their innings later on, when the seeds are ripe. Then they shed their hard little green scales in showers like a kind of summer snow.

The catkin-bearers, though primitive, are none the less important members of the tree world, for they include, among others, walnuts, oaks, beeches, willows, birches, chestnuts, ironwoods and hazel bushes.

Hepatica

In the warmer spots among the still naked bushes (*Turn to next page*)