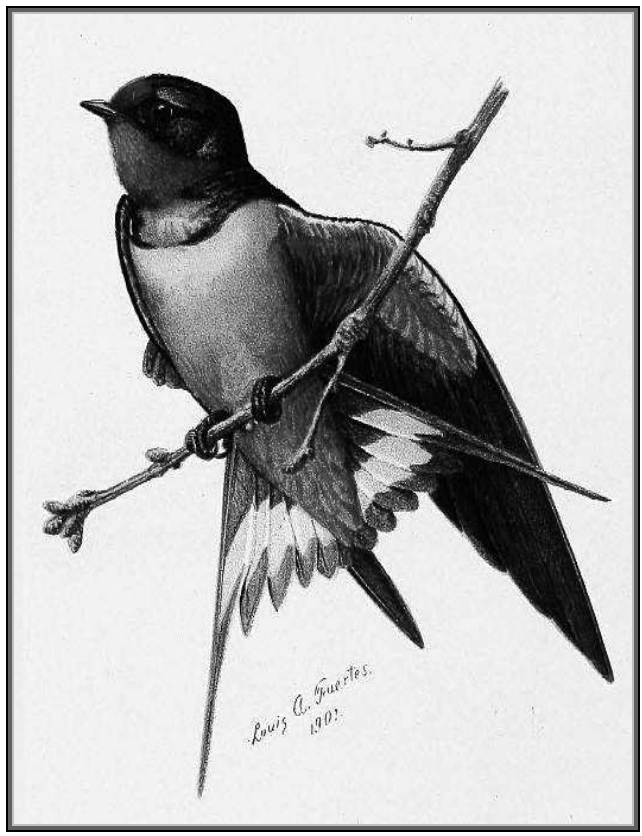
THE CHILDREN'S BOOK OF BIRDS

[ILLUSTRATED]

By



Olive Thorne Miller

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THE CHILDREN'S BOOK OF BIRDS

BY

OLIVE THORNE MILLER

WITH SIXTEEN COLORED PLATES

AND

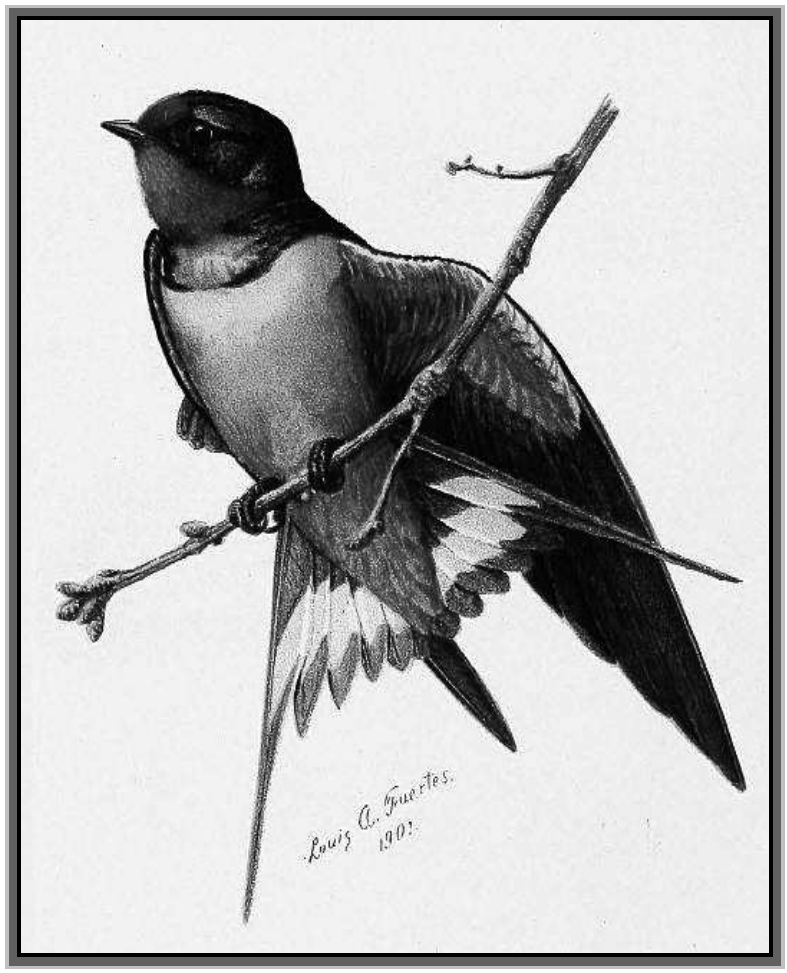
MANY OTHER ILLUSTRATIONS



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PREFACE



BARN SWALLOW

The Children's Book of Birds combines under a single cover the First and Second Books of Birds, originally published in 1899 and 1901 respectively and still popular with children in and out of school and with other beginners in the study of birds.

The book is intended to interest young people in the ways and habits of birds and to stimulate them to further study. It has grown out of my experience in talking to schools. From the youngest kindergarten scholar to boys and girls of sixteen and eighteen, I have never failed to find young people intensely interested so long as I would tell them about bow the birds live.

Some of the results of these talks that have come to my knowledge have been astonishing and far-reaching, such as that of one boy of seven or eight, who persuaded the village boys around his summer home to give up taking eggs and killing birds, and watch them instead, and who was dubbed "Professor" by his eager followers. The effect has always been to make children love and respect the living bird.

It has therefore seemed to me that what is needed at first is not the science of ornithology,—however diluted,—but some account of the life and habits, to arouse sympathy and interest in the living bird, neither as a target nor as a producer of eggs, but as a fellow-creature whose acquaintance it would be pleasant to make.

Naturally I have drawn on my own observations for much of the matter contained in this book, but these have been supplemented by consultation of recognized authorities in the various fields of ornithology.

In each bird family treated of in the Second Book I have given accounts of species to be found in the South and West as well as in the Eastern States, and I have selected the most common or typical species of each family. In cases where it was possible, I have chosen species represented in the different sections of the country, not only because the family traits are better shown, but because it is more encouraging to a beginner to become acquainted with birds he can see

almost anywhere. When familiar with these, he will be able to identify and study the rarer species.

OLIVE THORNE MILLER.

Eight of the sixteen colored plates are from drawings by Louis Agassiz Fuertes, and these are signed with his name. The other colored plates and the twenty-eight plain half-tones are from photographs of mounted specimens, many of which are in the collection of the Museum of Comparative Zoölogy, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and are reproduced by permission.

The First Book also contains twenty cuts in the text.

FIRST BOOK

THE FIRST BOOK OF BIRDS

I-WHAT YOU WANT TO KNOW

Birds seem to be the happiest creatures on earth, yet they have none of what we call the comforts of life.

They have no houses to live in, no beds to sleep on, no breakfast and dinner provided for them.

This book is to tell something about them; where they live and what they eat, where they sleep, how they get their beautiful dress, and many other things. But no one can tell all about their lives and habits, for no one knows all their ways.

Men who study dead birds can tell how they are made, how their bones are put together, and how many feathers there are in the wings and tail. Of course it is well to know these things. But to see how birds live is much more interesting than to look at dead ones.

It is pleasant to see how mother birds build their nests, and how they take care of their nestlings. It is charming to see the young ones when they begin to fly, and to know how they are taught to find their food, and to keep out of danger, and to sing, and everything young birds need to know.

Then when they are grown up, it is interesting to find out where they go in winter, and why they do not stay with us all the year round.

One who goes into the field to watch and study their ways will be surprised to find how much like people they act. And after studying

living birds, he will never want to kill them. It will seem to him almost like murder.

II- WHEN THEY COME IN THE SPRING

In the long, cold winter of the New England and Middle States, not many birds are usually seen. In the cities there is always the English sparrow, and in the country, now and then a chickadee, or a woodpecker, or a small flock of goldfinches.

But very early in the spring, long before grass is green, even while snow is on the ground, the birds begin to come.

Some morning a robin will appear, standing up very straight on a fence or tree, showing his bright red breast and black cap, flirting his tail, and looking as if he were glad to be back in his old home.

Then perhaps the same day will come the hoarse chack of a blackbird, and two or three will fly over and alight in a big bare tree, looking, it may be, for a good place to build a bird city.

Soon will be heard the sweet little song of the song sparrow or the bluebird, and then we shall know that summer is coming, for these are the first birds of spring.

Day after day, as the snow melts away and the sunshine grows hotter, more birds will come. One day a catbird or two, another day an oriole in black and gold, and another day a pert little wren. So it will go on, till by the time June comes in, all our birds will be back with us, very busy, hopping around in our bushes and trees, making their nests all about, and singing the whole day long.

Almost the first thing every bird thinks of, when he comes to us, is making the nest. For summer is the only time in his life that a bird has a home.

He does not need a house to live in. He cares nothing for a roof to cover him, because when the sun is hot, he has the broad green

leaves on the trees to shade him. And when it rains his neat feather coat is like a waterproof that lets the drops run off, leaving him warm and dry under it.

He does not need a dining-room, because he eats wherever he finds his food, and he wants no kitchen, because he prefers his food raw.

He has no use for a bedroom, because he can sleep on any twig; the whole world is his bedroom.

He cares nothing for closets and bureaus, because he has only one suit of clothes at a time, and he washes and dries that without taking it off.

He wants no fire to keep him warm, for when it is too cold he spreads his wings and flies to a warmer place. A bird has really no need of a house,—excepting when he is a baby, before his eyes are open, or his feathers have come, or his wings have grown. While he is blind, naked, and hungry, he must have a warm, snug cradle.

So when the bird fathers and mothers come in the spring the first thing they do is to find good places and build nice cradles, for they are very fond of their little ones. They spend the spring and summer in working for them, keeping them warm, feeding them till they are grown up, and then teaching them to fly and to take care of themselves, so that when summer is gone they will be ready to go with the other birds to their winter home.

THE NESTLING

III-THE BIRD'S HOME

Each bird mother has her own way of making the nest, but there is one thing almost all of them try to do, and that is to hide it.

They cannot put their little homes out in plain sight, as we do our houses, because so many creatures want to rob them. Squirrels and snakes and rats, and some big birds, and cats and many others, like to eat eggs and young birds.

So most birds try, first of all, to find good hiding-places. Some tiny warblers go to the tops of the tallest trees, and hide the nest among the leaves. Orioles hang the swinging cradle at the end of a branch, where cats and snakes and naughty boys cannot come. Song sparrows tuck the little home in a tuft of weeds, on the ground, and bobolinks hide it in the deep grass.

After a safe place is found, they have to get something to build of. They hunt all about and gather small twigs, or grass stems, or fine rootlets, and pull narrow strips of bark off the grapevines and the birch-trees, or they pick up strings and horsehairs, and many other things. Robins and swallows use mud.



BALTIMORE ORIOLE AND NEST

As they go on building, the mother bird gets inside and turns around and around to make it fit her form, and be smooth and comfortable for her to sit in.

When a nest is made, it must be lined. Then some birds go to the chicken yard, and pick up feathers, and others find horsehairs. Some of them pull off the soft down that grows on plants, or get bits of wool from the sheep pasture, or old leaves from the woods, and make it soft and warm inside.

Some bird homes are only platforms, where it seems as if the eggs must roll off, and others are deep burrows, or holes in the ground, where no one can get in. Some are dainty baskets hung between two twigs, and others are tiny cups of felt with lichens outside.

Each species of bird builds in its own way. There are as many different ways to make nests as there are kinds of birds to make them.

Then after all the trouble birds have taken to build a nest, they seldom use it a second time. If a pair have two broods in a season, they almost always build a new one for each family.

A few birds, such as eagles, owls, and sometimes orioles, and others, repair the home and use it again, and woodpeckers sometimes nest in the old holes. But generally, after the young birds have flown, we may be sure the nest will not be wanted again.

When the nest is finished, the eggs are laid in it, one by one. We all know how pretty birds' eggs are. Some are snowy white, some are delicate pink, and some blue. Many have tiny dots and specks on them, and a few are covered with queer-looking streaks and lines. But pretty as they are, I think no one would be so cruel as to take them away from the poor little mother, if he remembered that her young ones are inside them, and that she loves them as his own mother loves him.

I have heard people say that birds do not care for their eggs. Let me tell you what a little chickadee mother did when a man tried to steal the eggs out of her nest.

The nest was in a hole in an old stump, and the man could not get his hand in, so he had to take them out one at a time with a little scoop.

At first the mother flew at him and tried to drive him away. Then chickadees and other birds who lived near came to help her. All flew about his face with cries, so that he had to use one hand to keep them away from his eyes. But still he went on taking out the eggs.

At last the little mother was so wild with grief that she dashed into the hole and sat there in the doorway, right before his face. He could not get another egg without hurting her, and he was ashamed to do that.

This was as brave in the tiny creature as it would be for a human mother to throw herself before a fierce, hungry tiger. Do you think she did not care for her eggs?

IV-THE BABY BIRD

A baby bird, as you know, always comes out of an egg. And beautiful as these eggs are, they are most interesting when you think that each one holds a tiny bird.

Eggs are not all alike, of course. One the size of a bean is large enough to hold a hummingbird baby, till it is old enough to come out. But the young ostrich needs a shell nearly as big as your head. So there are all sizes of eggs to fit the different sizes of birds.

If you should break a fresh egg you would not see a bird, for it would not be formed at that time. After the egg is laid in its soft bed, it has to be kept warm for many days, and that is why the mother bird sits on her nest so quietly. She is keeping the eggs warm, so that the little ones will form and grow, till they are as big as the shells can hold.

While the mother is sitting her mate does all he can to help, though each species has its own way. The blue jay brings food to his mate, so that she need not leave the nest at all, and many others do so. But the kingbird father simply watches the nest to protect it while the mother goes for food. A redstart gets into the nest himself, to keep the eggs warm while his mate is gone, and a goldfinch coaxes his mate to go off with him for a lunch, leaving nest and eggs to take care of themselves.



REDSTARTS (FEMALE ON NEST)

Another thing the father birds do is to sing. This is the time when we hear so much bird song. The singers have little to do but to wait, and so they please themselves, and their mates, and us too, by singing a great deal.

When the little birds begin to be cramped, and find their cradle too tight, they peck at the shell with a sort of tooth that grows on the end of the beak, and is called the "egg tooth." This soon breaks the shell, and they come out. Then the mother or father carefully picks up the pieces of shell, carries them off, and throws them away, leaving only the little ones in the nest. Perhaps you have found these broken shells on the ground sometimes, and could not guess how they came there. When the birdlings break out of their prison they do not all look the same. Ducks and geese and chickens and quails, and other birds who live on the ground, as well as hawks and owls, are dressed in pretty suits of down. They have their eyes open, and the ground birds are ready to run about at once.

A man who studied birds, once saw a young duck get its first suit of down. He picked up the egg just as the little bird inside was trying to get out. In a few minutes the shell fell apart, and out stepped the duckling on his hand. It seemed to be covered with coarse black hairs, which in a moment began to burst open, one by one, and out of each came a soft fluff of down. So in a few minutes, while the man stood there and held him, the little duck was all covered with his pretty dress.

But most birds hatched in nests in trees and bushes, like robins and bluebirds, are very different. When they come out of their shells they are naked, have their eyes shut, and look as if they were nearly all mouth. A young hummingbird looks about as big as a honey bee, and a robin baby not much bigger than the eggshell he came out of.

They lie flat down in the nest, seeming to be asleep most of the time. All they want is to be warm and to be fed.

To keep them warm, the mother sits on them a great part of the time, and for the first few days of their lives, the father often brings most of the food. Sometimes he gives it to the mother, and she feeds

the little ones. But sometimes she gets off the nest, and flies away to rest, and get something to eat for herself, while he feeds the nestlings.

There is one bird father who—it is thought—never comes to the nest, either to watch the eggs or to help feed the nestlings. That is our hummingbird, the ruby throat.

We do not know the reason for this, and it is not fair to say hard things about him until we do. It may be that he thinks his shining ruby would show the hiding-place of the nest, or it may be that the little mother is not willing to have any help. I think this last is the real reason, for she has a great deal of spirit, and always drives away others from her feeding-places.

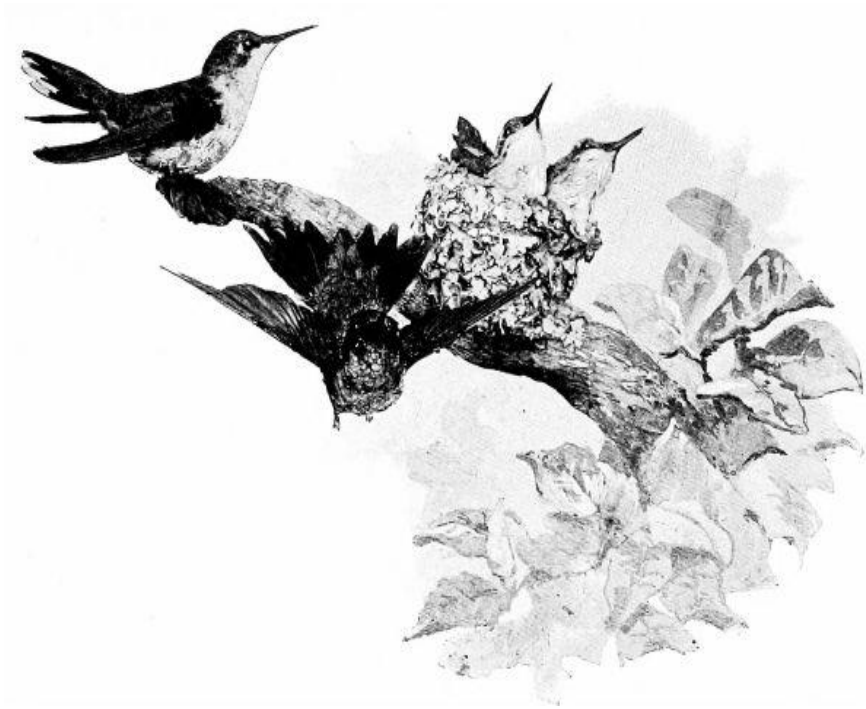
Young birds grow very fast, and soon feathers begin to come out all over them. They are not very pretty at this time.

V-HOW HE IS FED

Soon after the young bird comes out of the egg, he begins to be hungry. All day long, whenever the father or mother comes near, he opens his great mouth as wide as he can, to have it filled, and the moment he gets his voice he cries for food.

Then the old birds have to work hard. Three or four hungry nestlings can keep both father and mother busy from morning till night, hunting for caterpillars and beetles and grubs and other things to feed them. It seems as if the little fellows never could get enough to eat. Each swallow baby wants seven or eight hundred small flies every day, and a baby robin needs more earthworms in a day than you can hold in your hand at once.

At this time you will see robins hunting over the lawn, and carrying great beakfuls of worms up to the nest. Bluebirds you will find looking in the grass, and sparrows hopping about on the ground, all seeking soft worms and grubs and insects for the nestlings; and they are so busy they do not get much time for singing.



RUBY-THROATED HUMMINGBIRD

At this time the orioles go all over the orchard trees looking for tiny worms, and little warblers seek them under every leaf.

Woodpeckers find the insects hidden behind the bark of trees, by cutting holes through it. Chickadees and nuthatches pick the tiniest insect eggs out of the crevices, and flickers hunt everywhere for ants.

As soon as one of the old birds has his mouth full, he flies to the nest to feed the young.

But not all birds feed in the same way. A robin just drops a big earthworm, or a part of one, into the gaping baby mouth. Many other birds do so also. Sometimes, when an insect is too big or too hard, they beat it till it is soft, or break it up, before giving it to a little one.

But hummingbird mothers and flicker mothers have a different way. When they collect the food they swallow it, as if they wanted it

for themselves. Then they go to the nest, and jerk it up again in mouthfuls, and feed the nestlings. This is called feeding by "regurgitation," or "throwing up."

The way they give the food is very curious. They push their long beaks into the nestling's throat, and poke the food far down; so the young one does not even have the trouble of swallowing.

This looks as if it must hurt, but the nestling seems to like it, and is always ready for more. The pigeon mother lets the young one poke his beak down her throat, and get the food for himself.

If the food is hard, like corn, birds who feed in this way let it stay in the crop till it is soft and better fitted for tender throats, before they give it out.

It is comical to see a nest full of little birds when the father or mother comes with food. All stretch up and open their big mouths as wide as they can, and if they are old enough, they cry as if they were starving.

Some birds bring food enough for all in the nest, every time they come. A cedar-bird, feeding wild cherries, brought five of them every time, one for each of the five nestlings. One cherry was held in his mouth, but the other four were down his throat, and had to be jerked up one by one.

Other birds bring only one mouthful at a time, and when there are five or six in the nest, they have to make as many journeys before all are fed.

Some persons who have studied birds think that each nestling is fed in its turn; but they look so much alike, and are so close together, that it is hard to tell, and I am not sure that it is so.

I will tell you a story I have heard about feeding little birds. A child picked up a young goldfinch who had fallen out of the nest. He took

him home and put him into the canary's cage, which was hanging on the front porch.

Soon the family heard a great noise among the birds, and went out to see what was the matter. The baby goldfinch had hopped on to a perch in the cage, and seemed to be afraid to come down, though the old birds had brought food for him, and were calling him to take it.

The canary looked on a while, and then all at once he flew to the wires and took the food from the birds outside; then he went back to the perch beside the little one and gave it to him. This he did many times.

The next day another young goldfinch was picked up and put in the cage, and the canary took food from the parents and fed both.

After a few days the old birds came with a third little one, and as all were now old enough to fly, the cage door was opened, and they all flew away.

VI-HIS FIRST SUIT

Some birds that live on the ground—as I told you—have dresses of down to begin with. These little fellows have no warm nest to stay in, but run around almost as soon as they come out of the egg. Young ducks and geese wear this baby suit for weeks, before they begin to put on their feather coats.

Young birds that spend most of their time in the water, like grebes, and others that live in a cold country, have the down very thick and fine, like heavy underclothes, to keep them dry and warm.

Birds whose home is underground, like the kingfisher, or in the trunk of a tree, like the woodpecker, have hardly any down at all. They need no baby clothes in their warm cradles.

Robins and most other song birds have only a little down on them, and very soon the feathers begin to grow.

When the tiny quills push themselves up, they look like little white pins sticking out all over. Each bit of down grows out of a little raised place on the skin that looks like a pimple, and the feather comes out of the same.



YOUNG WOOD THRUSH

As the feather grows, the bit of down clings to it till it is broken off. Sometimes it holds on till the feather is well out. We can often see down sticking to a young bird's feathers.

The little feathers grow very fast, and before he is ready to fly a young bird is well covered. Birds hatched with their eyes open, and already dressed, who have to run and fly very soon, get their wing feathers early; but birds who live many days in the nest, like robins and bluebirds, do not get theirs till they are nearly grown.

The tail feathers are the last to come to full length, and you will notice that most birds just out of the nest have very dumpy tails.

A bird's first suit of feathers is called his nestling plumage. In some families it is just like the dress of the grown-up birds, but in others it is not at all like that. It is usually worn only a few weeks, for the young one outgrows it, and needs a new and bigger one before winter.

When a bird is fully dressed, his body is entirely covered, and it looks as if the feathers grew close to each other all over him. But it is not so. The feathers grow in patterns, called "feather tracts," with spaces of bare skin between them. These bare places do not show, because the feathers lap over each other and cover them.

The pattern of the feather tracts is not the same in all birds. A few birds of the Ostrich family have feathers all over the body.

There is another curious thing about the nestling plumage. You would expect a young bird to look like his father or mother; and some of them do. Many nestlings are dressed exactly like their mothers; and not until they are a year old do the young males get a coat like their father's. Some of them, indeed, do not have their grown-up suits for two or three years.

Then, again, many young birds have dresses different from both parents. Young robins have speckled breasts, and spots on the shoulders, which the old birds have not.

When the father and mother are dressed alike, as the song sparrows are, the young birds generally differ from both of them. When

the father and mother are different, like orioles or bluebirds, the young are usually like the mother the first season. In some cases the father, mother, and young are almost exactly alike.

Birds who live on the ground need dresses of dull colors, or they would not be very safe. The ostrich mother, who makes her nest in plain sight on the sand, is dressed in grayish brown. When she sits on the eggs, she lays her long neck flat on the ground before her; then she looks like one of the ant-hills that are common on the plains of Africa, where she lives.

The South American ostrich, or rhea, fluffs out her feathers and looks like a heap of dry grass. The male ostrich is dressed in showy black and white, and he stays away all day, but takes care of the nest at night, when his striking colors cannot be seen.

VII-HOW HE CHANGES HIS CLOTHES

It takes a bird weeks to put on a new suit of clothes. He has nothing but his feathers to protect him from cold and wet, and as feathers cannot grow out in a minute, he would be left naked, and suffer, if he lost them all at once. So he changes his dress one or two feathers at a time.

Some day a feather will drop from each wing. If you could look, you would see that new ones had started out in the same place, and pushed the old ones off. When the new ones are pretty well grown another pair will fall out.

If all dropped out at once, besides suffering with cold he would not be able to fly, and he could not get his living, and anybody could catch him. But losing only one from each side at a time, he always has enough to fly with.

It is the same way with his tail feathers. He loses them in pairs, one from each side at the same time.



AMERICAN GOLDFINCH

The soft feathers that cover his body drop out one by one. Thus all the time he is putting on a new suit he still wears part of the old one. In this way he is never left without clothes for a moment.