

Along The Trail

by

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Have you ever gotten intimate glimpses of the home life of a pair of birds? I had a robin nest in my spruce tree, and when the babies were a week old I set up a blind four feet away and eyed the parents through the slit in my sheeting house.

For a long time she knew I was in the blind and didn't want to come near. She hopped from branch to branch and squawked, and I thought "If she doesn't keep quiet she will attract that raven nesting up in the redwood, then she'll have something to squawk about."

The sun beat on my blind and I wished my jacket was in the house. Suddenly the faintly-red breasted female plopped down on the young, adjusted her body over them, and remained still.

A fly buzzed in the grass, I heard a toilet flush in the house, and a logging truck roared by on the highway. The mother robin opened her bill slowly as in a yawn, vibrated her throat a few times and remained still again, but with ever alert eyes wide open and surveying from within her needle-enclosed room.

When her mate came with his mouth crammed full of worms she eased off the nest. Three long tubes with gaping yellow mouths shot upward and into each he stuffed a part of the worm cargo. He reached into the nest and pulled out a fat, white fecal sac and hopped out of the spruce. She returned to her setting.

He picks up his stuff on my lawn. I see him out there hopping unconcernedly but industriously about. When he is ready to depart for the nest his mouth is crammed and he wears a worm beard. Sometimes he visits the blackberries on the back fence and then he alights on the post nearest his tree with a mouth full of green stuff. Children birds, too, like variety, I suppose.

As I sit and watch through my blind's slit I hear a raven's wings cleaving the air, his feather oars making a thrumming sound with each stroke, as he pushes along. It reminds me of a sound which is made when a boy throws a light board broadside into the wind.

My foot has gone to sleep and I let it sleep, for I must wait until one of the big robins is in position, then I will punch my camera's shutter release.

When he comes again with his mouth stuffed full of food I think how this is the fellow who calls each day to hurry in, and serenades every day into night. He seems to fling his notes about with a recklessness, probably brought on by his happiness over the nest in the spruce. He distresses my wife because she can't sleep after 5 o'clock.

As the day wears on, wearily for me, I know about the world outside my blind mostly by the sounds I hear. I know that the sun is behind a fog bank as light fades. Swifts are cleaving the sky over me. I hear their chipping twitter. I hear the white-crowned sparrow sing, over and over, and wonder why that hummingbird keeps hovering just outside the blind. Can she be gathering nest material for a second nest? It is the last of May now, and time.

The female robin does nothing but watch the nest now. Her three babies are so ill-clothed that they require her warmth, but in another week she can leave them alone and both parents can pack worms to the fast-growing birds.

This nest was a break. It was only five feet high, and in a little spruce right at the end of my house. Another nest was 'way up in an apple tree, one was high on a barn rafter, and still another, containing three eggs about the color of a blue flash bulb, but maybe a little greener, was also in a spruce tree.

Sit and think, sit and think, that is all I have to do, and when it seems like a long time between the male's trips I wonder "Is he all right? Is he coming back? What would happen if a Cooper's hawk hit him as he worked? The female would be hard put to keep her babies warm and feed them, too. Could she do it? Would she? I suppose she might try."

But back he comes. I hear him flop into the tree and she gets up. The three tubes rise with her leaving, and the process is repeated again.

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