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THE FRIENDLY TOWHEE OR CHEWINK

by

William L. Finley and Ed F. Averill

Summer is here and so is the towhee, as he has been all winter. In January when the rain came down and the winds blew so wildly that they whipped off limbs from the fir trees, the morning would find lonely and hungry towhee back under the kitchen window begging for bread crumbs. His note was a plaintive whining tone that seemed to ask as much for human friendship as for food. He needed both, for there were no other bird voices to be heard, and food was scarce also.

Little Blinky, the Gairdner's woodpecker who also staid with us through the winter, was somewhere around during the dour days, but he was shy and almost silent. Unlike the towhee who usually scuttled along on the ground under cover of the bushes, the woodpecker didn't like to get his feet wet and pattered about the trunks of the old apple trees making believe the sap would be running pretty soon when he could commence his tattoo of tapping the bark. But he had nothing to complain of, because he was fixed for the stormy weather with a snug hole bored in the under side of a cross-piece on the grape arbor, and not two feet away a big chunk of suet was nailed up so that he could almost reach out and eat his breakfast. But he didn't care for bread crumbs and never came to the feeding tray under the window, so he wasn't much of a winter chum for the towhee.

Towhee spent most of these dark days under the window, edging up the frail limbs of the bridal-wreath bush to hop into

the covered tray, talking contentedly as he ate. Once or twice when the tray became empty, he fidgeted about and wailed that he was starving to death. He fluttered to the window-sill, his red eye peering inside, for he knew the bread crumbs came from there.

Now with the warm days of June, he wanted his bread crumbs just the same for breakfast, dinner and supper. Even though he spent most of the day scratching out ants and a variety of beetles, or scurrying along the rows of vegetables in the garden hunting for cabbage-worms, potato-bugs, and other pests that are destructive to crops, he invariably returned several times a day for his crumbs. Perhaps we spoiled him with these plentiful hand-outs, but it gave us pleasure to have him so tame, and we knew that he was a good bug hunter as well. He didn't mind being watched while he ate and talked quietly as if he enjoyed a face at the pane. Who wants to eat all of his meals alone?

One of our neighbors who is an ardent gardner became irate because he found someone was stealing a march on him in the early hours of the morning and digging up his early corn seed. Laying for the culprit, he spied the gentle towhee working as busy as a bee along the rows. Gloating, the gentlemen-farmer picked him off with his gun and sent him to a Biological Survey expert to have him pronounce sentence of death on all towhees. To his chagrin, the stomach contents of the bird showed only insects that prey upon garden stuff, and not a kernel of corn. Undoubtedly the gardner had been out-witted by the wily black crow who loves corn and knows how to get it- and

get away.

The Oregon towhee is one of the common birds of the Willamette Valley and is sometimes called ground-robin, and sometimes cat-bird because of his alarm notes. In reality, the towhee or chewink is something like a large sparrow. His striking color easily identifies him. He has a jet-black head and neck in contrast to his white belly and clear reddish-brown flanks. But it is his fiery-red eye that distinguishes him from any of his relatives.

Three kinds of towhees live in Oregon and their dress is so different that one might think that they were not of the same family. The green-tailed towhee is a resident of eastern Oregon, a lover of the arid sagebrush country. He has a crown of reddish-brown, the edge of the wing bright yellow, the tail tinged with yellowish-green, and a white throat bordered with black stripes. He is the real songster of the family with high clear notes ending in a softer trill.

The brown towhee that lives commonly in California is found in southwestern Oregon, and is just a plain brown bird with a longish tail. His most noticeable note is an emphatic "chip", but he hasn't much of a song.

Some birds, like different people, have strong personalities. Among our feathered residents, the towhee is not of the mediocre class. He is individual in dress and actions. Being a ground bird and wedded to life in the thicket and tangle, he is rarely seen in a tree high from the ground. His nest also is found on the ground, but often in some hedge-row or low shrubbery. If you hear a scratching in the dry leaves and take

it for some good sized animal, you will probably find it is a towhee busy at his hunting.

The towhee's nest is usually made of dead leaves, strips of bark, and occasionally a few twigs. The lining is almost always of fine dead grasses. It is not covered over like nests of certain other ground birds, but is protected from the sun and curious eyes only by the limbs and leaves of the bushes under which it is hidden. Although fairly ample in size, it is really a frail cradle and usually goes to pieces during the autumn rains or in the winter storms.

Four or five white eggs, finely and evenly spotted with dark red, are usually laid in May. When one approaches the nest, especially after the eggs have hatched, the parents immediately appear, moving excitedly about the bushes, whining in alarm.