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Towhee, the Shy Garden Singsong  
by  
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One might say that the towhee is no great shakes in the bird world. He is neither large, over musical, nor dramatic. Perhaps he would never be mentioned in the same breath with the glorious, soaring eagle that pierces the upper sky with his wild scream of power and freedom. Nor would he be mentioned with the scintillating, gauzy-winged hummingbird, so little and so lovely that once seen is never forgotten. But the humble towhee of the black head and collar, the rich red-brown sides and white under parts, and glittering red eye has something that none of these other fine birds have. He is the shy, never failing companion of the dooryard and the kitchen window. He likes his chosen home, and he likes the home folks who feed him all the year around. For oregonus stays with us summer and winter, and we should miss him if he was not there. This is something worth mentioning in a part of the world that drizzles and glowers for the better part of twelve months, and once in a while freezes up.

The towhee is also called chewink and ground bird and when it comes to interpretations of his call notes, they are just as numerous and intelligible as the polyglott of dialects on the war-torn European borders. The towhee group are shy birds of the chaparral and when you step up for a closer look at a bush that is topped by a singing bird, it embarrasses him and he is liable to drop down to the ground and leave hurriedly, giving you only a flash of his white tail feathers, and a mewing nasal complaint. Here is what one disappointed observer got out of it: "Whank-yang-kit-er-er-er." Another made it out: "Hoorip-zee-zee-ee." A third who was a musician with a carefully trained ear was perfectly <sup>sure</sup> she heard: "Meah-sit-sit-sit-who-who." Another listener had it right down pat and couldn't be mistaken: "Ah-fewgee-wee-wee-pilly-willy-willy." Here is evidently a fine chance for one who likes a windy argument to join the contest. At least the towhee has everybody guessing.

The genus Pipilo has a number of species. Spotted towhees, of which the Oregon towhee is one, are found in western United States and Mexico among the

brushy regions. *Oregonus* is perhaps one of the most colorful and interesting, in part due to a certain fatherly alertness for the whole clan. No sound or movement, hostile or friendly, escapes his notice. Only at mating time does he throw caution to the winds. Then he mounts a sapling and "churrs" by the hour, either to distract attention from his sitting lady, or to openly entertain her and assure her through the long hours. All through the summer and early fall the towhees scratch about under the plants that border the house. The brighter male makes trips continually from the feeding tray under the window to the nest somewhere down the hillside, a nest which was either in a low bush or on the ground, and made of leaves and small sticks lined with grass. There were four or five pale bluish eggs speckled with brown and lavender.

Towhee enjoys the feeding tray and is perhaps the most regular boarder.

There are always lots of bread crumbs, raisins, and scraps of food. Later in the season when the weather begins to be nippy, there are chunks of suet tied up in the apple trees. Gairdner woodpecker and the chickadees claim this as their special dish. If by chance the tray becomes empty, the towhee calls attention to it. He pleads and whines that some one has forgotten him entirely. He wails that he is actually starving. Actually he is plump and glossy-coated, ready for the coming dreariness of winter, but he can't help playing on your sympathies.

With approaching cold weather, the dew frosty on the grass of mornings, the grapes so ripe they are almost wine, the towhees band together down the hill, hunting and scratching like little hens, tossing the rustling leaves into the air. Or they sit in a bunch talkingly listlessly in a half nude tree yellowed by the weakening sun.

Wherever you are, you may find a towhee that has adopted a district that suits him. *Pipilo erythrophthalmus* is black except for a white belly, brown sides, white patches on the wings and corners of tail, and bright red eye. He is found from Canada to the lower Mississippi Valley, and from the

Atlantic to the western parts of Dakota and Nebraska. *Pipilo maculatus oregonus* (Oregon towhee) is much like the bird just described but with white trimmings less pronounced. He is found in the Transition zone from British Columbia to San Francisco and breeds south to southern California. The Arctic towhee has a black head, back, neck, and chest mixed with olive-gray, belly white, flanks reddish, wings and tail with heavy white markings. Breeds in Transition and upper Sonoran zones on the plains and eastern foothills of the Rocky Mountains, and from Saskatchewan south to southern Colorado. The spurred towhee is much like arcticus with colors darker and with differences in bill and feet. Breeds in the Rocky Mountains to California and from British Columbia to Lower California and northern Mexico. The San Clemente towhee is much like the spurred towhee but with tones of gray and dark brown. Found on San Clemente Island in southern California. The San Diego towhee is deep glossy-black and pure white with some brownish on the back. Found in the coast region of southern California to Lower California.

The group of fuscus towhees, while chaparral birds, of the same general habits of the maculatus, seem more like big fluffy brown sparrows than che-winks. The canyon towhee wears a light fufous cap with back and sides plain grayish-brown, throat buffy and spotted. Found from western Texas to Arizona and from eastern Colorado to Sonora. *Crissalis* or the California towhee is dressed in dull grayish-brown with throat light rufous shading to white on under parts. Found in California west of Sierra Nevada, and the Shasta region south to San Bernardino. The Anthony towhee is much like *crissalis* but smaller and duller in color. Found from southern California to Lower California. The Abert towhee is plain grayish-brown with darker head, under parts lighter. Breeds from Colorado to southern California, Arizona, and New Mexico. The green-tailed towhee has a bright rufous head, white throat, upper parts olive-gray becoming bright olive-green on wings and tail, under parts white. Breeds from the western edge of the plains to the Coast Range of California, north to Montana, migrates to lower and central Mexico.

The green-tailed towhee is an individualist in both color and temperament. One would hardly recognize him as a towhee. Not knowing him, one might make a guess that he was an over-grown warbler, or a cross between a yellow-breasted chat and a chipping sparrow. It is a bird of the upland sage and lupine spaces. The note that one would hear is a dainty mewling, but he has a surprising repertory of song. There is something dashing and wren-like about his more familiar ditties. The bird is eerie and secretive about his nest, flitting away over the gray-green sage like a rainbow shadow.

Seeds and insects are the principal foods of the towhees as a group. However, they also feed moderately on small fruits like berries, cherries, and even grapes.