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THE RED-BREASTED SAPSUCKER
by
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"That's a bird I have never seen before," said the school teacher who was out with half a dozen children, to see and know some of the birds. She had caught sight of a red-breasted sapsucker that was walking up the trunk of a white birch tree at Jennings Lodge.

"He is an expert of the woodpecker family with the sharpest little toes, two in front and two behind. You will note that he can walk up the tree trunk or back down just as easily, and he can hitch around the tree in a circle drilling a series of holes to suck out the sap and eat some of the cambium or soft inner bark. You will know him by his bright red head and breast, black back and wings, the latter with a white bar," said the naturalist.

"My father calls that the Red Tree-Sucker, and he says it ought to be killed because it drills little holes in the bark of his walnut trees" said one of the boys.

That is an attitude that is found in all phases of outdoor life, to kill off everything that is not a benefit to man. Yet, it takes a lot of scientific study and research to find the real facts. Some people who have seen a hawk kill a quail or grouse have jumped to the conclusion that all hawks should be shot. Yet, some of these predators are of economic value to mankind. In certain areas, it was thought

the beavers were cutting too many trees and blocking the streams and they should be destroyed. Facts show that the beaver is the most valuable wild mammal that lives in America.

"If the sapsucker is destructive in some ways, is it beneficial from other standpoints?" asked the teacher.

Major Charles Bendire in his "Life Histories of North American Birds" says that the food of this bird consists principally of grubs, larvae of insects, ants and various species of moths that are caught on the wing the way a fly-catcher hunts. Mr. F. E. L. Beal, formerly of the Biological Survey, said the food of this bird consists of 63% of animal matter and 37% of vegetable. He has the habit of removing patches of bark from live trees like the willows, but also eats the ants attracted by the sap.

"Personally I haven't been able to really analyze the food habits of this red-breasted bird that lives on my farm," said the nature lover. "I enjoy the flowers, trees and feathered residents. The habits and the actions of each bird are interesting."

"Will you tell us the story of this pretty woodpecker that bores holes in your trees?" asked one of the boys.

"There's only been one sapsucker here during the early spring, and our acquaintance started at daylight one morning when I heard some one knocking. It was not at the doorway, but apparently some one on the roof. It was such a high-pitched sound that I went to the attic, and there above at the side of a chimney was the red-head pounding on the

tin flashing. He rattled along with a dozen tattoos, then looked up with joy like a boy who was learning to be a drum major," replied the host.

"That is very much like a flicker who rattled the roof of one of our neighbors. They couldn't stand being wakened so early in the morning, so some one killed the flicker. I might have had the same feeling, because this happened every morning at daylight, but even though I was awakened, it didn't take me long to drop asleep again."

"It may be this was just a play of the red-head, or it might be he had the hope of attracting a mate by drumming instead of calling. No other red-head had appeared, and one morning there was a change in his attitude. The pounding was louder because he was clinging to the side of the house and had taken to a tin rainspout.

"Later on, this was discontinued, and I thought the sapsucker had left for the mountains. Yet he was still cutting little holes in the bark of the birch. There were several zones of borings, so he would retrace his steps and drink the sap.

"Next came the unusual part of his career that I could not understand. I have been saying 'he,' but as a matter of fact there was no way of telling whether it was a male or female. Both are exactly alike. I was sure the bird would depart within a few days, but finally I heard the dull pounding in this maple tree in front of our house. There was a dead limb half way up, and in the side of this I noticed a hole

about the size of a silver dollar. The sound was continuing, and I walked around and around, but couldn't see the woodpecker. Then I discovered he was inside of the hole, where he was pounding and drilling out chips. The thing I couldn't understand was, where is the mate? If this was a female, she must have been in hopes that a wandering male would show up later on.

"I took for granted it was a male. He seemed satisfied that when the home was completed a lady would show up. Sure enough, one morning the pair was in the maple. Since this was the first time we had ever heard of a pair of sapsuckers nesting in this region, many who came out to the farm were interested in watching the sapsucker, which seemed to be the female, go in and out of the nest. Members of the Audubon Society and the hundreds who attended meetings here at the farm had a chance to learn something of the life history of this bird at first hand. They planned to see the young sapsucker later on.

"But this didn't happen to be the end of the story. A little later when some more visitors came to see these birds, they were not to be found around the place. Climbing to the nest, I found no sign of an egg, and the nest hole had not been completed at the bottom, and was very small. The energetic male had courted a migrating female, had brought food for his little lady and started a home. But she would have none of it and deserted him. She likely insisted on

showing him that this region was not the proper place for a sapsucker to raise a family, and after this pleasant little fling with him, she went on to her usual summer home in the mountains.

"It is now past the breeding season, the bachelor is still here. Every morning at daylight he tattoos on the tin rain-spout. He is exactly like a determined swain who courts a lady, but if she refuses to marry him, he remains an old satisfied bachelor. He apparently loves this country home, because he sticks around the birch and walnut trees and frequently drops into the big maple tree to poke his pointed nose in the empty love-nest. He may never find a bride who will live here with him.

"This is the story of my red-breasted sapsucker," said the naturalist.