



Birds Every Child Should Know

Neltje Blanchan

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Originally published in 1907, *Birds Every Child Should Know* is a collection of storylike descriptions of more than one hundred birds commonly found in the United States. Neltje Blanchan's detailed descriptions of birds—their physical attributes, calls, nesting and mating habits, and other behaviors—are nothing less than enchanting, and some read almost like fairy tales. Take for instance the mockingbird's call:

“when the moonlight sheds a silvery radiance about every sleeping creature, the mockingbird sings to his mate such delicious music as only the European nightingale can rival. Perhaps the stillness of the hour, the beauty and fragrance of the place where the singer is hidden among the orange blossoms or magnolia, increase the magic of his almost pathetically sweet voice; but surely there is no lovelier sound in nature on this side of the sea.”

or the yellow warbler's nest:

“an exquisite little cradle of silvery plant fiber, usually shreds of milkweed stalk, grass, leaves, and caterpillar's silk, neatly lined with hair, feathers, and downy felt of fern fronds.”

Blanchan includes folk history (how Native Americans and southern slaves thwarted mosquitoes by hanging gourds to attract purple martins) as well as common threats to birds that foreshadow current dangers to avian life (the toll taken on songbirds by lighthouses and electric towers). Such informative details, along with the author's disarming enthusiasm for her subject, will charm adult bird-watchers as well as children.

Cornelia Mutel's informative foreword places Blanchan's writing in the historical context of a turn-of-the-century environmental reawakening and burgeoning activism and research by women on behalf of dwindling bird populations.

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