A Spicing of Birds

Poems by Emily Dickinson

Illustrations by Early Masters of Bird Art

Selected and introduced by Jo Miles Schuman and Joanna Bailey Hodgman
A Spicing of Birds
A Driftless Series Book
For Howard, Marc, Beth, and David
&
For Kit, our children, our grandchildren,
and my brother Chuck

In memory of M.B.M. and D.W.B.
Contents

List of Illustrations ix

Introduction: Emily Dickinson, Intimate of Birds xiii

A Spicing of Birds, Poems by Emily Dickinson 1

Biographical Appendix: The Bird Artists 65

Acknowledgments 73

Bibliography 77

Illustration Credits 79

Index 81

Index of First Lines 85
Illustrations

A View from the East of the Dickinson Home, circa 1930  xii

Cordelia J. Stanwood
“Six Little Chickadees”  xxii

John James Audubon
Common [Eastern] Blue Bird (male, female, young) and Great Mullein  2

Alexander Wilson

John James Audubon
American Robin or Migratory Thrush (male, female, young) and Chestnut Oak  6

John James Audubon
Wandering Rice-bird [Bobolink] (male, female) and Red Maple  10

John James Audubon
Great Horned Owl  12

Allan Brooks
(Clockwise from top) Gray-cheeked Thrush, Hermit Thrush, Wood Thrush, Veery, Olive-backed Thrush [Swainson’s Thrush], and Bicknell’s Thrush  15

Robert Ridgway
Bob-O-Link [Bobolink]  17
Louis Agassiz Fuertes
(Left, from top) Orchard Oriole (adult male, young male first winter, adult female); (right, from top) Baltimore Oriole (adult male, adult female), [Eastern] Meadow Lark (adult male) 21

Alexander Wilson
(From top) Yellow-bird or [American] Goldfinch, Blue Jay, and Baltimore Bird [Baltimore Oriole] 22

Louis Agassiz Fuertes
(Counterclockwise from top) Northern Pileated Woodpecker (adult male, adult female) and Yellow-bellied Sapsucker (adult female, adult male) 24

John H. Hall
Ruby-throated Humming-bird 26

Louis Agassiz Fuertes
Ruby-throated Hummingbird (female and male) and Blue Vervain 28

Allan Brooks
(From top), Rose-breasted Grosbeak (male in spring, female), [Northern] Cardinal (male in spring, female in winter), and [Eastern] Towhee (male and female) 31

Robert Ridgway
Baltimore Oriole 32

John James Audubon
Baltimore Oriole or Hangnest (adult male, young male, female), and Tulip Tree 36

John James Audubon
Meadow Starling or [Eastern] Meadow Lark (males, at left and flying, and females, in nest and on ground) and Yellow-flowered Gerardia 38
Robert Ridgway
  Song Sparrow 41

John James Audubon
  Whip-poor-will and Black Oak 45

Artist unknown (from Thomas Nuttall)
  Snow Bird [Dark-eyed Junco], Song Sparrow, [Eastern] Phoebe, American Goldfinch, Vesper Sparrow, and [Eastern] Towhee 47

Robert Ridgway
  White-throated Sparrow 49

John James Audubon
  Great Carolina Wren [Carolina Wren] (male, female) and Dwarf Buck-eye 53

Mark Catesby
  The Blue Jay and Bay-leaved Smilax 55

Allan Brooks
  (Top, from left) [Eastern] Bluebird (female, juvenal male) and [American] Robin (adult male, juvenal) 56

Mark Catesby
  Eastern Bluebird and Carrion Flower 58

John James Audubon
  Common American Crow and Black Walnut 62

Cordelia J. Stanwood
  “Hermit Thrush Nest with Four Eggs and Bunchberry” 64
“A View from the East of the Dickinson Home as It Appears Today; the Boxed Garden is Where the Orchard Was in Emily’s Day.” Illustration from Josephine Pollitt, Emily Dickinson: The Human Background of Her Poetry, 1930, photographer unknown.
Introduction

Emily Dickinson, Intimate of Birds

Yet was not the foe — of any —
Not the smallest Bird
In the nearest Orchard dwelling
Be of Me — afraid.

In those four short lines, in her own unusual word order, the poet Emily Dickinson summed up her closeness with birds. Put in more ordinary prose: Not even the smallest bird in her orchard need feel afraid of her. In his essay “What Are You Really?” Roger Tory Peterson struggled over what to call people fascinated by birds. He asked: “Are you a bird watcher, ornithologist, ornithophile, an aviphile, a bird lover, bird fancier, bird bander, birder, bird spotter, lister, ticker [list maker], twitcher [pursuer of rare birds] — or what?” Dickinson falls into the categories of bird watcher and bird lover, and we would add bird listener and “intimate of birds.”

According to a recent survey conducted by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 46 million people in the United States enjoy watching birds. Of these, only about one person in eight can identify more than twenty species, so the large majority probably consists of home birders: people who maintain bird feeders and enjoy seeing and identifying the birds in their own yards. This was the case with Dickinson, and although she mentioned twenty-six species specifically in her poems, given her interest, she may have known many more by name.

Born December 10, 1830, Dickinson lived in Amherst, Massachu-
setts, all her life and rarely left home. Educated at Amherst Academy and Mary Lyon’s Female Seminary (now Mount Holyoke College), she became something of a recluse in later life and distilled her observations and philosophy into succinct poems. Current anthologies date her first poem as written in 1850, when she was twenty, and her last in 1886, the year she died at fifty-six. They are original, spare, and highly idiosyncratic poems. Receiving little notice during her lifetime, only a few were published. She did, however, send poems to friends in letters, or to accompany gifts of flowers. They became more widely known soon after her death, and she is now one of America’s most revered poets. She very rarely titled her poems, and they are referred to in this introduction by their number in The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, edited by Thomas H. Johnson. Johnson arranged them in what he believed from his research to be the chronological order of their composition. A more recent compilation, The Poems of Emily Dickinson, edited by R. W. Franklin, numbers the poems differently. We have included both sets of numbers under each poem in the body of this book; for example the poem beginning “The Judge is like the Owl” is referred to as J [for Johnson] 699/ F [for Franklin] 728.3

Dickinson lived on her father’s small farm — a fourteen-acre property with a barn, extensive perennial gardens, an orchard, vegetable garden, fields, and woods. This variety of habitats sheltered many birds. She observed them closely and knew intimately their songs, habits, and characteristics. Some of these species are rare around homes in New England today — bobolinks, whippoorwills, meadowlarks, bluebirds, and cuckoos suffered loss of habitat as large developments replaced fields and orchards. On the other hand, Dickinson may have seldom seen cardinals and mockingbirds, as these were infrequent
visitors in the Northeast during her lifetime, before global warming pushed their range northward.

No pocket guides to birds were available in Dickinson’s day. Although ornithologists published their findings from the beginning of the European settlement of America, popular bird identification books for the general public were not produced until almost the end of the nineteenth century. In 1832, Thomas Nuttall published a book for this purpose illustrated with woodcuts, but it was hardly a concise field guide — it numbered eight hundred pages.

Our selection of Dickinson’s poems is illustrated with the work of eight artist/ornithologists, all but one of whom lived at least part of their lives during the nineteenth century. The exception is Mark Catesby, who lived in the late seventeenth to mid-eighteenth century. These artists were chosen to show the variety and high quality of bird art over this time span. Dickinson may have been familiar with the work of five of them: Mark Catesby, Alexander Wilson, John James Audubon, John H. Hall, and Robert Ridgway. Some of the books they illustrated might well have been in the libraries of the schools she attended. (Brief biographical sketches of these pioneers of American bird illustration are included in the Appendix.) Careful study of the illustrations will find similarities among them. For instance, to illustrate the phoebe subject of Dickinson’s poem J1009 (page 47), we selected a color lithograph that Montague Chamberlain added to his much later revised edition (1903) of Thomas Nuttall’s 1832 A Manual of the Ornithology of the United States and Canada. However, in the same illustration you can see a song sparrow that clearly is an unacknowledged copy of Ridgway’s lithograph (1875) shown in the illustration for poem J1761 (page 41). Perhaps it was with Ridgway’s permission,
but possibly not. This kind of appropriation was not uncommon at the time and seems to have been tolerated. John James Audubon copied some of Wilson’s birds without giving credit. Moreover, some of the early work of these artists was often a collaboration with engravers, colorists (who filled in the engravings by hand), and other assistants.

Dickinson’s collected poems include 222 that make references to birds. Birds are woven through her poems like the string she mentions that “Robins steal . . . for Nests —.” Or perhaps we could say that her poems have “a spicing of Birds,” a phrase she used in describing the natural environment. She was a keen observer and often captures the essence of a bird with her words: “Before you thought of Spring . . . a Fellow in the Skies” (the bluebird, first to return); the “sweet derision of the crow”; “the new Robin’s ecstasy”; “mad and sweet — as a Mob of Bobolinks.” She knew their different habitats, mentioning birds of the meadows, woods, orchard, barn, lawns, and gardens. She was aware of their seasonal comings and goings. In a letter from Cambridge to her sister-in-law, Susan Gilbert Dickinson, in September 1864, she asked “Are the Apples ripe — Have the Wild Geese crossed —?”

We have selected poems for this collection that show Dickinson’s acute perceptions of the habits and qualities of the birds she knew. We also tried to represent as many species as possible, although in the case of some of her favorites — robins, hummingbirds, and orioles among them — they appear more than once, with a different focus in each poem. Taken as a whole, these poems put Dickinson in the class of skilled and experienced birders and reflect the many attributes of birds. Birds are part of the earth and of the sky; their songs can seem both natural and ethereal; their behavior both defines them and sug-
gests similar aspects of human behavior. The poems also reflect Dickinson’s fondness for contrasts: between religion and nature, optimism and pessimism, shyness and self-confidence, life and death.

Dickinson tells us, “Some keep the Sabbath going to Church — / I keep it, staying at Home — / With a Bobolink for a Chorister —.”\(^{10}\) Emphasizing optimism, she writes of the bluebird: “Her conscientious Voice will soar unmoved / Above ostensible Vicissitude.”\(^{11}\) In contrast, however, she says, “One Joy of so much anguish / Sweet nature has for me . . . Why Birds, a Summer morning / . . . Should stab my ravished spirit / With Dirks of Melody.”\(^{12}\) Defining her own shyness, Dickinson gives us the phoebe and the wren: “I dwelt too low that any seek — / Too shy, that any blame — / A Phoebe makes a little print / Upon the floors of Fame —.”\(^{13}\) And “For every Bird a Nest — / Wherefore in timid quest / Some little Wren goes seeking round —.”\(^{14}\) On the other hand, the raucous blue jay provides opposing behavior: “The Jay his Castanet has struck.”\(^{15}\) In winter, “the Jay will giggle / At his new white House the Earth.”\(^{16}\) And the hummingbird becomes a giddy cyclist: “Within my Garden, rides a Bird / Upon a single wheel —.”\(^{17}\) In addition, some bird songs create a mixture of emotions in the listener. Although they often bring joy and rising spirits, occasionally the songs emphasize the grief and silence of death: “The saddest noise, the sweetest noise, / The maddest noise that grows, — / The birds, they make it in the spring, / . . . It makes us think of all the dead / That sauntered with us here, / By separation’s sorcery / Made cruelly more dear.”\(^{18}\)

These examples show only some of Emily Dickinson’s characteristic approaches and subjects in her bird poems. The reader also notes and appreciates poems that focus simply on close descriptions; imagery and metaphor make these descriptions vibrant. Observing an owl, she notes, “The Judge is like the Owl —.”\(^{19}\) Of the woodpecker she writes,
“His Bill an Auger is.”20 And she tells us that “The Way to know the Bobolink” is “Precisely as the Joy of him —.”21

The Dickinson family fed the birds that lived near their house and barn. No commercial bird seed as we know it today was available, but in her poems and letters Dickinson often mentions giving them “crumbs,” which seems to indicate smallness of particle, not necessarily bread crumbs. In a letter to Mrs. Samuel Bowles, probably written June 18, 1880, Dickinson described how her father fed the birds during an April snowstorm the previous year: “the birds were so frightened and cold they sat by the kitchen door. Father went to the barn in his slippers and came back with a breakfast of grain for each, and hid himself while he scattered it, lest it embarrass them . . . their descendants are singing this afternoon.”22 She also wrote to thank Elizabeth Carmichael for a “little tub,” which she “shall keep till the birds [come], filling it then with nectars” presumably for hummingbirds.23 Dickinson realized the need to provide birds with water during a heat wave: “We have an artificial Sea and to see the Birds follow the Hose for a Crumb of Water is a touching Sight. They wont take it if I hand it to them — they run and shriek as if they were being assassinated, but oh, to steal it, that is bliss.”24

Dickinson seemed to be most deeply affected by bird song. In an unfinished fragment she wrote: “One note from one Bird / Is better than a million words / A scabbard holds (has-needs) but one sword.”25 She was so sensitive to bird song that it seemed to be an almost physical assault: “And then he lifted up his Throat / And squandered such a Note / A Universe that overheard / Is stricken by it yet —.”26 Although many of her poems mention bird songs without being clear as to species, she does refer to the calls and songs of the [meadow] lark, blue jay, robin, bluebird, plover, oriole, bobolink, blackbird, phoebe, whip-
poorwill, and cuckoo. She knew their unique vocalizations: “the Jays bark like Blue Terriers” she wrote to a friend.27 In a letter to Jane Humphrey, a former schoolmate, in the spring of 1852, a young Dickinson wrote: “I do wish I could tell you just how the Robins sang — they don’t sing now, because it is past their bedtime, and they’re all fast asleep, but they did sing, this morning, for when we were going to church, they filled the air with such melody, and sang so deliciously, that I tho’t really, Jennie, I never should get to meeting.”28 Dickinson knew, as all dedicated birders do, that you have to rise early to hear the great spring chorus of returning birds:

   The Birds begun at Four o’clock —
   Their period for Dawn —
   A Music numerous as space —
   But neighboring as Noon — 29

And she observed changes in the quality of their songs. In a letter to her brother Austin she wrote: “The air was really scorching, the sun red and hot, and you know just how the birds sing before a thunder storm, a sort of hurried, and agitated song — pretty soon it began to thunder . . . then came the wind and rain.”30

The welfare of the birds concerned her from an early age. In a letter to Abiah Root in February 1845, a fifteen-year-old Emily described unusual May-like weather unlike “arctic February” and then wrote: “I have heard some sweet little birds sing, but I fear we shall have more cold weather and their little bills will be frozen up before their songs are finished.”31

Well into the late 1890s, any serious study of birds entailed shooting specimens by the thousands; ornithologists, bird artists, and amateur collectors all thought it necessary. Moreover, bird feathers were in
great demand to decorate women’s hats. Some birds, such as egrets, were threatened with extinction. At its height, in the late 1890s, the feather trade was killing an estimated 200 million birds a year.\textsuperscript{32}

Emily Dickinson was ahead of her time in being outraged by the act of killing birds with a gun. Her poem \textit{j1102}, written around 1866, is a powerful testament to her horror at this practice:

\begin{quote}
... to be
Assassin of a Bird
Resembles to my outraged mind
The firing in Heaven,
On Angels — squandering for you
Their Miracles of Tune — \textsuperscript{33}
\end{quote}

Other writers, among them Henry David Thoreau, Celia Thaxter, and Sara Orne Jewett, also addressed this issue early on.

In 1889, Florence Merriam Bailey wrote \textit{Birds through an Opera Glass}.\textsuperscript{34} This portable book and the use of binoculars made it possible to identify birds in the field without first shooting them. It described seventy species and was considered the first useful field guide, but this was three years after Dickinson’s death. Bailey’s book was instrumental in furthering a growing interest in bird watching by the general public.\textsuperscript{35}

The advent of photography also aided in nondestructive bird identification and study. Cordelia Stanwood (1865 – 1958), of Ellsworth, Maine, was not above wearing hip rubber boots under her long skirts as she went out hunting for birds in the swamps and woods, carrying a heavy camera, tripod, and glass plates to document them in their natural habitats. Through her long, patient hours of observation, she was able to locate a large number of nests; the nests and young birds became her specialty. Her observations and photographs were used by
well-known bird authorities in their books, as well as in her own published articles.36

In the 1880s, prominent ornithologists began to be concerned about the slaughter. George Bird Grinnell, who founded the first Audubon Society in 1886, the year Dickinson died, was an early conservationist trying to end the market for eggs, birds, and feathers. Members of the society, by the thousands, signed a pledge to work against the destruction of birds and eggs. However, although the Audubon Society had

“Six Little Chickadees,” photograph by Cordelia J. Stanwood.

Men are picking up the apples to-day, and the pretty boarders are leaving the trees . . . I have heard a chipper say ‘dee’ six times in disapprobation. How should we like to have our privileges wheeled away in a barrel?
— From a letter to Louise Norcross, early September 1880, in Dickinson, Letters of Emily Dickinson, 3:670.
many enthusiastic members, it was financially unstable, and Grinnell gave up. He had made no progress against the use of bird feathers or other slaughter for market, and the organization folded. Frank Chapman, although an avid hunter, was also an early conservationist. In 1900, he initiated the still-popular annual Christmas Bird Count to replace the holiday tradition of a “match hunt” in which the largest pile of dead birds and animals won.

When these and other prominent, deeply concerned ornithologists failed to stop the slaughter, women took on the task. In 1896, after she read an account concerning the killing of herons and egrets for millinery, Harriet Lawrence Hemenway organized a group of women who created the Massachusetts Audubon Society. Soon chapters spread to other states. Through education, pressure, and example, they were able to stem the tide; the first federal protective legislation was passed in 1900. Further legislation in 1913 shut down the feather industry and protected all migrating birds. Emily Dickinson, had she lived into her eighties, would have rejoiced.

Susan Dickinson wrote in her obituary for Dickinson: “So intimate and passionate was her love of Nature, she seemed herself a part of the high March sky, the summer day and bird-call.”

Birds were an inseparable part of Dickinson’s world. She brings them to us in her poetry, where we see and hear them through her eyes and ears. Her brilliant observations enrich our own acquaintance with these same “common” birds. Many readers familiar with the songs of birds but less so with the cadences of poetry may find unexpected beauty and pleasure in her words.

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Notes


10. j324, “Some keep the Sabbath going to Church.”
11. J1395, “After all Birds have been investigated and laid aside.”
13. J1009, “I was a phoebe — nothing more.”
14. J143, “For every Bird a Nest.”
15. J1635, “The Jay his Castanet has struck.”
16. J1381, “I suppose the time will come.”
18. J1764, “The saddest noise, the sweetest noise.”
19. J699, “The Judge is like the Owl.”
20. J1034, “His Bill an Auger is.”
28. Letter to Jane Humphrey, about April 1852, in Letters, 1:198. Here, as elsewhere in letters and poems, words are spelled as Dickinson wrote them.
30. Letter to Austin Dickinson, 10 May 1852, in Letters, 1:204.
32. Weidensaul, Of a Feather, 151.
33. J1102, “His Bill is clasped — his Eye forsook.”
35. Weidensaul, Of a Feather, 134.
37. Weidensaul, Of a Feather, 152–53.
38. Ibid., 148–49.
39. Ibid., 155–61.

Introduction
Common Blue Bird

1. Male
2. Female
3. Young

Great Mullen: Verbasum Impaeva.
Before you thought of Spring
Except as a Surmise
You see — God bless his suddenness —
A Fellow in the Skies
Of independent Hues
A little weather worn
Inspiriting habiliments
Of Indigo and Brown —
With specimens of Song
As if for you to choose —
Discretion in the interval
With gay delays he goes
To some superior Tree
Without a single Leaf
And shouts for joy to Nobody
But his seraphic self —
1. Turdus melodus, Wood Thrush. 2. Turdus migratorius, Red breasted Thrush or Robin.
The Robin is the One
That interrupt the Morn
With hurried — few — express Reports
When March is scarcely on —

The Robin is the One
That overflow the Noon
With her cherubic quantity —
An April but begun —

The Robin is the One
That speechless from her Nest
Submit that Home — and Certainty
And Sanctity, are best
The Robin is a Gabriel
In humble circumstances —
His Dress denotes him socially,
Of Transport's Working Classes —
He has the punctuality
Of the New England Farmer —
The same oblique integrity,
A Vista vastly warmer —

A small but sturdy Residence,
A self denying Household,
The Guests of Perspicacity
Are all that cross his Threshold —
As covert as a Fugitive,
Cajoling Consternation
By Ditties to the Enemy
And Sylvan Punctuation —
If I shouldn’t be alive
When the Robins come,
Give the one in Red Cravat,
A Memorial crumb.

If I couldn’t thank you,
Being fast asleep,
You will know I’m trying
With my Granite lip!

J182/F210
The Way to know the Bobolink
From every other Bird
Precisely as the Joy of him —
Obliged to be inferred.

Of impudent Habiliment
Attired to defy,
Impertinence subordinate
At times to Majesty.

Of Sentiments seditious
Amenable to Law —
As Heresies of Transport
Or Puck’s Apostacy.

Extrinsic to Attention
Too intimate with Joy —
He compliments existence
Until allured away

By Seasons or his Children —
Adult and urgent grown —
Or unforeseen aggrandizement
Or, happily, Renown —

By Contrast certifying
The Bird of Birds is gone —
How nullified the Meadow —
Her Sorcerer withdrawn!

J1279/F1348
No Bobolink — reverse His Singing
When the only Tree
Ever He minded occupying
By the Farmer be —

Clove to the Root —
His Spacious Future —
Best Horizon — gone —
Whose Music be His
Only Anodyne —
Brave Bobolink —

J755/F766
The Judge is like the Owl —
I've heard my Father tell —
And Owls do build in Oaks —
So here's an Amber Sill —

That slanted in my Path —
When going to the Barn —
And if it serve You for a House —
Itself is not in vain —

About the price — ’tis small —
I only ask a Tune
At Midnight — Let the Owl select
His favorite Refrain.

J699/F728
The Bird her punctual music brings
And lays it in its place —
Its place is in the Human Heart
And in the Heavenly Grace —
What respite from her thrilling toil
Did Beauty ever take —
But Work might be electric Rest
To those that Magic make —

J1585/F1556