

## THE BROWN THRASHER AND THE TERRITORY THEORY

BY ARETAS A. SAUNDERS

IN the spring of 1923 I noted during early morning walks, that a Brown Thrasher (*Toxostoma rufum*) sang daily from a small tree along a roadside in Fairfield, Connecticut. The bird sang daily from April 27 to May 13. On the 14th, not hearing the song at first, I soon discovered the bird, in a tangle of weeds and blackberry almost directly beneath the singing tree. Another bird, evidently the female, was with him, and he was following her around on the ground, singing constantly, a song like the normal one in form, but so faint I could not have heard it, had I not been very close to the birds. After that time I no longer heard this bird in song, and did not see it, or its mate again till May 22, when I discovered the nest with four eggs, and a bird incubating them. The nest was in almost the exact spot where I had observed the courtship, and almost directly beneath the singing tree of late April and early May.

This is all in perfect accord with the territory theory. I have previously mentioned these facts (1929, pp. 38 and 46) to show that the belief that the Brown Thrasher does not sing near its nest, first stated, I believe, by John Burroughs, is not true. It is quite evident that the bird does not sing after it is mated, and while nesting, but in this instance it sang as close to the nesting site as other birds do.

In 1938, however, I made some more observations that surprised me, for they were quite different from the previous observation, and showed that, some of the time at least, Burroughs' statement is right. These new observations took place in the back yard of my former home.

In that yard there is a small hill, so steep and with soil so poor and rocky that it was impossible as either a garden or a lawn. When I first lived there, twenty years ago, there was one small Smooth Sumac on the hill. I allowed it to remain, and it spread by underground runners, until there was a thicket. I planted rambler roses and several shrubs and the thicket gradually increased in height and density. A succession of nesting birds took place with the years. When the thicket became fairly dense a pair of Song Sparrows (*Melospiza melodia*) nested in it. A few years later the Song Sparrows moved out and a pair of Catbirds (*Dumetella carolinensis*) took the place. The Catbirds nested there till 1938. That spring the male Catbird arrived and sang as usual, and a week or so later his mate arrived. On May 18, when the Catbirds were just beginning to gather nesting material, a pair of Brown Thrashers arrived rather suddenly, and at once took over the thicket and started nest-building. I saw no fighting between them and the Catbirds. The latter simply retired to a neighboring yard.

I had heard no thrasher song anywhere near my home, and I did

not hear it now. The birds had simply moved in from elsewhere after they had become mated. The nest was soon finished and the eggs laid. During the period of incubation I heard the male thrasher sing a few notes one day, but that was all the song I heard from the bird that summer. They produced a brood of young successfully, which left the nest on June 15. On June 17 they began a second nest. Incubation of the second set began on June 24, and on June 30 I left for summer work elsewhere and saw nothing more of the birds that year.

The following spring, 1939, the first thrasher of the year was seen on April 20, and on April 23 a male arrived at my thicket and began singing. He sang daily for some time thereafter. A male Catbird arrived early in May and sang from a neighboring yard. Then, on May 12, I noted a pair of Catbirds in the thicket, building a nest, while the thrasher, still mateless, had retired to a poplar tree across the street. Evidently a pair of Catbirds were too strong for a lone, mateless male thrasher. Two days later the thrasher ceased to sing and disappeared. Had he found a mate and gone elsewhere to nest, or did he try singing in a new and distant territory? Whatever happened the Catbirds' triumph was short, for before the nest was completed the female disappeared. Possibly she was the victim of a cat. The male, who had ceased singing when the nest-building began, resumed singing again, and sang continually for the rest of May and June. For the first time in years my thicket contained no completed birds' nest that summer.

I believe that both the Brown Thrasher and the Catbird are territorial in nesting behavior. But in this region the Catbird is extremely abundant, and the thrasher only fairly common. For Catbirds territory is scarce, but for thrashers it is abundant. Evidently a pair of thrashers can have their pick of territory, once they are mated, by simply taking that of Catbirds. So they often move elsewhere after the mate arrives, whereas Catbirds must stick to the territory they have selected.

So, it seems from this observation, that the male thrasher does not always select the nesting territory, but merely one to which it first attracts a mate by its singing. The nesting territory, in some cases at least, is selected after the mating has taken place, and then it would seem likely that the female would have more to do with the selection than her mate.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

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361 Crestwood Road, Fairfield, Connecticut.