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BIRDS AND SEEDS

By H. E. BATES

ALREADY the hot still days of September seem very far away; the rooks have come away from the stubbles and break the evenings with great gabbles of alarm in the yellow-green elms, and there is a continuous commotion among the poplars: a flat clapping of thousands of paper hands. There is now an autumnal stirring of life that seems more like spring, and birds are back again in the seeding gardens.

For many weeks the blackbirds, freed from the great cherry orchards that surround us here, have been attacking the first berries with secret greed. They have a way of hiding among the blue fruits and leaves of the earlier-berried berberis, and then suddenly losing balance and flopping guiltily out, orange bills stained purple as a child's lips with blackberries. And now that the berberis are finished they have turned to the elderberries, performing the same guilty flopping, stripping the berry-stalks so clean that they are left like the red skeletons of little hands, or after heavy rain like fronds of claret sea-weed. So, gradually, the rich black feast of elders is lessening, and now there are fewer blackbirds than a month ago, and already for every blackbird there seems to be a dozen blue-tits, and for every tit there must be a million seeds.

After the brilliant raid of red admirals, tortoiseshells, peacocks and painted ladies on the lilac-branched buddleias in August and September there is nothing in the later country year which in beauty equals this autumnal passion of tits and finches for the seeds of flowers. It will continue just as eagerly, and will continue to enchant, until the first days of mid-winter, when tits will still be seen swinging on the frost-browned branches of the latest michaelmas-daisies, plucking silver-brown darts of seeds, and an odd goldfinch or two will flash fretfully up the tall orange-tipped pagodas of the last red-hot pokers. The goldfinches, shyer now, will light up the more open spaces of the winter garden with little touches of tropical brilliance. They never come into the garden except with a kind of dancing nervousness, rarely resting, only very occasionally pausing long enough for the eye to take a quick sliot of them in motionless brilliance. There was such an occasion a month ago, when they came down to the lily-pond one hot afternoon to drink and rest. A few flowers of the blush-pink water-lily were out, and as the finches rested and hovered and rested again on the flowers, which are like great sea anemones, a small silvery grass-snake uncurled itself and swam about the green water, the pool lit up for a second or two by that strange bright combination of flower, snake and bird.

Meanwhile the tits, with a occasional finch or two, and quite frequently sparrows, are all over the flower-borders, raiding everything. Full of cheek, they are the schoolboys among birds, small Eton collars a little bedraggled, tight black caps well down over the forehead. They appear to eat anything, and never rest. Their real harvest, since the michaelmas-daisies and later heleniums and sunflowers are

only just past their best, has hardly begun, and there are a few seeds, too, which they will not or cannot touch: the fat turbans of hollyhocks, perhaps not yet ripe enough, the biscuit-coloured bombs of the Peruvian-lilies, which crack off on hot afternoons like toy pop-guns in a silly symphony. Otherwise they raid everything, clearing up the dust and fluff of campanula and anthemis, swinging upside down on the taller salvias, quick heads very beautiful against the soft lilac bracts, having a peck at the small brown horns of *salvia patens*, heads more lovely than ever against the flashing electric blue of the flowers, swinging for no apparent reason on the long-stalked *Verbena bonariensis*, still in full flower, with sweet buddleia-mauve heads that will not seed for a week or two. They are already scaling the full-flowered stalks of the red-hot pokers, nosing into the flower-tubes, and it is they who must have been on the acorn-hard pods of that curious plant *acanthus mollis*, with its horny pink bracts and spiky decorative leaves for which the Greeks found so much use in architectural design. They are inexhaustible acrobats. The chaffinches and bullfinches have an almost dressed-up Sunday sedateness by contrast. Only days of cool wet weather, when the seed is musty or sodden, seem to damp them down, and even then they are still busy, selecting those seeds, like salvias, which lie deep and dry in crisp protective pockets.

There are no doubt choice seeds which they have missed in the earlier summer: fat orange pills of crocus, lupins, black showers of delphinium, the crinkled charcoal scraps of the border pinks, poppies, the catapulted bullets of the hardy geranium. But they have still to enjoy the best of the year, the rich feast of berry and seed of the later autumn.

And there is no doubt that this is a vintage year for berries. Elderberries have been hanging like dark grapes. The promise of holly-berries, turning a little already from olive-green to dull crimson, is richer than for some years; haws, which vary along one hedgerow from orange-scarlet to ripe maroon, look as luscious as cranberries. It will not be long before they are stripped bare of skin, and not long later before the first spell of frost finds bird-droppings scarlet and orange with the seed and skin of rose-hips.

Meanwhile, each evening, starlings perform a strange drama of their own. They have begun to gather on the highest branches of a group of Spanish chestnuts which have died back at their tips, so that they are like ebony skeletons against the evening sky. On these dark naked branches the starlings descend in thousands, and the trees seem to become laden with countless gigantic seeds. Suddenly, it is as if the pods of these seeds are simultaneously split open. They break from the branches with a harsh explosion and the seeding wings lift briefly and then disperse. They blacken the air for a moment and then spread and scatter, sowing themselves into the coloured acres of sunset.