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november 2012

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# bird enemies

*john burroughs*



Photo: Najeeb Khan

How surely the birds know their enemies! See how the wrens and robins and **bluebirds** pursue and scold the cat, while they take little or no notice of the dog! Even the swallow will fight the cat, and, relying too confidently upon its powers of flight, sometimes swoops down so near to its enemy that it is caught by a sudden stroke of the cat's paw. The only case I know of in which our small birds fail to recognize their enemy is furnished by the **shrike**; apparently the little birds do not know that this modest-colored bird is an assassin. At least, I have never seen them scold or molest him, or utter any outcries at his presence, as they usually do at birds of prey. Probably it is because the shrike is a rare visitant, and is not found in this part of the country during the nesting season of our songsters.

But the birds have nearly all found out the trick the **jay**, and when he comes sneaking through the trees in May and June in quest of eggs, he is quickly exposed and roundly abused. It is amusing to see the robins hustle him out of the tree which holds their nest. They cry "Thief, thief!" to the top of their voices as they charge upon him, and the jay retorts in a voice scarcely less complimentary as he makes off.

The jays have their enemies also, and need to keep an eye on their own eggs. It would be interesting to know if jays ever rob jays, or crows plunder crows; or is there honor among thieves even in the feathered tribes? I suspect the jay is often punished by birds which are otherwise innocent of



*"The great  
bugaboo of the  
birds is the owl"*

Photo: **Jennie Rainsford**

nest-robbing. One season I found a jay's nest in a small cedar on the side of a wooded ridge. It held five eggs, every one of which had been punctured. Apparently some bird had driven its sharp beak through their shells, with the sole intention of destroying them, for no part of the contents of the eggs had been removed. It looked like a case of revenge; as if some thrush or warbler, whose nest had suffered at the hands of the jays, had watched its opportunity, and had in this way retaliated upon its enemies. An egg for an egg. The jays were lingering near, very demure and silent, and probably ready to join a crusade against nest-robbers.

The great bugaboo of the birds is the **owl**. The owl snatches them from off their roosts at night, and gobbles up their eggs and young in their nests. He is a veritable ogre to them, and his presence fills them with consternation and alarm.

One season, to protect my early cherries I placed a large stuffed owl amid the branches of the tree. Such a racket as there instantly began about my grounds is not pleasant to think upon! The **orioles** and **robins** fairly "shrieked out their affright." The news instantly spread in every direction, and apparently every bird in town came to see that owl in the cherry-tree, and every bird took a cherry, so that I lost more

*“The life of birds is beset with dangers and mishaps of which we know little.”*



fruit than if I had left the owl in-doors. With craning necks and horrified looks the birds alighted upon the branches, and between their screams would snatch off a cherry, as if the act was some relief to their outraged feelings.

The chirp and chatter of the young of birds which build in concealed or inclosed places, like the woodpeckers, the house wren, the high-hole, the oriole, is in marked contrast to the silence of the fledglings of most birds that build open and exposed nests. The young of the **sparrows**,--unless the social sparrow be an exception,--warblers, fly-catchers, **thrushes**, never allow a sound to escape them; and on the



alarm note of their parents being heard, sit especially close and motionless, while the young of chimney swallows, **woodpeckers**, and orioles are very noisy. The latter, in its deep pouch, is quite safe from birds of prey, except perhaps the owl. The owl, I suspect, thrusts its leg into the cavities of woodpeckers and into the pocket-like nest of the oriole, and clutches and brings forth the birds in its talons. In one case which I heard of, a screech-owl had thrust its claw into a cavity in a tree, and grasped the head of a red-headed woodpecker; being apparently unable to draw its prey forth, it had thrust its own round head into the hole, and in some way became fixed there, and had thus died with the woodpecker in its talons.

The life of birds is beset with dangers and mishaps of which we know little. One day, in my walk, I came upon a **goldfinch** with the tip of one wing securely fastened to the feathers of its rump, by what appeared to be the silk of some caterpillar. The bird, though uninjured, was completely crippled, and could not fly a stroke. Its little body was hot and panting in my hands, as I carefully broke the fetter. Then it darted swiftly away with a happy cry. A record of all the accidents and tragedies of bird life for a single season would show many curious incidents.👉

*“Probably the darkest tragedy of the nest is enacted when a snake plunders it”*

Photo: **Leo**

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Photo: Naieeb Khan

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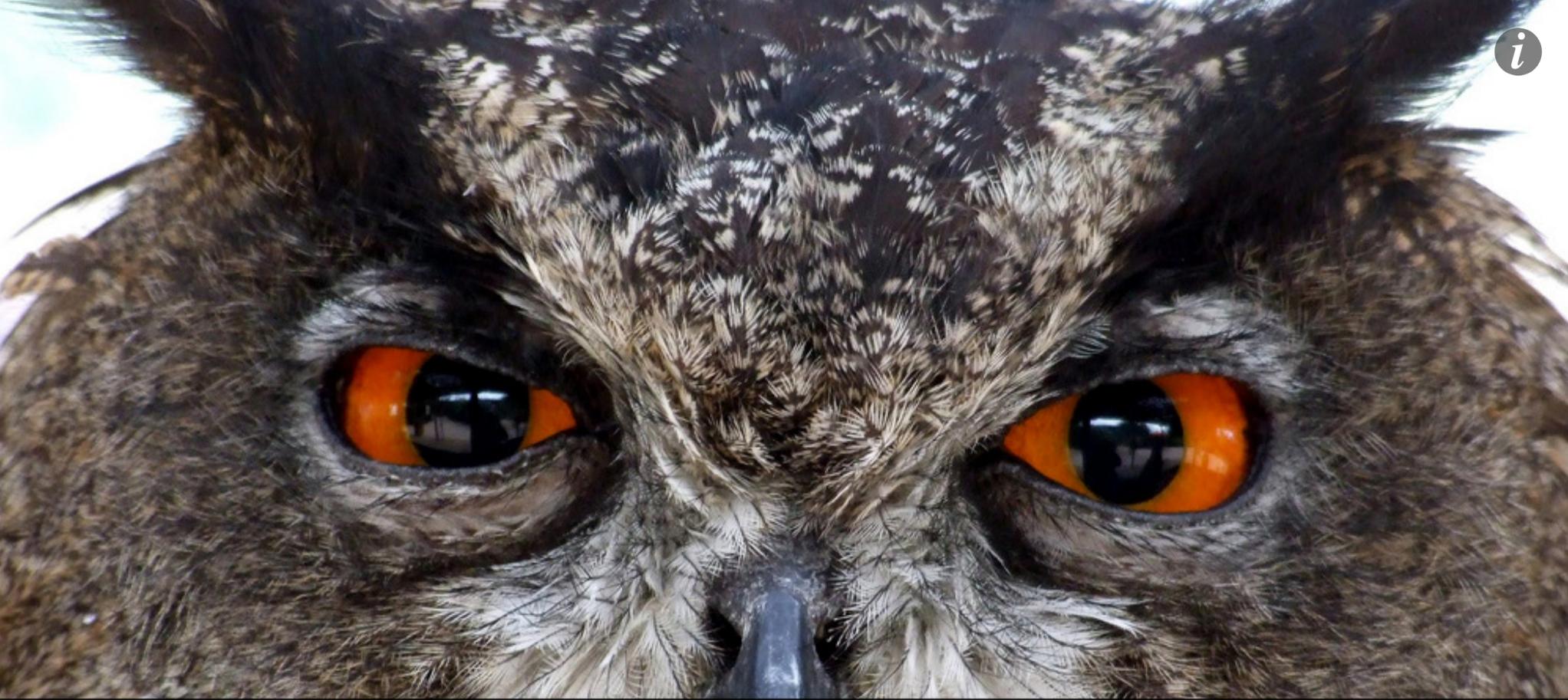


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## bluebird



The bluebirds are a group of medium-sized, mostly insectivorous or omnivorous birds in the genus *Sialia* of the thrush family (Turdidae). Bluebirds are one of the few thrush genera in the Americas. They have blue, or blue and red, plumage. Female birds are less brightly colored than males, although color patterns are similar and there is no noticeable difference in size between sexes.

Photo: Jennie Rainsford

[more info](#)

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## phoebe snetsinger

Phoebe Snetsinger, née Burnett (9 June 1931, Lake Zurich, Illinois, USA - November 23, 1999, Madagascar), a resident of Webster Groves, Missouri, was a birder famous for having seen over 8,398 species by the time of her death, more than anyone in history. She was the daughter of advertising magnate Leo Burnett, she inherited a small fortune, which she used to fund numerous trips in pursuit of her hobby.

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