



# MONTEREY NEWS

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## The Catbird is Back

April comes, May slides in, and we wonder if “the catbird” will be back. Times are uncertain always, but many of us hope this is one of those seasonal pleasures that will come again this year.

There are others. In the bird department I have been wistful about the chewinks, as my dad called them. They are also called rufous-sided towhees, or just towhees. These different common names for the same bird have been chosen by folks who focus some on sound and some on appearance. The birds do have rufous sides. To some they seem to say “chewink,” and to others they say “towhee.” Still others think the bird says something like “Drink your tea.” Or maybe “Chewink, towhee!”

The towhees stay low to the ground, mostly, and scritch up dead leaves looking for things to eat. They scritch with both feet at once, then hop back and do it again. When not actually foraging, they hop or fly up into the bushes and say “chewink, towhee!” Sometimes just one or the other of these remarks. I have been wistful about towhees the last few years, neither seeing nor hearing them in these parts. This year I was nervous about the catbirds, too. Where was everybody?

And then one morning in May I heard the towhee! What a welcome sound, full of memories of all our lives here, of Dad who preferred “chewinks,” of our own kids growing up and us pointing out these birds. I listened to the call again, my sentimental memories on the alert. I thought, “This call sounds slightly odd, maybe less strident and more musical than I’d remembered.”

I was suspicious I might actually have been hearing a catbird. I hadn’t seen one yet, but they do come every year. Their name makes you think they must sound like cats, and sometimes they do. They are mockers or copiers of other sounds. Someone once took notes on this and I read in Edward Howe Forbush’s *Birds of Massachusetts* (1929) that catbirds can imitate thirty-four species of birds. He also recounts that there was a catbird heard every evening from a front porch in Fall River, which sang repeatedly the first three phrases of “Taps.” Forbush writes that there was a ceme-



*Catbird music, after F. Schuyler Mathews, Field Book of Wild Birds and their Music. G.P. Putnam and Sons, N.Y., 1904.*

tery nearby where the bird no doubt heard a bugle play this salute from time to time.

Having heard the song of the towhee, I kept my eye out for him and hoped to hear it again, though it had been absent here for years. In a few days I saw the singer—and it was a catbird! I was happy to have him back, and he was pretty quiet. This is so when they first arrive. In a few days the males will be up in the higher branches of the shrubbery giving voice with considerable “vocal appropriation,” as it is called.

Forbush writes, “The bird’s moods are many. It is in turn a merry jester, a fine musician, a mocking sprite, and a screaming termagant, —but always an interesting study.” He goes on, “It is somewhat startling at times to hear the catbird’s sweetest song interrupted by a perfect imitation of some harsh cry such as that of the great-crested flycatcher, the squawk of a hen, the cry of a lost chicken, or the spitting of a cat.”

So we humans identify with each other, and with other critters in our neighborhood. What is the catbird really saying? What is the point of all this repertoire? Those given to counting and measuring might be able to correlate some territorial, practical, or reproductive success rate that can be attributed to strongest voice, or most appropriated songs expressed per day. Others less apt to stand back and correlate are more likely to smile and freely identify with the bird, with pure expression. We say, “That doggone bird is making my day. Must be having a good day, himself.”

What of the original author of the song? How about the towhee, the bugler, the spitting cat? These singers are just as expressive as the

mocker and when we hear them firsthand, many of us will say, “That doggone bugler is speaking to me, speaking for me. I am making a salute.”

So we folks do have an ability, a tendency, to interpret and to appropriate. We empathize, we take in and make of another’s song our own heart feelings. For me, hearing the catbird sing the song of the towhee let me picture that strong bright bird, scritch and hopping back on the ground, with his bright orange and handsome black. My pleasure was shaded with memories, and some concern.

And then one day. . .! I kid you not. I saw an actual rufous-sided towhee near the path up to the garden. This is the first one in years and there is no doubt. Is this the bird I heard sing “Drink your tea!” days back, before I’d seen either him or the catbird? Who cares! I was happy then and I am happy now. Thank you, dear birds of this place, of this season.

— Bonner McAllester