

Redwing and Yellow Wing

by Thornton W. Burgess

Peter had come over to the Smiling Pool especially to pay his respects to Redwing the Blackbird, so as soon as he could, without being impolite, he left Mrs. Teeter sitting on her eggs, and Teeter himself bobbing and bowing in the friendliest way, and hurried over to where the bulrushes grow. In the very top of the Big Hickory-tree, a little farther along on the bank of the Smiling Pool, sat some one who at that distance appeared to be dressed all in black. He was singing as if there were nothing but joy in all the great world. "Quong-ka-reee! Quong-ka-reee! Quong-ka-reee!" he sang. Peter would have known from this song alone that it was Redwing the Blackbird, for there is no other song quite like it.

As soon as Peter appeared in sight Redwing left his high perch and flew down to light among the broken-down bulrushes. As he flew, Peter saw the beautiful red patch on the bend of each wing, from which Redwing gets his name. "No one could ever mistake him for anybody else," thought Peter, "For there isn't anybody else with such beautiful shoulder patches."

"What's the news, Peter Rabbit?" cried Redwing, coming over to sit very near Peter.

"There isn't much," replied Peter, "excepting that Teeter the Sandpiper has four eggs just a little way from here."

Redwing chuckled. "That is no news, Peter," said he. "Do you suppose that I live neighbor to Teeter and don't know where his nest is and all about his affairs? There isn't much going on around the Smiling Pool that I don't know, I can tell you that."

Peter looked a little disappointed, because there is nothing he likes better than to be the bearer of news. "I suppose," said he politely, "that you will be building a nest pretty soon yourself, Redwing."

Redwing chuckled softly. It was a happy, contented sort of chuckle. "No, Peter," said he. "I am not going to build a nest."

"What?" exclaimed Peter, and his two long ears stood straight up with astonishment.

"No," replied Redwing, still chuckling. "I'm not going to build a nest, and if you want to know a little secret, we have four as pretty eggs as ever were laid."

Peter fairly bubbled over with interest and curiosity. "How splendid!" he cried. "Where is your nest, Redwing? I would just love to see it. I suppose it is because she is sitting on those eggs that I haven't seen Mrs. Redwing. It was very stupid of me not to guess that folks who come as early as you do would be among the first to build a home. Where is it, Redwing? Do tell me."

Redwing's eyes twinkled.

*"A secret which is known by three
Full soon will not a secret be,"*

said he. "It isn't that I don't trust you, Peter. I know that you wouldn't intentionally let my secret slip out. But you might do it by accident. What you don't know, you can't tell."

"That's right, Redwing. I am glad you have so much sense," said another voice, and Mrs. Redwing alighted very near to Redwing.

Peter couldn't help thinking that Old Mother Nature had been very unfair indeed in dressing Mrs. Redwing. She was, if anything, a little bit smaller than her handsome husband, and such a plain, not to say homely, little body that it was hard work to realize that she was a Blackbird at all. In the first place she wasn't black. She was dressed all over in grayish-brown with streaks of darker brown which in places were almost black. She wore no bright-colored shoulder patches. In fact, there wasn't a bright feather on her anywhere. Peter wanted to ask why it was that she was so plainly dressed, but he was too polite and decided to wait until he should see Jenny Wren. She would be sure to know. Instead, he exclaimed, "How do you do, Mrs. Redwing? I'm ever so glad to see you. I was wondering where you were. Where did you come from?"

"Straight from my home," replied Mrs. Redwing demurely. "And if I do say it, it is the best home we've ever had."

Redwing chuckled. He was full of chuckles. You see, he had noticed how eagerly Peter was looking everywhere.

"This much I will tell you, Peter," said Redwing; "our nest is somewhere in these bulrushes, and if you can find it we won't say a word, even if you don't keep the secret."

Then Redwing chuckled again and Mrs. Redwing chuckled with him. You see, they knew that Peter doesn't like water, and that nest was hidden in a certain clump of brown, broken-down rushes, with water all around. Suddenly Redwing flew up in the air with a harsh cry. "Run, Peter! Run!" he screamed. "Here comes Reddy Fox!"

Peter didn't wait for a second warning. He knew by the sound of Redwing's voice that Redwing wasn't joking. There was just one place of safety, and that was an old hole of Grandfather Chuck's between the roots of the Big Hickory-tree. Peter didn't waste any time getting there, and he was none too soon, for Reddy was so close at his heels that he pulled some white hairs out of Peter's tail as Peter plunged headfirst down that hole. It was a lucky thing for Peter that that hole was too small for Reddy to follow and the roots prevented Reddy from digging it any bigger.

For a long time Peter sat in Grandfather Chuck's old house, wondering how soon it would be safe for him to come out. For a while he heard Mr. and Mrs. Redwing scolding sharply, and by this he knew that Reddy Fox was still about. By and by they stopped scolding, and a few minutes later he heard Redwing's happy song. "That means," thought Peter, "that Reddy Fox has gone away, but I think I'll sit here a while longer to make sure."

Now Peter was sitting right under the Big Hickory-tree. After a while he began to hear faint little sounds, little taps, and scratching sounds as of claws. They seemed to come from right over his head, but he knew that there was no one in that hole but himself. He couldn't understand it at all.

Finally Peter decided it would be safe to peek outside. Very carefully he poked his head out. Just as he did so, a little chip struck him right on the nose. Peter pulled his head back hurriedly and

stared at the little chip which lay just in front of the hole. Then two or three more little chips fell. Peter knew that they must come from up in the Big Hickory-tree, and right away his curiosity was aroused. Redwing was singing so happily that Peter felt sure no danger was near, so he hopped outside and looked up to find out where those little chips had come from. Just a few feet above his head he saw a round hole in the trunk of the Big Hickory-tree. While he was looking at it, a head with a long stout bill was thrust out and in that bill were two or three little chips. Peter's heart gave a little jump of glad surprise.

“Yellow Wing!” he cried. “My goodness, how you startled me!”

The chips were dropped and the head was thrust farther out. The sides and throat were a soft reddish-tan and on each side at the beginning of the bill was a black patch. The top of the head was gray and just at the back was a little band of bright red. There was no mistaking that head. It belonged to Yellow Wing the Flicker beyond a doubt.

“Hello, Peter!” exclaimed Yellow Wing, his eyes twinkling. “What are you doing here?”

“Nothing,” replied Peter, “but I want to know what you are doing. What are all those chips?”

“I'm fixing up this old house of mine,” replied Yellow Wing promptly. “It wasn't quite deep enough to suit me, so I am making it a little deeper. Mrs. Yellow Wing and I haven't been able to find another house to suit us, so we have decided to live here again this year.” He came wholly out and flew down on the ground near Peter. When his wings were spread, Peter saw that on the under sides they were a beautiful golden-yellow, as were the under sides of his tail feathers. Around his throat was a broad, black collar. From this, clear to his tail, were black dots. When his wings were spread, the upper part of his body just above the tail was pure white.

“My,” exclaimed Peter, “you are a handsome fellow! I never realized before how handsome you are.”

Yellow Wing looked pleased. Perhaps he felt a little flattered. “I am glad you think so, Peter,” said he. “I am rather proud of my suit, myself. I don't know of any member of my family with whom I would change coats.”

A sudden thought struck Peter. “What family do you belong to?” He asked abruptly.

“The Woodpecker family,” replied Yellow Wing proudly.

Source:

Burgess, Thornton. “Redwing and Yellow Wing.” *The Burgess Burd Book for Children*. Electronic.