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978-1-108-02303-0 - The Natural History of Birds, Volume 6

Comte de Buffon and William Smellie

Excerpt

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THE
NATURAL HISTORY
OF
BIRDS.

The FLY-BIRD.

*L'Oiseau * Mouche, Buff.*

OF all animated beings, the Fly-bird is the most elegant in its form, and the most brilliant in its colours. The precious stones and metals polished by our art cannot be compared to this jewel of nature. Her miniature

* In Spanish *Tomineios*: in Peruvian *Quinti* or *Quindé*, which name obtains also in Paraguay: in Mexican *Huitzitzil* or *Hoitzitzil*, *Ouiriffa* (sun-beam): in Brazilian *Guianumbi*, which is generic. It is also called *Vicililin* and *Guachichil* (flower-sucker) in Mexico. Brisson terms it *Mellisuga* or honey-sucker; Linnæus *Trochilus*, or little-top. In English it is usually known by the name of *humming-bird*. Mr. Pennant denominates it *boney-sucker*.

[The Mexican appellations of *Huitzitzil* and *Vicililin*, signify *re-generated*; which alludes to a notion entertained by the Indians that in autumn this bird stuck its bill into the trunk of a tree, and remained insensible during the winter months, till the vernal warmth again waked it to animation, and invited it to its flowery pasture. F.]

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productions are ever the most wonderful; she has placed it in the order of birds, at the bottom of the scale of magnitude; but all the talents which are only shared among the others, nimbleness, rapidity, sprightliness, grace, and rich decoration, she has bestowed profusely upon this little favourite. The emerald, the ruby, the topaz, sparkle in its plumage, which is never soiled by the dust of the ground. It inhabits the air; it flutters from flower to flower; it breathes their freshness; it feeds on their nectar, and resides in climates where they blow in perpetual succession.

It is in the hottest part of the new world that all the species of Fly-birds are found. They are numerous, and seem confined between the two tropics*; for those which penetrate in summer within the temperate zones make but a short stay. They follow the course of the sun; with him they advance or retire; they fly on the wings of the zephir, to wanton in eternal spring.

The Indians, struck with the dazzle and glow of the colours of these brilliant birds, have named them the *beams or locks of the sun* †. The Spaniards call them *tomineos*, on account of their diminutive size, *tomine* signifying a weight of twelve grains. “I saw,” says Nieremberg, “one of these birds weighed with its

* Lact. *Ind. Occid.* Lib. V. 256.

† Marcgrave.

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neft, and the whole together did not amount to two tomines *." The fmaller fpecies do not exceed the bulk of the great gad-fly, or the thicknefs of the drone. Their bill is a fine needle, and their tongue a delicate thread; their little black eyes refemble two brilliant points; the feathers of their wings are fo thin as to look tranfparent †; hardly can the feet be perceived, fo fhort they are and fo flender: and thefe are little ufed, for they reft only during the night. Their flight is buzzing, continued, and rapid; Marcgrave compares the noife of their wings to the *whirr* of a fpinning-wheel: fo rapid is the quiver of their pinions, that when the bird halts in the air, it feems at once deprived of motion and of life. Thus it refts a few feconds befide a flower, and again fhots to another like a gleam. It vifits them all, thrufting its little tongue into their bofom, and careffing them with its wings; it never fettles, but it never quite abandons them. Its playful inconfancy multiplies its innocent pleafures; for the dalliance of this little lover of flowers never fpoils their beauty. It only fips their honey, and its tongue feems calculated for that purpofe: it confifts of two hollow fibres, forming a fmall canal ‡, parted at the end into two

* Nieremberg, p. 239. Acofta, Lib. IV. cap. 37.

† Marcgrave.

‡ Macgrave.

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filaments* : it resembles the proboscis of insects, and performs the same office †. The bird protrudes it from its bill, probably by a mechanism of the *os hyoides*, similar to what obtains in the tongue of wood-peckers. It thrusts it to the bottom of the flowers, and sucks their juices. Such is its mode of subsisting according to all the authors who have written on the subject ‡. One person alone denies the fact; he is Badiet§, who, finding in the œsophagus some portions of insects, concludes that the bird lives on these, and not the nectar of flowers. But we cannot reject a number of respectable authorities for a single hasty assertion; though the Fly-bird swallow some insects, does it thence follow that it subsists upon them? Nay, must it not necessarily happen, that, sucking the honey from the flowers, or gathering their pollen, it will sometimes swallow the little insects which are entangled? Besides, the rapid waste of its spirits, the consequence of its extreme vivacity and its rapid incessant motion, must continually be recruited by rich nutritious aliments: and Sloane, on whose observations I lay the greatest stress, positively avers

* Labat, t. IV. 13.

† Natural History of Guiana, p. 165.

‡ Garcilasso, Gomara, Hernandez, Clusius, Nieremberg, Marcgrave, Sloane, Catesby, Feuillée, Labat, Dutertre, &c.

§ Journal de Physique, *Janvier* 1778, p. 32.

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that he found the stomach of the Fly-bird entirely filled with the pollen, and sweet juice of flowers*.

Nothing can equal the vivacity of these little creatures, but their courage, or rather audacity; they furiously pursue birds twenty times larger than themselves, fix in the plumage, and as they are hurried along strike keenly with the bill, till they vent their feeble rage †: sometimes even they fight obstinately with each other. They are all impatience; if upon alighting in a flower they find it faded, they will pluck the petals with a precipitation that marks their displeasure. Their voice is only a feeble cry *screp*, *screp*, which is frequent and reiterated ‡. They are heard in the woods at the dawn of the morning §, and as soon as the sun begins to gild the summits of the trees, they take wing and disperse in the fields.

They are solitary ||; and indeed, fluttering irregular in the breeze, they could hardly associate. But the power of love surmounts the elements, and, with its golden chains, it binds all animated beings. The Fly-birds are seen to pair in the breeding season; their nest corre-

* Nat Hist. Jamaica, p. 307.

† Browne, p. 475; Charlevoix, *Nouvelle France*, t. III. p. 158; Duterte, t. II. p. 263.

‡ Marcgrave compares this note, for its continuance, to that of the sparrow, p. 196.

§ Marcgrave, p. 196.

|| Philosophical Transactions, No. 200, art. 5.

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ponds to the delicacy of their bodies ; it is formed with the soft cotton or silky down gathered from flowers, and has the consistency and feel of a thick smooth skin. The female performs the work, and the male collects the materials*. She applies herself with ardour ; selects, one by one, the fibres proper to form the texture of this kindly cradle for her progeny ; she smooths the margin with her breast, the inside with her tail ; she covers the outside with bits of the bark of the gum tree, which are stuck to shelter from the weather, and give solidity to the fabric † : the whole is attached to two leaves, or a single sprig of the orange or citron ‡, or sometimes to a straw hanging from the roof of an hut §. The nest is not larger than the half of an apricot ||, and it is also shaped like a half cup. It contains two eggs, which are entirely white, and not exceeding the bulk of small pease. The cock and hen sit by turns twelve days ; on the thirteenth the young are excluded, which are then not larger than flies. “ I could never perceive,” says Father Dutertre, “ how the mother fed them, except that she presented the tongue covered entirely with honey extracted from flowers.”

We may easily conceive that it is impossible to raise these little flutterers. Those who have

* Dutertre, t. II, p. 262.

† *Id. Ibid.*

‡ Browne.

§ Dutertre.

|| Feuillée *Journal d'Observations*, t. I. p. 413.

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tried to feed them with syrups could not keep them alive more than a few weeks; these aliments, though of easy digestion, are very different from the delicate nectar collected from the fresh blossoms. Perhaps honey would have succeeded better.

The method of obtaining them is to shoot with sand, or by means of the *trunk-gun*; they will allow one to approach within five or six paces of them*. They may be caught by placing a twig smeared over with a clammy gum in a flowering shrub. It is easy to lay hold of the little creature while it hums at a blossom. It dies soon after it is caught †, and serves to decorate the Indian girls, who wear two of these charming birds, as pendants from their ears. The Peruvians had the art of forming their feathers into pictures, whose beauty is perpetually extolled in the older narratives ‡. Marcgrave, who saw some of these pieces of workmanship, admires their brilliancy and delicacy.

With the lustre and gloss of flowers, these pretty birds have been supposed to have also the perfume; and many authors have asserted that

* They are so numerous, says Marcgrave, that a fowler may easily take sixty in a day.

† Dutertre and Marcgrave.

‡ See Ximenes, who attributes the same art to the Mexicans: Gemelli Carreri, Thevet, Lery, Hern. mdez, &c.

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they have the fragrance of musk. The mistake originated probably from the name applied by Oviedo, of *passer mosquitus*, which would easily be changed into *passer moscatus* *. But this is not the only marvellous circumstance with which their history has been clouded †; it has been said that they are half birds, half flies, and produced from a fly ‡; and a Provincial of the Jesuits gravely affirms in Clusius, that he was witness to this transformation §. It has been alledged that during the winter season they remain torpid, suspended by the bill from the bark of a tree, and awakened into life when the flowers begin to blow. These fictions have been rejected by intelligent naturalists ||; and Catesby assures us, that he saw them through the whole year at St. Domingo and Mexico, where nature never entirely loses her bloom †. Sloane says the same of Jamaica, only that they are more numerous after the rainy season; and prior to both, Marcgrave

* Gesner very justly remarks that this epithet is derived rather from *musca* (a fly), than from *moschus* (the name in modern Latin for musk.)

† Dutertre corrects very judiciously many puerile exaggerations, and detects, as usual, the mistakes of Rochefort, *t. II. p. 263.*

‡ See Nieremberg, *p. 240.*

§ This Jesuit, says Clusius, made strange relations in natural history. *Exotic, p. 96.*

|| See *Willoughby.*

‡ Nat. Hist. of Carolina, *Vol. I. p. 65.*

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mentioned their being frequent the whole year in the woods of Brazil.

We are acquainted with twenty-four species in the genus of the Fly-bird; and it is probable some have been overlooked. We shall distinguish them by their different denominations, drawn from the most obvious characters.

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The LEAST FLY-BIRD.

Le plus petit Oiseau-Mouche, Buff.

FIRST SPECIES.

Trochilus Minimus, Linn. Gmel. and Klein.

Mellisuga, Briff.

Guainumbi septima species, Marcq.

Guainumbi minor, corpore toto cinereo, Ray.

Polytmus minimus variegatus, Brown.

The Least Humming-bird, Sloane, Edw. and Lath.

IT is congruous to begin with the smallest species, in enumerating the smallest genus. This Least Fly-bird is scarce fifteen lines in length; its bill is three and a half, its tail four: so that there remains only nine lines for the head, the neck, and the body. It is smaller, therefore, than some of our flies. All the upper side of the head and body is of a gold green changing brown, and with reddish reflections; all the under side is of a white grey. The feathers of the wing are brown, inclining to violet, and this is the general colour of the wings in all the Fly-birds, as well as in the colibris. The bill also and the feet are commonly black, the legs are clothed pretty low with little downy plumules; and the toes are furnished with little sharp curved nails. All of them have six feathers in the tail; Marcgrave mentions only four, which