



First published July 1, 2017



American Robin on way to feed its young

THE EARLY BIRD GETS THE WORM

One of those maxims we learn in early childhood is: "The early bird gets the worm." So get yourself out of bed and off to school, work, your chores, or at least, something worthwhile. The invocation applied to whatever activity our parents wanted us to engage in that was more important than remaining in bed asleep. Even today, many decades later, as I am sometimes inclined to loaf a little longer in bed in the morning, I can hear my parent's admonition in my mind, "Get out there and get those worms!" For many species of birds, getting those worms, or not, is a matter of survival.



The cliché photo of a bird “getting the worm” is usually one of the American Robin tugging hard on a hapless worm as it struggles to liberate the worm from its secure ground habitat. I was not early enough to get that shot (missed the worm?) but I was in time to see the Robin with its mouth full of worms on its way back to feed its babies in the nest in our Rhododendron. However, on another occasion, I was early enough in the process to capture a Piping Plover (*left*) making the final pull that would promise that it would eat that day. And thus we have concrete evidence that worms can be found on grassy lawns and dry beaches.

We don’t normally associate worms with wetlands or watery places, and yet we

should, for many shorebirds are successful in finding worms in water that covers their feet, such as this Black-bellied Plover (*right*) about to take one down the hatch (another cliché?).



Then, on the contrary, we should not be at all surprised to learn that birds do find worms in farm fields, as the working of the ground for planting makes for ideal habitat for those dirt mulching worms. We watched this American Pipit



(*left*) search for quite a while before he/she found this morsel. But the

quintessential worm eater is the American Woodcock, (*below*) which counts earthworms as the main staple of its diet, although it will eat other organisms it finds while probing the woods and marshes for food. Interestingly, the American Woodcock and Wilson’s Snipe, two long-billed birds with a mainstay diet of earthworms, have their eyes set high on the rear of their heads so that they can watch for predators even while having their long beaks deep in the mud. But not all

worms are found in the ground. Indeed many smaller birds search for and find worms in the trees. It’s just that the worms they find are not earthworms, but rather the larva or caterpillars of many flying moths and insects too numerous to recount here. This House



Wren (*below*) brought this “worm” to our feeder pole to show off his prowess in capturing his meal and that he didn’t need our help. It was certainly not one of the foods offered in the feeders hanging from the pole.



But how will the “late bird” fare? To prove the point of the maxim, this Wilson’s Snipe, (*below*) photographed in the waning late afternoon sunlight is still probing hard and fast for its daily bread apparently not having arisen early enough to get the early worm. Hopefully he/she found a late worm and did not go to roost hungry. How many other bird cliché maxims did we learn as children that we have later learned have an actual basis in life? “A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.” Or, “Birds of a feather flock together.” If you “Get your ducks in a row,” do you have a better chance of “killing two birds with one stone?” Ok, I’m done, so “don’t get your feathers all ruffled.” “It’s all water off a duck’s (my) back.”



NOTE: I apologize, dear Reader, that some of these photos are of poor quality. When sorting through my years of photos to find bird/worm examples, I had to go back a number of years to my earlier work, to a time when I knew even less than I do now about photography. The Robin and Woodcock are my more recent shots. I do indeed recognize I still have a way to go.