

## ROOM FOR MOCKINGBIRDS

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There are only a few disadvantages to living in the South, and one of them may be learning to put up with mockingbirds. To outlanders, drugged by the heady scents of jasmine and magnolia, the song of the mockingbird is a captivating melody that fits neatly into a picture of white columns and languid living. The native Southerner, however, takes his mockingbirds for granted, and while he may occasionally thrill to the sound of bird music, he just as often finds it a source of vexation, particularly if he suffers from insomnia.

Mockingbirds are an aggressive and intolerant clan, a bunch of fussy busy bodies insistent on property rights, and neither sweet tempered nor shy about proclaiming their superiority. Nevertheless, personality failings are often overshadowed by singing abilities, which, at times, are most impressive. It is highly probable that there are large numbers of unpleasant mockingbirds who are real duds in the song department and who get by solely by riding the reputations of those who sing well. Since they are conformist in their dress and coloration, it is difficult to distinguish the untalented mockingbird from his more gifted fellow.

Our neighborhood boasts one unusually vocal and persistent bird. His song making is great, and he is otherwise remarkable in that he has only one leg. As this is the first one-legged mockingbird we have ever known, we usually go out of our way each morning to locate his perch. He does not seem partial to any one spot and divides his time between a small, low-hanging pine branch in the yard below, atop the house chimney, television aerial or telephone pole, or in the crabapple tree. With the volume and range of a Metropolitan tenor, there is no trouble hearing him wherever he is. His difficulties in balancing, which are overcome by a slight list and an occasional wing flutter, are more than compensated for by his extensive repertoire of calls and the polished perfection of his song.

We have speculated that his deformity may have resulted from an earlier traumatic escape from Fred, our backyard tomcat, but as there is no stump visible (even to binoculars) this is probably unlikely. Fred tends to specialize in chipmunks anyway.

It is more likely that this is a congenital deformity. It might have been that his mother had German measles early in pregnancy, or perhaps pecked unsuspectingly at a thalidomide pill. At any rate it is good that mockingbird mothers are not sociologically oriented and are unaware of the psychiatric trauma involved in giving birth to a possibly deformed child. Today's mere liberal attitudes towards therapeutic abortion could easily have eliminated this birth defect. But maybe there should always be room in the world for one-legged mockingbirds with talent and determination.