

## Onions, Anyone?

By Anna Wiker

The robin skirted the patch of worm eaten cabbages and entered the onions. My binoculars were actually focused on a flicker that happened to be some ten feet behind the robin, eating ants on the lawn, but I could hardly help but see what the robin did next: it took a firm grip on the protruding tips of an onion seedling and gave an almighty tug, uprooting the onion. I don't remember the reason why I lowered my binoculars, but if I hadn't then the mystery of the onion-tugging robin would have been solved a good deal quicker.

I thought no more about it until a friend of my parents reported that robins were doing the same thing to his onions. The only explanation he could think of right off, he said, was that perhaps the robins thought the onion tips were earthworms sticking above the ground. I considered that theory myself for a little, then banished it on evidence that if robins went around mistaking onion seedlings for worms they would starve in a short time.

Not to mention they'd have to have really bad eyesight.

Obviously there are not robins hopping around tugging onions that resemble worms until they fall over dead from starvation, nor are they extraordinarily far-sighted.

I watched the robins in the yard for days on end, hoping to see a repeat of the behavior but not once did I see them tugging up grass or even wild onions, which very closely resemble the domestic type.

It was a dry summer and the ground was as hard as a rock, except for in the garden where it was weeded, dug up, and watered. Thinking that might have something to do with the odd behavior of the robins, I started keeping watch on the onion patch again. Sure enough, I observed several more plants being uprooted, but it was not until I put two and two together that I realized the purpose behind the seemingly senseless act.

The robins only pulled up onion plants in the garden where the soil was loose and they were easy to uproot; and they only pulled on things sticking up out of the ground in potential earthworm habitat.

I suppose that you could say that the robins recognized the habitat as food-rich, which they probably did, but mistook the onion plants as the food, but such conjecture becomes null when you take your considering further. How could something intelligent enough to know where to *find* a worm be stupid enough to mistake an onion-of all things-*for* the worm? Not that robins are the brightest bulbs in the pack, but they aren't dumb.

My conclusion was that the robins were eating the worms that they uprooted along with the onion. Sort of like hungry birds following a plow to eat the insects it digs up, only in the absence of continuously plowing plows the robins had taken it one step further. This sounded perfectly plausible but prior experience with assumptions about bird behavior led me to run down to the garden waving my arms the next time I saw a robin pull up an onion plant so as to be sure that it had pulled up worms as well.

It had.

There weren't many onions left for us that year, though. I tried watering the yard to bring the worms closer to the surface so the robins could reach them. (People in the country don't water their yards, so the neighbors thought I was weird. If they knew I was doing it for birds they would have thought I was even weirder.) The robins did pull some worms out of that bit of the yard but they kept pulling up onions as well.

As the previously mentioned scenario suggests, the diet of *Turdos Migratorius* does not include onions. It goes, however, very much beyond the earthworms that even the nonbirder knows robins eat. They do eat plant material, an astonishing 80 percent of their diet consisting of such in autumn when insect prey is diminishing.

In spring when insects and earthworms are more available than plant intake drops to only 20 percent.<sup>1</sup> Besides earthworms they eat caterpillars, flies,

spiders, snails and other kinds of "bugs," and I once saw one pick up a slug. I don't think it actually ate the slug, and I don't blame it. Slugs emit a disgusting and unappetizing slime when disturbed that would be enough to temporarily glue any robin's beak up. I have also seen a juvenile robin catch-and eat-deerflies as well as black ants.

Robins' methods of acquiring animal prey are as varied as the prey itself. Besides the onion episode, there is the much more common and well-known method of hopping around the lawn and pulling up worms. The hop, stop, and lunge behavior is similar to that of other visual ground feeders such as the plovers.<sup>2</sup> When the robin pauses to search for worms it cocks its head to one side, staring intently at the ground. It is sometimes thought that this is because the robin is listening for worms, but the reason is that the position of the bird's eyes-on the sides of the head-prevents it from seeing directly in front of it (unless the object is farther away), hence the need to examine the ground in a sideways manner.

Another method employed, especially in woodlands, is sometimes called "bill-sweeping". The bird uses its beak to brush aside leaf litter and eats what it uncovers, provided it's edible. Around our woodpile the robins use a slightly different technique: they actually lift up pieces of bark and throw them aside to eat what's underneath. These pieces of bark are often half the size of the robins themselves. I have seen blackbirds do this as well, although they seem to do it more often than robins and pick up pieces of bark that are oftentimes larger than the pieces that robins do.

I have never seen or heard of robins hawking, as their relatives the bluebirds do, although they do eat some flying insects. Apparently they don't catch them out of the air; the abovementioned juvenile robin snagged them when the insects landed within reach.

When animal matter is scarce robins turn to fruit. Around here their favorites are multiflora rose berries and staghorn sumac, and in the late summer and fall they eat a quantity of mulberries and blackberries. Pokeberries, poison

ivy, and chokecherries are all on the robin menu here as well, eaten according to season when they are available. The first place we always see robins when they return in February is in the sumac tree, where a pair nests almost every year.

Even during the summer, when bird feeding slows down, harried and busy robin parents will eat feeder fare in between rushing around to feed gaping nestlings or dive-bombing a cat that's after a fledgling. They will eat apples, raisins, cherries, grapes<sup>3</sup> and similar food at feeders, but I've never tried offering them any of these. Around here they eat whole wheat bread, cantaloupe and watermelon rinds, soggy cereal, spaghetti, and pretty much anything else we chuck in the compost bin, as well as dog food and occasionally homemade suet put out for actual bird feeding reasons, but only rarely the latter as they seem to have trouble with the suet cages.

Yet another favorite food of the robin is watermelon. When available, they almost seem to favor it above earthworms. I don't blame them. So do I. Daniel Beard writes in *The American Boy's Handy Book* that "A robin the writer once owned would eat a large slice of watermelon down to the green rind in a single day."

So the old adage could go much farther than just "the early bird gets the worm." The early bird gets the dog food, the sumac berries, the soggy cereal, or, yes, the worm. But I have yet to hear about the early bird that got the onion.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.backyardnature.net/ecorobin.html> Accessed July 2005

<sup>2</sup> John Kricher, *The Sibley Guide to Bird Life and Behavior* (Chanticleer Press 2001), p. 461

<sup>3</sup> <http://library.thinkquest.org/5078/Wildbirds.dir.robin.html> Accessed July 2005