

Swim, Baby, Swim!

By Mary Leister



One summer morning, a young blackbird clung to a cattail stem near his nest. His mother had woven the nest from fresh grasses, but it was now brown and dry. It hung crookedly in a clump of cattails on the edge of a farm pond.

The little brown bird held tightly to a stem and flapped his wings. On a nearby cattail, his father's yellow head glowed in the sun. Both parents clucked nervously as they watched their last baby learn to fly.

The little bird blinked his dark eyes and looked around. He saw a world of green plants and sparkling water. He fluffed up his feathers. Then he flapped his wings again and gave a little push with his feet against the cattail stem.

All of a sudden, something really special happened—off he went flying through the air!

He wobbled as he flew across the edge of the farm pond and looked for a place to land. His toes grabbed a long thin willow branch that hung out over the water. But the branch sagged under his weight. He slipped off the end of it and plopped down into the pond!

Now the little bird's parents hopped around the cattails and called to their baby. But there was nothing they could do to help him.

Then something special happened again. The little bird began to swim! He dipped his wing tips low into the water. When he pushed back

with all his might—just as though he were flying—he moved the tiniest bit toward shore.

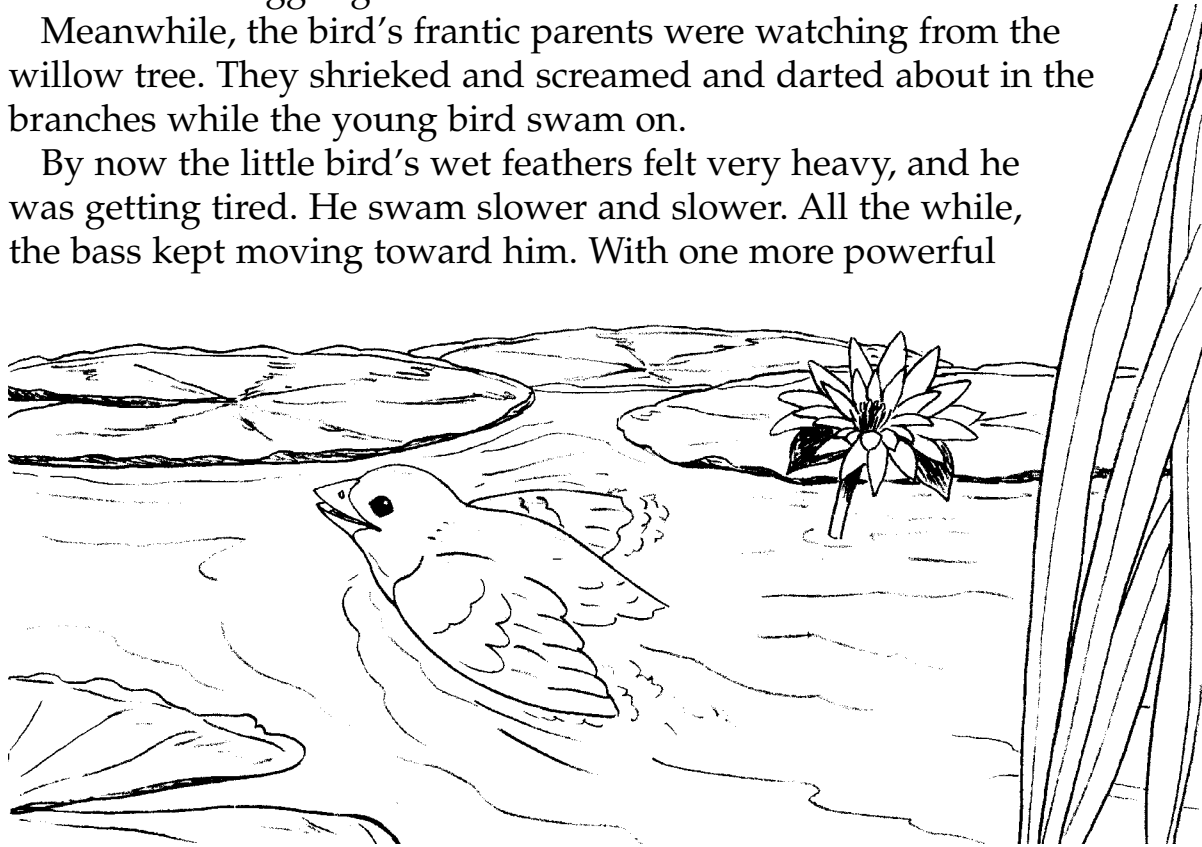
As the young bird splashed his wings in the water, bright sparkling droplets showered on his head. The drops spilled over his back and soaked his last dry feathers.

The pond looked calm and quiet. But the baby blackbird wasn't the only animal in the water. And some of the creatures—big fish, bullfrogs, and snapping turtles—would eat little birds whenever they had the chance.

As the little bird struggled along toward shore, a female bass noticed the ripples he was making. Then the big fish saw tiny feet and wet, feathery wing tips coming toward her. She started to drift upward toward the struggling bird.

Meanwhile, the bird's frantic parents were watching from the willow tree. They shrieked and screamed and darted about in the branches while the young bird swam on.

By now the little bird's wet feathers felt very heavy, and he was getting tired. He swam slower and slower. All the while, the bass kept moving toward him. With one more powerful



swish of her tail and a snap of her jaws, the wet blackbird would be hers—feet, feathers, and all!

But just as the bass was about to lunge for the bird, an otter came streaking through the water. The fish zipped away from the hungry otter and went to find cover in the weeds. Off went the otter to search for the bass. So the little bird was safe from the fish!

With a last push of his wing tips, the young blackbird reached the edge of the pond. He flapped out of the water and crawled up on shore. There he dropped onto the damp clay soil in a wet heap of feathers.

Now his parents circled wildly above him, squawking and shrieking. With luck, their noise would frighten away any enemies.

As the young bird lay there, the rays of the summer sun warmed and dried him. He stood up and began to fluff out his feathers and straighten them with his beak.

Then he stretched his wings and gave a little push with his feet against the damp clay of the shore. Off he flew into a clump of cattails growing on the other side of the pond.

For the rest of that day the little bird rested in the shelter of the cattails. Meanwhile his parents still clamored and fussed. But now they also brought him all the insects he could eat.

The next morning, the young bird flew away from the pond and headed for a marsh. There were plenty of dangers in the marsh, as he would soon discover. But for this day, at least, he would stay away from the pond.

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