PLE - July 27, 1931

Points on Errington's Quail Article, Part II

Page 2 - second paragraph. I have always felt that wild quail, judged from the bird's standpoint, showed a very remarkably high average in selecting the right response, in the face of a difficult situation, to insure survival. Aside from situations involving mechanical difficulties (obstructions, mazes, guns, etc.) I cannot recall what I should consider "dumb" quail. Would not cases of such observed "dumbness" be worth a note in The Auk or elsewhere?

Page 3 - second paragraph. Can "supreme factors" be isolated? If winter has been the supreme factor in making the northern Bobwhite what he is today, one might logically ask what the supreme factor has been in making the southern bird what he is today, and might also inquire in what significant respect, aside from weight, the two or more forms are different.

Similarly, (page 5), there occurs the statement that more vigor is required of a northern bird. In this connection, it can be said that Dr. Alexander Wetmore, studying the survival of Mexican quail introduced in Maryland and Pennsylvania, found evidence of very definite survival, inter-breeding with native stock, and perpetuation of certain Mexican type plumage characteristics. Both of these states are in the latitude where winter feeding is often necessary, even for native quail. I am not in sympathy with the introduction of Mexican quail, least of all in Wisconsin, but I do not know of any evidence to indicate less vigor in one or the other stock. I should think experimental evidence would be in order.

Page 3 - second paragraph. I agree that the Red Tail is an ideal predator type, from the quail standpoint, but I should not be able to agree that its prey is necessarily "weak, sick or inept", except insofar as weakness and ineptness are characteristics of species of prey. As to the selection of weak, sick or inept birds, I wonder if this is a consistent habit of the species or whether it may be an occasional advantage taken in times of stress, or even an individual habit.

Similarly, (third paragraph), reference is made to Red Tails weeding out quail "burdened with disease", and the implication given that this is advantageous to quail. Aside from starvation (which is not a disease in

this sense, is there any evidence that diseased quail are so eliminated? If it can be proved that any species of hawk actually exerts a purging effect on the quail population, I should say that the most important recent argument for hawk preservation had been discovered. It would warrant sportsman-backed legislation favoring hawks. To my mind, however, the matter is still in the theoretical stage, and while it is forceful to point out the possibilities along this line, especially to hunters who have never given it a thought, have we, as a matter of fact, any evidence of it as a scientific reality?

Page 7 - paragraph 2. In describing the experiments in which ten quail were given exhaustion tests it would be more interesting if a statement to the effect that samples from both lots (under-weight and normal-weight) had been given post-mortem examination and no pathologic impediment found. It is not stated, in recording the experiments, whether the under-weight birds were reduced by starvation or by other causes, possibly accompanying starvation, such as high parasitic infestation, etc. It is possible that weak birds picked up in the wild may be emaciated through other conditions than lack of food.

Page 12 - In recording the experiment in which a combination of sumac, sweet clover, rose hips, bittersweet berries and dried grapes was fed, the proportions of each food is not given. If the proportion were 20-20-20-20-20 results might be very different than if it were 80-10-5-3-2.

Also, might not a combination of say 20% Ragweed, 40% Corn and 40% rose, bittersweet, grape, sumac, etc., (any possible toxic ingredients eliminated), permit the birds to maintain or even increase weight? Even though low grade, as staples, these foods might be the difference between survival and extinction under certain circumstances.

Page 13 - second paragraph. The statement, "It is hard to imagine how quail would be forced to do without minerals in the wild for any period even approaching six weeks" is at variance with my own field observations in Wisconsin. I should say that it is a very probable situation every few years, for example the winter of 1928-1929, in Southeastern Wisconsin, and every year at Ladysmith (where a few quail occur).

W. B. G.