

July 29, 1932

Mr. W. L. McAtee,
In Charge, Food Habits Research,
U. S. Biological Survey,
Washington, D. C.

Dear Mr. McAtee:

I am sending you for criticism my latest manuscript: "The psychic nature of the great horned owl". I don't know if the thing is any good or not - I'm afraid not. I wrote it because I had the material and thought perhaps something could be made of it. Will you please give me your opinion as to whether or not the paper is worth publishing, and, if so, where?

I was very much pleased to receive your Smithsonian publication on protective adaptations. I have read it carefully and do not feel that our views on fundamentals are divergent to nearly the extent that I expected they would be. You are expressing my opinion as well as your own on page 135 where you say, "Availability is a mighty factor in the choice of food by birds. Within the limits imposed by special habitats, etc., etc., birds are prone to feed upon what is abundant and easily obtained." I think, however, that "availability" has a broader meaning than in the way you have used it and that it is not so synonymous with abundance as your text seems to imply. My contentions are based upon my work with quail and raptors, in which respect I'm fairly sure of my ground.

I can give numerous examples of where conspicuous winter quail populations in strong predator country were not available to very much except horned owls and - to a lesser degree - Cooper's hawks. Moderate populations of fit adult quail in a fit environment were but slightly available to foxes, redtails, and marsh hawks. But let those populations weaken from starvation and even the slower predators can kill almost at will. This does not look like indiscriminancy to me, when the proportion of weak birds taken by certain types of predators runs higher than the proportion of weak ones in the population as a whole. Indeed my data hint that all Wisconsin enemies of adult quail with the exception of the horned owl exert in winter a variably

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selective pressure on quail either "dumb" or physically unfit.

So much for that. The whole matter is too complex to be discussed adequately by correspondence. I am hoping to spend a few days in Washington during the Christmas holidays; perhaps you could then spare me an evening or two and go over a number of these things.

My paper, "The ecological role of the predator", is on the shelf, where it will probably remain for a few years until I have more data and more maturity. I believe I have the beginning of something there, but it is not ripe for publication. I suspect that I may feel differently about the debatable points later, though at present I am still standing by my guns.

My thesis didn't get published in its entirety, due to the University's short budget, though almost everything in it is in print or in press somewhere or other. The Wisconsin Academy of Science has accepted the two chapters dealing with winter quail studies; these were combined and revised to make a single long paper. About the only material you haven't seen relates to my 1931 - 32 winter observations - and I might say that some rather startling quantitative mortality (starvation and horned owl) data came out of the last season's study.

Again, I hope that my manuscripts are not proving a painful inconvenience to you. This will possibly be the last for some weeks, though I'm planning a rather heavy writing schedule later. If my stuff becomes burdensome, please let me know, for you are by no means obligated to handle it. I do, however, value your criticism as highly as any to which I have access and I don't want to give it up.

Yours sincerely,

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PLE:B

Paul L. Errington,
Asst. Professor,
Wild Life Research