

Man and Birds
The birds of Iowa.

It is true, that where ever man lives upon this earth, he has his bird associates. They are a part of our normal environment, and being active during the day, ~~as we are~~, they attract attention by their movements, size, coloration, and song. Many wild creatures are conspicuous, due in some cases to their small size, and to their retiring habits. This is also true with certain of the birds. It is possible for a person to live his normal life in a community, and if not particularly interested, can have various species near at hand, from year to year, and not know it. Before the coming of the white man to this continent, the Indian's interest in birds was only as a source of food, and the feathers ^{Felt} as bodily covering, and ornament. In their simple knowledge at that time, ^{period} supernatural importance was given to some large birds, as we learn from the legends of our native tribes. The early white man's interest was mainly that as a source of food. As the country was developed, and education brought inventions that made the pioneer's life easier, the leisure which came gave opportunity for cultural advance. Today, the study of birds gives profitable employment to the leisure of an ever increasing number of people.

Birds did not have the protection by law until the beginning of the present century. Prior to that time, for something like sixty years, an enormous commercial traffic was carried on. Many persons hunted for the market as a livelihood. Certain species, considered game, could be found in the markets of our larger cities, at all seasons of the year. Finally the enormous draft on the wild species began to show its effect, in spite of the seemingly unlimited numbers of certain birds that formerly existed. Notably among these was the Passenger Pigeon, whose great flocks hid the sun, as they passed on their spring and autumn migrations. Sights like that, are vivid in the memory of our older folks. Today there is not a living example of this bird. During the market hunting period, they

were sold in the markets for as low as five cents a dozen. Today a preserved specimen is worth from seventy-five to one hundred and fifty dollars, depending on ^{on its condition} the condition of the specimen. The Laborador Duck, never common, was at times found in the markets of New York City. Today there are not over three dozen specimens to be found anywhere, and these are nearly worth their weight in gold.

Formerly, smaller non-game birds, were killed for their plumage, thousands being used each year in the millinery trade. Records from one shop in New York City show, that from 350 to 400 song birds were purchased daily, from local hunters. Education and proper laws long ago put a stop to that practise.

The trapping of live birds, of certain species, for ^{the} cage-birds ^{trade} was for a long time a profitable business. With the passage of laws, this also ceased.

Fifty years ago, a very small number of people were interested in birds, besides those who killed them for the table, and others who saw their value only in dollars and cents, as an article to sell. The progress made, up to the present day, in behalf of the wild bird is vast, and was not done without great opposition of other interests. Scientific investigations have shown us their value as destroyers of insects and weed seeds. The larger birds, the hawks and owls, are nature's check on the undue increase of mice, gophers, and other rodents. We know them to be agriculture's greatest ally. We know them to be the guardian of the vegetable kingdom.

The ^{lives} life of a bird, while they goes about it with vim and evident enjoyment, is a serious business. They are beset by many dangers, each species has its enemies, and death comes often and in a hundred different forms. The scheme of nature, in ^{to} which the birds balance perfectly, seems to be most cruel, but with a little thought and figuring ^{INDICATES} we find out that it works out most perfectly and could'nt be improved upon. ^{if that were possible}

The death rate of birds must necessarily be high.

If every bird that leaves its nest would live its normal life, ~~seen~~ *there would be such numbers, that* room for other forms of wild life would not exist. For example.- A pair of ^{Birds} birds raised eight young last summer. Together they migrated to the south. If these ten birds returned ^{in the} next spring, and each pair were successful in raising eight young, ⁶⁰ ~~ninty~~ birds would leave for the south in the fall. In five or six years, the increase from the original pair would number in the thousands. The fact is accepted among ornithologists, that the number of birds that return north in the spring, is equal, on the average, to the number that came north to breed the spring before. The natural increase^d is lost, through accident, disease, as food for other forms of wild life, and other reasons. Blue Jays, Crows, Bronzed Grackles and others are ~~not~~ notorious nest robbers, taking both eggs and callow young. Certain mammals, including ^{the} our house cat, take a heavy toll of both young and adult birds. Coopers and Sharp-shinned Hawks live nearly exclusively on a diet of song birds. Many are killed in storms. Thousands are killed by mechanical means, by striking telephone wires, fences, illuminated towers, light-houses on both ocean and inland shore, especially those with a fixed light, and numerous other agencies. It is certainly a case of the survival of the most fit.

The importance of the inroads made upon insects and weed seeds by birds can not be under estimated. The Tree Sparrow, one of our most numerous winter birds, is probably one of the greatest destroyers of weed seed. Prof. Beal, while ^{connected with} in the U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, estimated that each Tree Sparrow ate at least one-fourth ounce of weed seed daily. This estimate was made by the stomach examination of specimens. He stated, that counting ten birds to the acre, this birds destroys in the state of Iowa, ^{each season} 1,750,000 pounds of weed seed, which is equal to 875 tons.

It has been found, that certain species, while growing up in their nest, will consume their own weight in insects, brought to them by the parent birds, between dawn and dark.

Certain of our birds have been sufferers from age old prejudice and hostility. Most important among these are the Hawks and Owls, and the various water-birds who include fish in their diet. To find out how successful this prejudice is carried from one generation to another, and how much false propaganda is taken for actual facts, one need only to discuss the value of hawks and owls with the average ^{or sportsman} farmer, or speak of heron, bitterns, and pelicans with a person who fishes. In regard to the birds of prey, we fail to accept the fact, that in their relation to man, we must judge them by comparative values. Late in the last century, Dr. A.K. Fisher, made an exhaustive investigation and the results were published by the U.S. Dept. of Agriculture. Stomach contents of 2700 of the birds of prey were examined. Many later investigations have been made and all of Dr. Fishers findings have been substantiated. Probably the hawk most in evidence here in our general region is the Red-tailed Hawk, and is also the most persecuted. Dr. Fisher examined the stomachs of 562 of this species. He found that 515 contained remains of mice, and other mammals, reptiles, and insects. 54 contained remains of game birds and poultry. 51 of other birds. Judging by comparative values, this hawk is beneficial at least 85%. Other species of hawks are beneficial nearly 100%, seldom killing either a game or song bird, or poultry. Three species of hawks are ^{with} condemned by all, The smaller Sharp-shinned, and Coopers Hawk, and the large Goshawk. The last mentioned appears ^{but} only during the winter, ~~in this region~~, and in such small numbers that the effect is negligible. Sad to say, very few Sharp-shinned or Coopers Hawks are killed by either the ~~general run of~~ ^{the hawk} farmers or sportsmen. They hunt about under cover of trees, bushes etc and dart out after their prey like a bullet. Thus they are seldom seen in their raids on the poultry yard. But the large, slow moving Red-tail, who goes about his business in the open and in the plain sight of man, ^{fisher} gets the blame for most of the damage done by the two smaller species. The Red-tail is shot, caught in steel traps, and poisoned.

Being a scavenger, this hawk is easily attracted to a dead chicken and the steel trap. The long continued persecution has reduced this bird greatly in numbers in the late years. No one can deny that this hawk will not at some time or other prey on poultry. Certain individuals get the habit, and these can easily be disposed of. To dispose of dead poultry by throwing them out in the fields, is a sure means of attracting these birds and perhaps give them a taste for this class of food.

During the fall of 1933, the writer received 10 Red-tails that had been shot or trapped by farmers. None of these contained either poultry or other wild bird. All had ^{taken} ~~eaten~~ mice of two species, one a rat, and all had partaken rather heartily of grasshoppers.

In their relations with man, the birds have aroused every shade of opinion among the people. The sportsman has a dislike for any bird that invades the field that he considers game. Too many farmers see only the loss of an occasional chicken, and do not appreciate the value of most hawks and owls as destroyers of vermin. The fisherman is hostile, because certain birds eat fish. We become exasperated when birds of the thrush family devour the fruit in our berry patches, but forget that we have stripped the land of most of the fruit bearing plants on which they formerly fed.

Therefore, while we give just praise to those species that prey entirely ^{up} on insects, and make successful agriculture possible, and to the destroyers of weed seeds, we must look more intelligently upon those species that ^{in one way or another} ~~do~~ conflict with man, and weigh our judgement on scientific truths and facts.

Education and a love of the beautiful has brought our appreciation of the birds ^{all} to a high level. Thus, birds, divested of sordid considerations, are coming more and more into the lives of the many, to bring joy and satisfying diversion.

Read before the
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