THOREAU: SPEAKING FOR BIRDS

by Richard K. Walton

> The Turkyes of that Countrie are great, and fat, and exceeding in plentie. The riuers from August, or September, till February, are couered with flocks of Wildfoule; as swannes, geese, ducke, mallard, teal, wigeons, hearons, bitters, curlewes, godwights, plouers, snights, dottrels, cormorants, in such abundance as are not in all the world to be equalled.

William Strachey's early seventeenth century description (Forbush 1912, page 8) of Virginia (the name used by the early English explorers for the entire eastern section of North America) birdlife is typical of the reports sent back for the edification and the enticement of potential colonials. These accounts described a garden of plenty: land, timber, water, and game of all kinds. In England where the landowners were few, the timber long since cut down, the sources of pure water scarce, and the game available to most only at the considerable risk of poaching, America must indeed have seemed like Eden. The possibility of substantially improving one's lot through landownership and surplus crops moved boatloads of Europeans across the Atlantic.

The realities of the New World were not always as advertised. Although America was indeed a land of plenty, there was another side to the coin. Once coastal lands were claimed, pioneers were forced to move inland. Here they were faced with a wilderness that was decidedly hostile. Early colonial settlements were often isolated, distant communities constantly struggling to maintain their foothold in the backcountry. The backbreaking work of clearing the land, building homesteads, and planting, raising, and harvesting crops was made all the more difficult by animal predators and whimsical natives. Although the settler may have been delighted by a ready supply of game, he was not prepared to appreciate or even to try to understand the less benign aspects of natural America. Those things which were useful were considered good; other natural features were simply a hindrance to the colonial crusade to clear and work the land.

Even the early naturalists looked at the plants and animals from a utilitarian perspective. In fact, naturalists first explored America as hired collectors for wealthy and curious Europeans. The employers hoped that the New World would hold miraculous botanic cures from which a profit might be made. At the very least, they expected to have their private collections filled with curios of the American flora and fauna. When animals or plants were encountered that seemed to be more of a detriment than a blessing, one senses a disillusionment about the promised land. In the mid-1700s Mark Catesby, one of the first European naturalists to visit America, wrote the following account of the "red-

wing'd Starling" (Red-winged Blackbird).

> This and the Purple-Daw (Common Grackle) are of the same Genus, and are most voracious corn-eaters. They seem combined to do all the mischief they are able: and to make themselves most formidable, both kinds unite in one flock, and are always together, except in breeding time, committing their devastations all over the Country. When they are shot, there usually falls of both kinds; and before one can load again, there will be in the same place oft-times more than before they were shot at. They are the boldest and most destructive Birds in the Country.

For close to three centuries the birdlife in the New World was seen as a pestilence or as mere food on the table. In both instances bird populations suffered substantial and, in some cases, irreparable losses. Initial pressures created by bounties on blackbirds and hawks, as well as hunting for the family table, gradually increased as specialists made a living hunting for the market. The first species to be extirpated were the game birds of eastern North America. Birds such as the Wild Turkey and Heath Hen were greatly reduced throughout most of their eastern range as early as the eighteenth century. Numerous migrant species were the next to suffer. During the latter part of the nineteenth century, as the railroads opened up the country, the slaughter became widespread. Edward Howe Forbush summed it up this way.

> The fame of America as a game country was noised far and wide. Hunters and sportsmen came from every land; sportsmen, market hunters, big game hunters and skin hunters crowded into the new country. The improvement in firearms kept pace with the increased transportation facilities. The breech-loader gave the hunter an added advantage. Then followed the practical extermination of the American bison, the deer, elk, antelope, mountain sheep, mountain goat, Wild Turkey and Prairie Chicken over wide areas. Then first began the marked decrease in the numbers of game birds, shore birds and wildfowl throughout most of the United States. . . . (Forbush 1912, page 26).

Descriptions of the market gunners' spoils include accounts of wagonloads of duck carcasses rotting in the heat of a North Dakota summer, barrels full of prairie chickens for sale in Boston markets, and a one-day kill of fifteen thousand Redheads and Canvasbacks on Chesapeake Bay.

To the numerous species that were directly affected by the gun must be added an equal or greater number adversely impacted by the axe and the plow. The intensive agricultural efforts of the settlers resulted in elimination of large parts of the eastern forests, gradual depletion of the soil, and drainage of a majority of the wetlands. Habitat destruction was probably more lethal than the hunting. Yet all of these depredations were carried out in the name of progress and civilization, in the best traditions of the Judeo-Christian culture. As Aldo Leopold said, "Abraham knew exactly what the land was for; it was to drip milk

and honey into Abraham's mouth." And if this was to be accomplished, the wilderness needed to be subdued. One of the first Americans to offer an alternative viewpoint was Henry David Thoreau.

Thoreau rejected the utilitarian-Abrahamic land ethic that was being enthusiastically embraced by his Concord neighbors. While they fretted over how to get two blades of grass to grow where formerly there was but one, Thoreau sought to accommodate himself to the natural world. Wilderness, he said, was an important and necessary component of a truly civilized world. Thoreau's intellectual roots were the natural history tradition of Gilbert White of Selborne and the transcendentalism of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Along with White, he shared an abiding interest in his local area and an ecological perspective of the natural world. With Emerson he shared a concern for a culture where progress and materialism seemed out of control. "Things are in the saddle and ride mankind." A more fulfilling life might be had through the contemplation of nature as a symbol for greater truths. In Thoreau we find an uneasy synthesis of the objective field naturalist and a seeker of metaphysical enlightenment. The common element was wilderness—the medium of both philosophy and natural history.

Thoreau's ornithology reflects this dichotomy. At times he focuses on the birds themselves; elsewhere Thoreau is looking for the meaning behind his observations. What is constant is Thoreau's belief in the inherent value of the natural world. Thoreau considered himself a part of the natural world. His duty was not to exploit the material wealth of that world, but rather to develop an appreciation and understanding of nature. This perspective led to one of the first in-depth looks at a local bird fauna in America. Thoreau's bird studies, which include notes on identification, behavior, seasonality, nesting, and ecology of over one hundred species, began a tradition that has continued to this day.

The relentless hunting of birds is a repeated theme in Thoreau's notes ("Huckleberries" essay). In the fall when migrant Common Loons stopped in at Walden, "all Concord sportsmen were on the alert, in gigs, on foot, two by two, three by three, with patent rifles, patches, conical balls, spy-glass or open hole over the barrel." His journals contain numerous entries about Passenger Pigeons. Ensnared in nets and gunned down by the flock, Thoreau tells how one of his neighbors caught two thousand of these birds in one week. Hawks attracted by the netted pigeons were quickly dispatched. "They are catching pigeons nowadays. Coombs has a stand west of Nut Meadow, and he says that he has just shot fourteen hawks there, which were after his pigeons." A family of Wood Duck that Thoreau had been observing met a similar fate. "In my boating of late I have several times scared up a couple of summer ducks of this year, bred in our meadows. They allowed me to come quite near and peopled the river. I have not seen them for some days. Would you know the end of our intercourse?

Goodwin shot them, and Mrs. _____, who never sailed on the river, ate them. Of course she knows not what she did. What if I should eat her canary?"

Thoreau suggested quite a different "use" for the birds. At times it was simply to enjoy their beauty. "They belonged to me," said Thoreau of those Wood Ducks, "as much as to any one, when they were alive, but it was considered of more importance that Mrs. _____ should taste the flavor of them dead than I should enjoy the beauty of them alive." At other times Thoreau's interest is identification and behavior. "A hen-hawk [Red-tailed Hawk] sails away from the wood southward. I get a fair sight of it sailing overhead. What a perfectly regular and neat outline it presents! an easily recognized figure anywhere. Yet I never see it represented in any books. The exact correspondence of the marks on one side to those on the other, and the dark line midway the wing. I have no idea that one can get as correct an idea of the form and color of the under sides of a hen-hawk's wings by spreading those of a dead specimen in his study as by looking up at a free and living hawk soaring above him in the fields." Thoreau often finds a spiritual use for birds; they allow him to transcend the moment of observation. "I sit here at my window like a priest of Isis, and observe the phenomena of three thousand years ago, yet unimpaired. The tantivy of wild pigeons, an ancient race of birds, gives a voice to the air, flying by twos and threes athwart my view or perching restless on the white pine boughs. . . ." Thoreau was not aware that his was to be one of the last generations to see this species alive.

At a time when bird study was primarily concerned with describing and classifying, Thoreau's interests foreshadowed the work of twentieth century ecological studies. Concord's landscape at mid-nineteenth century, like much of New England, had been radically altered by two centuries of "progress." Forest cover had been reduced to a mere ten percent and much of the land had been overworked. The newest hope of the local farmers was land reclamation; the wetlands were to be drained to produce more arable acres. Thoreau was aware of the effects of these practices on the birdlife. "He who cuts down woods beyond a certain limit," he said, "exterminates birds." Thoreau also appreciated the habitat requirements of many species and understood how different habitats suited different species. "The surface of the earth is portioned out among them. By a beautiful law of distribution, one creature does not too much interfere with another." Although Thoreau's perspective on the land and its wildlife was a minority opinion in the nineteenth century, he was not content to remain silent. Thoreau repeatedly asked his fellow townsfolk to consider a different point of view; furthermore he suggested appropriate action.

> What are the natural features which make a township handsome—and worth going far to dwell in? A river with its water-falls—meadows, lakes—hills, cliffs or individual rocks, a forest and single ancient trees—such things are

> beautiful. They have a high use which dollars and cents never represent. If the inhabitants of a town were wise they would seek to preserve these things though at a considerable expense.

Thoreau was not heeded by many of his contemporaries. The forests were cut and recut, the swamps and marshes drained, and the bird killing continued. It was not until a half century after his death that concern over the plunder of the land and the wildlife resulted in concerted action to save what was left. When Americans finally began their search for alternatives to the utilitarian land ethic, they would find in Thoreau's work a detailed and carefully elaborated model for appreciating the natural world for its own sake. Ironically, as Thoreau was to point out, a truly civilized America would look to those needs fulfilled by wild America.

> April 15, 1852. How indispensable our one or two flocks of geese in spring and autumn! What should be a spring in which that sound was not heard? Coming to unlock the fetters of northern rivers. Those annual steamers of the air.

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