

Further Afield

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June

Riley's "queenly month of indolent repose" is here at last— June, with its blushing brides, sweet girl graduates, blooming roses and nesting birds. During the months which have preceded we have watched an army of birds file past; now it is high time to pay our respects to our feathered friends at their very homes.

Now I'll never claim to be an expert on James Whitcomb Riley, or on queenly months, but I will admit to an appreciation of the amiable and appealing chronologies of one Allen C. Conger, Professor of Zoology at Ohio Wesleyan University, in Delaware, Ohio.

In 1928 Professor Conger included the above passage in "A Calendar of Ohio Birds: June," the sixth installment in a 12-part series of newspaper articles that detailed the month-to-month changes in Ohio's avifauna over the course of a year. As related in my most recent column, I stumbled upon this series in the microfilmed archives of the *Wadsworth Banner-Press*, a perfect example of a small town rural newspaper, the type that thrived in the prosperous days immediately preceding the great stock market crash of 1929. Comparatively little information was published regarding Ohio's birds in the 1920s, which makes this series all the more noteworthy. Plus, I just like it.

At the conclusion of my last column, you'll recall we parted company with Professor Conger, and with spring migration, at the end of May. And so, let's now pick up where we left off in our year-long journey. I imagine we'll find the good Professor somewhere in central Ohio, and in early June, his month of blushing brides, sweet girl graduates, blooming roses, and nesting birds.

After a thoughtful request-- *do not disturb a nest or its immediate surroundings, for many species of birds will abandon eggs and even young if the privacy of their homes is invaded*, the Professor leads us down a dusty, shaded road. By early June, *[s]ome of our good friends have already sent a brood of youngsters out into the wide world, but most of our common small birds raise two broods each year. Many of them are now busy with the second nesting— building a new home, incubating eggs or even caring for young, while the latest arrivals may just be settling down to the arduous cares of family life.*

As we take a detour through town, the Professor begins to point out nests, finding them much quicker than we do, but just as adeptly as one might expect from an old-fashioned nest scout. He waves off the *all too easy to find* nests of English Sparrows; is more pleased with the *grass-lined mud cup of the Robin*, but is somewhat dismayed by the Mourning Dove's platform of twigs, a *poor excuse for a home*. So carelessly made are dove nests, intones the Professor, that *[t]here must be a special providence that watches over these defenseless creatures*. As we push onward, we discover nests of the house wren, chipping sparrow, Baltimore oriole, warbling vireo, even a pewee; and of course, the purple martin, whose *apartments are a common sight in most Ohio towns*. It's been a good day.

Harlan

July

Summer moves on, so do we, and so do the birds. The first signs of impending change are upon us. *The ducks which nested in the marshes by our Ohio lakes have already begun to assume their dull "eclipse plumage;"* family groups of many birds are abroad, and while some *seem loath to break family ties so soon*, others are already scattered. The late nesting goldfinches, on the other hand, which until now *have led a carefree existence...have sobered down to more prosaic tasks*.

Not so prosaic is *that big eccentric fellow, the Crested Flycatcher* and his offbeat habit of dangling a discarded snakeskin from the opening of his nest cavity. The Professor muses: *Many and long have been the arguments as to why a bird should choose so consistently and frequently this peculiar and far from common material for nest adornment*. Lacking a solid answer, he settles for a trivial one— perhaps they are merely devotees of fashion.

August

It would seem that the hot sun of dry August days here in Ohio might deter even the most eager of travelers from setting out on a journey to tropical regions, but such is not the case. Despite the scorching temperatures and an abundant supply of food, many birds choose August to steal away quite unheralded and in somber traveling dress.

Already the Swallows show signs of unrest, including the tree swallows, which have come down from more northern summer homes to tarry with their Ohio cousins for a few weeks. Many warblers reappear as well, including the gay Magnolia and the bay-breasted, in disguise at this season. Even our familiars, like the yellow warbler, have begun to melt away, perhaps [d]own the river, where the shrunken stream now flows between thickets of water willow. The yellows will be gone by the end of the month.

September

On all sides we now see signs of the passing of the summer season. Though days may still be torrid, the death-knell of straw hats is sounded. Baseball and bat are neglected and the thud of footballs resounds throughout the land. School bells ring out and the bookseller rubs his hands with glee. Yes, summer is gone and the birds are going.

The Professor calls the roll of the departing: the cuckoos, the whip-poor-will and the nighthawk, the hummingbird, the kingbird *and his lesser kin*, and the bobolink. *By the month-end the Martin houses stand empty and tenantless. No longer do we hear the cheery twittering notes.*

But not all species depart so quickly, and many are still arriving. *In the spring time May was warbler month; no less does September belong to them. But even these hordes are frequently overlooked— [m]ost people do not even see them and perhaps that is just as well, since they are thereby relieved of a great deal of mental effort....Last spring we learned to know some, perhaps many, of this army of birds as they passed on parade, in bright clean uniforms, with bands playing and colors flying. Can we pick these acquaintances in this army in retreat, which files by now in faded uniforms? There is a challenge here for the best of us. A confusing fall challenge, indeed.*

October

Another challenge is quickly upon us. *Who can doubt the approach of winter now? Woodlands are turning to flame and gold. The tang of leaf smoke is in the evening air...[s]urely the birds know it.*

And we know it, too. Without the swallows and swifts, *now our sky seems bare.* Others depart as well; *[t]he vireo clan, leisurely seekers of insects among the foliage of trees, now seeks more productive hunting grounds, where frost will not paint the leaves and send them tumbling down.*

But while some depart, still others arrive. *Just as September is Warbler month, we must dedicate October to the Sparrow tribe.* We'll soon miss our locals, the vesper, the savannah, and the grasshopper, but *we welcome our transient friends, the white-throated, white-crowned, swamp, and fox. The reappearance of Tree Sparrows and Juncos is further evidence of the near approach of winter, for they were among our first acquaintances on a mild day last January.* A long time ago, it seems.

November

Not infrequently its days are melancholy and "the saddest of the year," but just as often it is a glorious month...The bird student who would round out his list of feathered acquaintances will not neglect this opportunity. Waterfowl are here, but *they are so local in distribution and so variable in number that it is hazardous to predict what one may expect to find.* The marshes now seem mostly deserted, save the occasional coot, and *[a]long the sandy beaches where all summer long the sandpipers played tag with the waves we look in vain for the tiny three-toed footprints.*

Of course, crows, jays, woodpeckers, and a few hardy robins remain with us. But now so does a new, and unwelcome, intruder to the Ohio scene—the European starling. *Its ever-growing numbers will all too soon make it a factor to be reckoned with. Flocks of hundreds now winter at a great many places in central Ohio and it probably nested in most of the counties of the state during the past summer. The ill-advised introduction of this bird into North America is most unfortunate, since it can contribute nothing of song, beauty or value by its presence here.* Amen to that.

December

What can a bird lover find of interest in such a season? The answer will depend upon our own cunning in discovering the sheltered spots which birds now seek and which offer them both protection from storm and food in plenty.

These sheltered spots will come in handy for us, too, if we follow the Professor's advice and take part in the annual Christmas bird census. We might see our efforts recorded in print in *Bird-Lore, the official organ of the Audubon Society.* Though the lengthy lists published therein might seem *almost unbelievable,* a day searching out the sheltered spots, and the ones and twos that hunker there, will prove them at least possible.

We should search for open water as well, in hopes of mallards and black ducks, some golden-eyes, and especially the American merganser. In the fields, quail are of course present, and ring-necked pheasants *have become fairly common in many parts of the state.* Mourning doves should also be present, *except [in] the northern third of the state.*

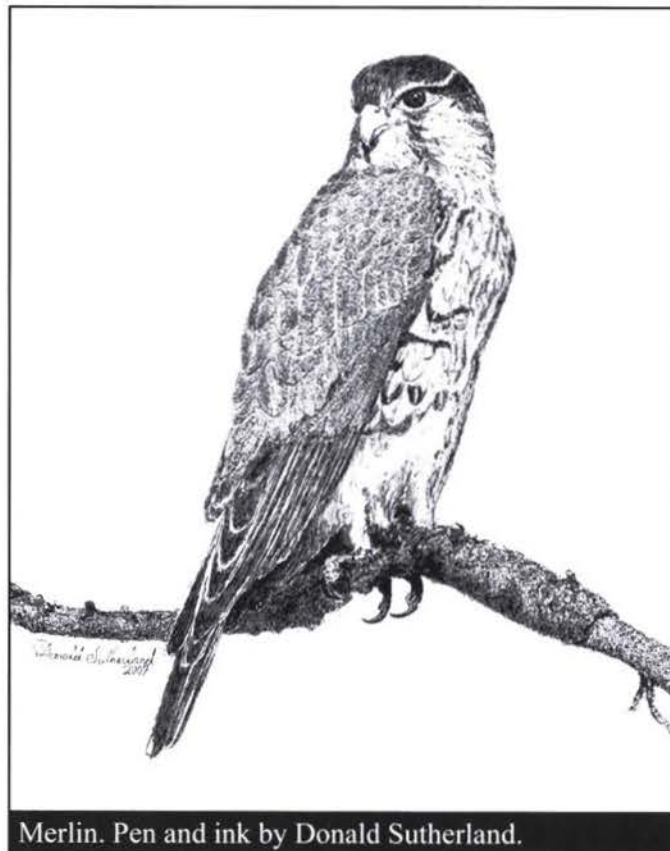
Don't overlook the birds of prey. *In central Ohio we find the Marsh Hawk, a few Red-tailed and Red-shouldered Hawks, many Sparrow Hawks and not infrequently the three feathered scourges, the Goshawk, the Cooper, and the Sharp-shinned Hawks.* Owls also reside, including the screech, barred, great horned, and also the barn, which the Professor deems *locally present.*

In the windswept fields we must seek out the horned larks, and in the weedy fields, song sparrows, tree sparrows, and juncos. *The brilliant Cardinal adds a needed dash of color to our December list,* and the winter and Carolina wrens add a dash of spunk.

We must also keep a vigilant lookout for the *unexpected discoveries of the season.* Especially in the north, we may wish for the American crossbill, pine siskin, snow bunting, Lapland longspur, and northern shrike. And in the south, we may hope to stumble upon stragglers left over from the warmer months. It's often rewarding to expect the unexpected.

Sadly, it's now time for us to straggle home as well, very tired (but at least it's a good kind of tired) after a year's worth of fields and forests, new acquaintances, and old friends. I'm sorry to say that I've not been able to find much more in the way of popular writings penned by Professor Conger, but I suspect a growing family, a World War, and a busy workload put an end to his unfettered days soon after 1928. But by 1953, things were looking up, as his long career was winding down. In the October 1953 issue of *Ohio Wesleyan Magazine,* we note the Professor was planning some extensive travels, including a trip to San Francisco, home to his son, daughter-in-law, and *the most wonderful grandchild in the world.*

Professor Allen C. Conger, registrar and professor of zoology, likes to walk past the college buildings this fall, look at them and not have to worry about what is going on inside them. He finds it good to be without any definite plans, to be for awhile master of his own destiny. We should all be so blessed.



Merlin. Pen and ink by Donald Sutherland.