HOW CAN THE BIRD-LOVER HELP TO SAVE THE HAWKS AND OWLS?

BY GEORGE MIKSCH SUTTON.

SPORTSMEN and farmers, generally speaking, continue not to be in favor of protecting Hawks and Owls. The bird of prey is regarded chiefly as an enemy of game and poultry. A few of us, who consider ourselves open-minded bird-lovers, foresee that certain Hawks and Owls will be exterminated unless we can plead their cause powerfully and promptly. The bird-lover, if he is sincerely interested in preserving these beautiful creatures, will recognize that certain steps must be taken, certain feats accomplished, if he is to win this cause.

If the bird-lover is ever to convince the sportsman and farmer that certain birds of prey should be protected, he must know not alone the problems of the birds of prey, but also the problems of the sportsman and farmer. He must recognize in the average sportsman the embryonic naturalist, who seeks an outlet for his interest in Nature through activity in the hunting season; he must recognize the deep desire to protect, first of all, the game birds and mammals which are so dear to the hunter; he must remember that, after all, it is the presence of sportsmen with their interest in wild life, and their license money which is put to work, that has made any general system of wild-life conservation possible at all. He must recognize in the farmer a similar altruism, coupled with a desire to make a comparatively strenuous existence yield proper returns each year.

The bird-lover must recognize the power of tradition which helps to make predatory creatures unpopular. Even today the Eagle which carried off babies has not been forgotten; and the bright, fierce eyes of the smallest Hawk will cause many of us racially to remember the times when we were preyed upon by prowling beasts. Anyone who has witnessed the capture of a bird or mammal by a Hawk or Owl will readily understand the widespread sympathy which is felt for the defenseless creatures which are captured by organisms more powerful than themselves,

and the corresponding antagonism, which often mounts to genuine hatred, toward these fierce pursuers.

The bird-lover must remember that to the general public arguments must be offered which will not sound like sentimentality; he must learn studiously to avoid terms which will bring any smile of indulgence; he must, in other words, be a good physchologist, and use all the forces within his reach in dealing with a problem which requires comparatively subtle handling.

Bird-lovers must not antagonize sportsmen by calling them brutal, bloodthirsty killers, when they are not; we must not call farmers inhuman simply because these farmers have a desire to protect their stock by killing what they consider the enemies of the stock.

I do not mean to suggest that our plea should be based entirely upon what we know to be the economic value of many of these birds of prey, although these data are valuable indeed, and a judicious use of them will strengthen our position greatly. We may direct our appeal to the average altruism of our listeners, however, if we use care, and this type of appeal, if it be wisely handled, will probably prove most satisfactory in the end.

The genuine naturalist regrets of course that it is necessary to offer any arguments at all in behalf of preservation of any bird. He feels that every creature has a right to exist; he resents any interference of Man in the scheme of Nature, forgetting at times, perhaps, that Man is, himself, one of the most important features of the scheme of Nature. He undertakes the task of establishing the fact of the economic value of any bird or mammal with a certain unhappiness, for he realizes that such arguments are needed to convince those whose love of Nature is not as intense as his own. Nevertheless thorough investigations have been made and extensive data have been gathered concerning the economic status of our birds of prey.

Sportsmen and farmers usually admit that they do not desire the absolute extermination of any bird or beast of prey, so long as its presence does not directly endanger human life. This attitude of mind is fair, and with such an audience we may well take pleasure in pleading our cause.

In Pennsylvania the species which needs most attention now

is the Duck Hawk, a few pairs of which nest in our mountains, along the rivers.[1] The Red-tail is in many sections becoming too rare, though it is holding its own fairly well. The fact that the Duck Hawk is a killer is widely recognized. In the most emotional pleas for bird protection the Duck Hawk is conceded to be one of the "bad" Hawks. How can we bird-lovers, in such a case as this, which needs our attention, state our arguments so forcefully and so fairly that we will be heard? How can we, to state the matter as a definite issue, secure protection for the Duck Hawk in spite of the fact that we know the species is destructive and in view of our knowledge that Pennsylvania's 600,000 sportsmen will do almost anything possible to protect the game of which they are so proud?

The bird-lover should find such a task fascinating. He convinces himself of the rarity of the bird; he knows that the creature embodies, in a magnificent way, a wilderness that is being replaced by a complex civilization; he acquaints himself with the historical significance of the bird, and its association with the sport of princes; he knows, also, its consistently "bad" habits.

A plea for the Duck Hawk's preservation may well center in a study of the deepest desires of the human race,—the desire for happiness, for beauty, for interesting experience. The sportsman who recoils a little at being told that Duck Hawks should not be killed because "every creature has a right to live," or because "it is wrong to take a life which we cannot give back," may even thrill at the sudden realization that he may more thoroughly enjoy Pennsylvania's out-of-doors if during the course of his journeys through our wilderness he may have the opportunity of seeing alive a rare and muscular creature—one of the swiftest, most nicely balanced and beautifully colored birds in existence. He will value the bird when he knows its actual standing from the scientific and sporting standpoint. I wonder how many sportsmen would care to sanction the extermination of a creature thought by many to be the most perfect flying organism which Nature has yet evolved, in spite of the fact that this same bird takes a daily toll of birds as food? Most sportsmen, if they fully

[1] The Raven, which is also very rare, has been protected in Pennsylvania since May, 1923.

sensed the rarity of such a creature, would grant it protection at once. Sportsmen do not realize that the listing of this species among the unprotected birds of Pennsylvania is *at this moment* sanctioning the extermination of the Duck Hawk. The species is so rare now that the possibilities of its survival are doubtful.

If it is necessary to bring into use any argument from the economic standpoint we may, in perfect faith, state that virtually all the birds which are captured by the Duck Hawk are abundant species much better fitted to succeed in the race for survival than the Duck Hawk. Examination of Duck Hawk ledges has shown that domestic pigeons, Meadowlarks, Robins, Blue Jays, Flickers, and an occasional water-bird are the principal prey of the Duck Hawk in Pennsylvania. These species are all common, well equipped by Nature for a fight against greater odds than the presence of a few Duck Hawks. There are probably ten thousand Meadowlarks for every Duck Hawk in Pennsylvania; Robins are even more abundant. Why is it, the naturalist asks, that the Duck Hawk's extermination must be sanctioned, when its presence makes so little actual difference to the total population of the species upon which it preys? Obviously the fact that the Robin's food habits are not particularly commendable has no effect on that bird's popularity, though the protection we give it will permit it to become too abundant for its own good, while the Duck Hawk slowly but surely disappears. The general public, after all, has but little idea of the vital problems of wild life. The public does not know that the Robin, for instance, is exceedingly adaptable to changes of environment; that it is almost omnivorous, capable of bringing forth two or three broods of young every year, and otherwise perfectly able to care for itself as a race, whereas the Duck Hawk is handicapped at the outset by its comparative rarity, its small, single brood of young, its rigorous existence, and its inability to adapt itself rapidly to changing conditions. The fact that the Duck Hawk is just as beautiful a bird as the Robin has little bearing upon the problem. The comparatively innocuous Robin is, of course, a popular bird; the Duck Hawk is unpopular.

If birds of prey are to become popular a better understanding of biology is needed. The killing of organisms for food as an

activity necessary to the perpetuation of life, must be more clearly apprehended. No one cringes at the thought of the death of an unpopular caterpillar when a Cuckoo snaps it up; yet life to a lowly organism, biologically speaking, may be just as precious as it is to higher forms. Birds of prey will be better understood when it is realized that the pursuit of food throughout the world demands essentially the same furious conflict among all creatures.

If we sense, therefore, that death is an established necessity, and remember that Nature has provided a tremendous oversupply of lower forms so that the higher forms, as we think of them, may live, then we begin to see the possibility of preserving many forms of wild life alongside each other. It will be understood, for example, that the presence of so striking and handsome a creature as the Duck Hawk will demand the lives of many smaller birds annually; and this will cause us no perturbation, for we will know that the smaller birds are increasing rapidly enough to perpetuate themselves without difficulty, while the Duck Hawk, too, may survive.

The public must be brought to a realization of the fact that great beauty is to be found where mere prettiness does not exist; that the soaring of the wide-winged Hawks, their discordant cries, their mottled plumage and gleaming eyes, are just as truly beautiful as the fluttering flight, cheerful songs, and sweet faces of our smaller bird neighbors. Surely, an appreciation of the beauty and majesty of these birds of prey does not demand a special spiritual endowment of some sort!

Those of us who sense this beauty want our friends to enjoy these birds with us. We bird-lovers are willing to aid in the control of birds of prey, when they are so abundant that their presence endangers the status of another bird. When Goshawks are so plentiful that Ruffed Grouse are being exterminated by them, we sense the justice of eliminating the Goshawk to the point of safety for the Grouse. But we want to make sure, also, that destruction of these fine predators does not go so far as to endanger their own existence as a race.

I have felt for years that every small town in Pennsylvania should have its pair of Red-tailed Hawks and Great Horned Owls. The presence of the Hawks as they soar about in the spring sun,

the hooting of the big Owls on February nights,—these are the just heritage of any American boy, a heritage which we have no right to withhold. Two Red-tailed Hawks, two Great Horned Owls—a pair of Screech Owls, of Sharp-shins, a Sparrow Hawk family or two—these are about all the birds of prey an average town may possess today—and these birds will not, according to the results of our open-minded investigations, exterminate any of the game so long as hunting is properly controlled and limited to a comparatively brief season. If no laws exist, if unrestricted shooting by human beings goes on, there is a danger of exterminating game, it is true; but our game is reasonably well protected, nowadays, from vandalism, and the price our countryside pays for the possession of a few of these magnificent birds of prey is so small that we should be more than glad to pay it, while we may.

It is our problem, as bird-lovers, to give the public the opportunity of sensing this. Without guidance they will continue to have false notions concerning birds of prey. If we criticise them too openly, or demand too abrupt a change of thought we run a considerable risk of being considered fanatical. By degrees, however, we will cause our friends the sportsmen, and our allies the farmers, to sense that there is room for all in a world so generously proportioned as that in which we live.

The fact that most birds of prey have either entirely innocent, or decidedly beneficial food habits will, of course, be unknown to many of our audiences. The fact that year-round examinations of Red-tail stomachs has shown that this species is largely beneficial rather than harmful will, of course, upset many preconceived and long entertained notions. But I am hoping that we may gradually free our plea from arguments based upon materialistic statements.

Our deepest, most sincere reasons for protecting wild-life are not, after all, based upon economic values. If we can make the public sense the need for these magnificent creatures in every one's experience, the preservation of birds of prey which are now too rare will become an important and fascinating feature of the wild-life conservation movement.

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