

REPORT OF THE A. O. U. COMMITTEE ON BIRD
PROTECTION FOR 1944

LAND is the source of all material wealth, of the food we eat and the materials from which our shelters are made; most naturalists and all economists understand this important fact. It is not so generally recognized how important the landscape and various elements in it may be in maintaining a healthy condition, both physical and mental, among people. Whether we look upon land solely as a producer of crops to be harvested, sold, and then used, or think of land as producing plants, animals, and scenery, to be used without destruction or removal, determines the kind of response we make to the idea of bird protection.

Members of the American Ornithologists' Union have taken a lead in the protection of birds in accordance with both these options in the scale of attitudes toward natural resources. Approach to the problems which arise involves many contradictions both in manner of thinking and in execution of decisions. Your Committee believes that this is an opportune time to study the problem and to enquire into possibilities for defining the kind of bird protection program best adapted to the knowledge and views of the Union.

Wartime obviously affects adversely the land and the peoples of our countries even though they may be far from the scene of conflict. These influences are important because, coming so quickly, we have no time to prepare for them; they stop, or hasten, or reverse, tendencies to which over long periods we have become accustomed; they extend farther than we are likely to realize, and they establish precedents, both good and bad, that may govern our behavior for a long time in the future. Therefore, if we are to encourage the good trends and counter the bad ones, we should recognize them early and prepare ourselves to help or to hinder them.

The ornithologist thinks of bird protection in a manner different from those whose chief interests lie in some other direction even though this be closely related. As examples: farmers, hunters, fishermen, or park rangers may consider birds as a help or a hindrance in their affairs and respond to the condition accordingly. A farmer may be one who wants no bird protected that takes any part of his crop, though he may consider some species beneficial because they eat seeds, or insects, or rodents, and he may encourage the presence of others because he likes to see them. A hunter may want shootable birds protected until he is ready to kill them, and, too often, he considers all other species as vermin. Fishermen tend to magnify the extent

to which fish-eating birds feed upon game fishes and to call for their destruction, themselves to undertake the killing. A park ranger may be one who wants to protect all birds conspicuous enough to show visitors.

An ornithologist wishes to preserve a representation of every native kind of bird, in numbers adequate to maintain the species. He wants no greater population of each kind than the available habitat will support, but he may advocate some artificial adjustment of the environment to accommodate a minimum population. His objective is a kind of conservation which assumes that land comes first and that its proper use must be the basis of all conservation. When this has been attained, enough people may desire the preservation of animals and plants to see that it is accomplished.

Meanwhile, we must be concerned with such immediate problems as overpopulation and underpopulation of birds. The first of these comes when we intentionally, or by accident, change the environment in such a way that a species, or a set of species, increases or assembles beyond normal numbers. Fields which resemble some natural habitat, but which contain even more food, attract great numbers of birds and this condition results in complaints of damage or threat of retaliation by people. Such problems generally have been localized, but some, involving birds like crows and blackbirds, concern great areas and cause strong prejudice against birds in general.

Among the current explanations for small numbers of some kinds of birds we should consider the following.

Predators are blamed on slight evidence, or none, by many people as being responsible for small numbers of birds. It has become increasingly apparent to us that predators generally are fitted to get their food without taking a proportion of any animal so great as to endanger its existence.

Parasites and disease, too, are little understood as determiners of populations. It seems clear, however, that these are normally of small import in reduction of species under naturally wild conditions.

Scarcity of food may limit the presence or numbers of a species, but again such occasions come rarely in the wild. Food is available in amount sufficient to keep the native species alive within their normal ranges where the land has not been artificially modified.

When we come to consider human activities, it is easy to discover how birds are hindered to the extent of approaching extinction in some species or helped to the stage of becoming injuriously numerous in others. First, we face the accusation, unjustified but often heard, that some birds are injured to the point of extinction by the actions of

students—A. O. U. members. Rare birds have a special attraction for photographers, falconers, banders, and collectors. It is now well known how each of the interests represented may harm the species concerned. The discipline imposed by the Union and other ornithological societies on their members has served to keep these pursuits within proper bounds although this has not been effective in every instance. It is fitting that control in this manner be maintained by education and the force of group opinion, rather than by administrators of game who use legal action and tend to favor too severe regulations. Moreover, it is necessary that study of birds by scientific methods be continued. It is especially important that any person undertaking serious study of birds be able to build his experience on the handling of objects—specimens which he finds, takes, examines, and preserves with his own hands. A worthy aim of the Union would be to promote the opportunity for all ornithologists to do collecting as a part of their study, unhampered by unnecessary restrictions.

Activities of people other than students are those which really decimate bird species. It may be natural to look beyond these for some new or unknown factor which causes the harm. However, it has now become well established, though possibly not yet widely acknowledged, that the chief problem in maintaining bird species is the control of people. This is less a problem of new and strict laws than it is of demonstrating the ill effects of irresponsible shooting, of bad farming, and the misuse of land generally. A widespread recognition of these evils is essential.

The pleasure to be obtained from hunting as practiced under natural conditions is not found by the modern army of shooters that travels by motor and is equipped with new and untried outfits. However, the sport, or the anticipation of sport, is enough to bring shooters in increasing numbers to the woods and fields each season. It is becoming evident in many places that shooters are far too numerous or too few to keep the harvest of game birds adjusted to production, whether on managed or unmanaged lands. The problems for which they are responsible are mainly outside the scope of A. O. U. concern except when species are brought to the point of extinction through over-hunting, or when attitudes develop that consider birds, except game, as nuisances.

Farming varies greatly in its effects on the native avifauna. The types which leave the natural vegetation least modified change least the kinds of birds and their numbers. The kinds which use the whole surface of the land for crops leave little or no room for a permanent bird population. Fortunately only a minute portion of the land can

be so treated. The remainder is farmed most profitably by practices which employ natural principles involving maintenance of organic soils and adequate moisture, and which recognize a place for some animals and some species of plants in addition to those forming the main crop. Sometimes these are harvested to supplement the planted crop. Changes in bird numbers resulting from farming are mainly the concern of the land owner and usually they do not enter the problem of protecting species of birds. Exceptions occur when such species as the Prairie Chicken are brought nearly to extinction by unfavorable agricultural practices.

Other uses of land involving such practices as forest-cutting, drainage, control of stream beds, road construction, making of parks, brush burning, and many types of management for game show a common tendency to impose a regularity of landscape. This may increase the number of birds of some kinds or the total of individuals, or it may bring a depletion, but it is also likely to destroy the variety of habitat required for the normal community of living things. The interspersion of environmental types frequently sought establishes a certain type of irregularity designed to support more animals on certain areas. The control of the land may bring the desired result temporarily or even permanently. The main injury here is that which results from a partial control practiced without consideration of the resulting disturbances in other parts of the environment. Persons who thus disturb the land may have an obligation to compensate for the changes they intend to initiate.

It may be true that too little is known about the processes involved to permit evaluation of the human activities which interfere with nature. Possibly it is better to say that too few people know the conclusions that are becoming accepted generally by naturalists. The problems of bird protection which confront the A. O. U. would become clearer if all members could study the publications of the last decade concerning the interrelations among plants, animals, and the land of our continent. Coming to an agreement on the primary aims to be sought, and the most likely profitable ways of reaching them, would make our efforts more effective than would a continued attempt to meet each of the examples of bad natural history as it appears. These have now become so numerous, so extensive, and so widespread as to be far beyond the powers of our organization to keep acquainted with them, let alone to cope with them.

The great, recent extension of agricultural practice to include management of wild land and its plant and animal inhabitants involves an attempted control over large areas previously not molested. The

resulting increases in bird populations have been demonstrated clearly, though it is not yet clear that stable, varied, natural populations can maintain themselves on such land. Along with these movements to increase birds there has developed a correspondingly great and effective capacity to destroy them and their homes. Continual compromise has permitted growth of the two notions by postponement of the final decision to preserve samples of all the kinds of birds and their natural habitat. It is evident now that the home of any species will be destroyed if it contains some element of considerable salable value. Purchase of the lands by federal, state, or provincial governments may remove them only temporarily from the market.

The human activities likely to be opposed by a naturalist who typifies the interests of our organization include the following:

1. Modification of natural, or near natural, areas in efforts to improve their wilderness values or to make money.
2. Designation of areas as preserve, wilderness, or sanctuary when artificial tampering with the biota or environment on them is undertaken.
3. Regulation by poison of mammal populations on wild land and bird populations anywhere.
4. Transfer of wild animals to localities outside the normal range of the geographic race represented.
5. Release of exotic species to substitute for native species depleted in number or considered inferior by hunters.

It is likely that this naturalist will observe, without taking a prominent part in, such activities as the following which come properly within the scope of wildlife management:

1. Establishment and development of protected areas to provide more game and fish for hunters.
2. Practices of modifying farming, lumbering, or recreational custom in order to increase or decrease birds or other kinds of animals.
3. Modification of hunting regulations calculated to keep a supply of birds available for all licensed hunters, so long as these regulations do not threaten the existence of any species.

His energies will be used to promote those activities which come naturally from his primary interest in birds, such as:

1. More vigorous attempts among naturalists and other persons to understand the significance of wild plants and animals, including birds, on the land.
2. Continuous agitation for the designation, the protection, and immediate study of tracts of land to be preserved as adequate samples of original conditions represented on the continent. Where no ade-

quate representation of a wilderness type is available, substitutes may be selected from lands little modified and these treated so as to permit recovery. On these tracts the valid aim would be to protect the environment, not to maintain it.

3. Search for better information, obviously needed in connection with species approaching extinction, to show a possible working plan of preservation and one that would permit vigorous prosecution of the plan. So far no one has been able to resolve satisfactorily the clash of interests which comes when some commercial undertaking takes away the living place of a species. The upper limit of public money that can be used to buy a home for a kind of animal or plant has not been determined. However, where such trees as the redwood and the Monterey cypress have been concerned, relatively huge sums were spent for this purpose. This question, apparently, is the major obstacle now preventing favorable action in behalf of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker.

The 1943 report, published late in 1944, makes use of current information concerning threatened species. It invites every member to make the results of recent observations available. One handicap to the prompt use of pertinent observations is the long time required to assemble information from many parts of the continent. A possible remedy for this delay would be to make use of the organization which reports on the status of birds in the Season section of Audubon Magazine. Sending information on rare species to the compilers of the regional reports would help them and would make the information available quickly to this Committee as well as to other interested persons.

If this Committee is to represent adequately the membership of the A. O. U., it must be supplied with information from, and the opinions of, the individual members. It may indicate opportunities for enquiry and action, but the effective interest must come from the remainder of the organization. If only a few members are actively concerned about the preservation of birds, we may conclude that permanent success must be dependent on the incidental results arising from the movements to culture birds mainly for economic motives. There is no doubt that land birds will be helped by improved practices of culture of the soil and that both land birds and aquatic birds are helped by wiser control of streams, lakes, marshes, and swamps. However, these practices alone will not preserve the natural samples of habitat and the sets of plants and animals which go with them. This latter we believe is actually the real aim of the A. O. U. in its desire to protect birds. True understanding of birds and their rôle in the biota will come from study of them in these natural situations.

Recognition of the need for this normal representation of our avifauna does not prevent the development of museums, zoos, game refuges, or managed wild areas, but rather it gives better perspective to our efforts in defining, selecting, and regulating these developments. We need to discover the fact that we are not yet prepared to control natural processes. The place to make this discovery is the area where protection rather than regulation is the practice. It is clear that most of the land is not now in condition to maintain the natural processes without special attention to it at first, and that the kind of attention required varies from place to place. The desirable aim, however, is to practice the minimum of disturbance required to re-establish the normal relations between the land and its inhabitants.

In suggesting that the Union define its interest in bird protection we feel that its influence could thereby become more effective and its special knowledge would supplement, rather than follow or duplicate, the work of other organizations whose aims overlap ours in part. In addition to recognition of the individual responsibility for understanding the problem, each member can serve to maintain bird species directly by acquainting himself with persons in his vicinity who work with wild birds. These include game wardens, forest rangers, museum curators, park wardens, trappers, vermin hunters, and nature writers or lecturers. Especially to be sought is acquaintance with the organization which administers natural resources in each State or Province.

If the anticipated changes in treatment of land are carried out after the war, there may be urgent need for the kind of advice that members of the A. O. U. are equipped to give. It is not too early for them to review their evidence and opinions bearing on these matters. When structures have been made on, and control of vegetation or animals attempted over, some of the special kinds of habitats which still support remnants of declining bird species, it may be too late to protest or to suggest. Americans are learning to modify landscapes on a scale not previously imagined and before long they may practice these skills on lands hitherto considered safe for birds.

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