

IS THE UNLIMITED COLLECTING OF  
BIRDS IN BREEDING SEASON  
JUSTIFIED?

A COMMUNICATION.

To My Fellow Ornithologists:—

Realizing fully that in condemning a practice which, by reason of its having been followed by many of our best ornithologists, has assumed to many the garb of propriety, I am inviting criticism and perhaps caustic criticism at that, I lay before you a matter which has impressed itself upon me for three seasons past. What I have seen of bird slaughter (and it can be known by no other name) has placed me as unalterably opposed to collecting large numbers of birds during the breeding season. It is not my wish to attempt to arouse a senseless sympathy, such as has cropped out in too many of our magazines of late, with scarcely a fact to justify it in many cases. I have kindly feelings for those of the Audubonians who are working for bird protection in a practical way, but none whatever for those who rant and criticise the current journals because they print the bird news. The theorists are all right but as useless as the fifth wheel of a coach, so long as their theories are unexecuted, save on paper. I hope to be understood as not adding another to the already long list of empty pleas with which we have been afflicted of late.

The science of ornithology demands the collecting of any reasonable number of birds to further its ends, and personally I have taken the lives of birds with as much zeal as any, when the skins were desired for actual use. Furthermore I have always been a devotee of the gun rather than the opera glass in collecting, and am at the present time a recruit in what Dr. Coues has termed the "shot-gun wing" of the ornithological army. Therefore I may presume to write without prejudice against unnecessary bird slaughter. It seems but humane that where unusual numbers of skins are collected that the time should be during the spring and fall migrations or else in winter or early summer. No sane ornithologist can condemn the shooting of one or both parents to an occasional nest, if they be desired for identification or for the collection,

but it would be needless, nor is it practiced, often. To such a status it would seem that extremists in both directions might agree.

My first insight into bird slaughter in the name of science was in 1896 during my stay in the Sierras of El Dorado Co., Cal. Two well known Californian workers were touring the emigrant road, having been sent out by a third ornithologist, and were allowed ten or fifteen cents per skin for such of the take as he could use. This was, of course, an incentive to collect everything in sight, which I must say, regretfully, was done. Each day these collectors roamed the woods and hills and every bird which had the confidence to present itself to view, paid for its temerity with its life. In the Sierras many species are typical, such as *Pipilo maculatus megalonyx*, and others which are not hoped to show any perceptible variation. Yet in 1896 species such as Cassin's Vireo, Spurred Towhee, various warblers etc. were collected without limit; as many as thirty to fifty of some being taken. Most of these were not collected for the personal use or study of either of the three interested parties, but to be sold for a paltry sum, if indeed at all, for after the trip over rough mountain roads and being packed away when "green" for weeks, many of the skins were poor and misshapen. This was the first slaughter in the name of science which I witnessed. Perhaps 500 or 600 birds had been taken from their haunts in breeding time, the collectors had unquestionably done much hard work in warm weather, while their return was very moderate financially. Doubtless they saw and learned much of nature and the birds, as both were active workers in the field, but the glory of their season's work has upon it a blot in the shape of unwarranted bird slaughter.

In 1897 another prominent Californian made an extended trip over the Lake Tahoe road of El Dorado County through the Sierras. He was accompanied at first by one and later by several assistants. This gentleman I count as a personal friend and a thoroughly able naturalist, who has the charm of enlivening camp life which few possess, and far be it from me to criticise his good nature or to disparage the value of his scientific work. But he waged the same heartless war-fare against the birds all through the summer and I will not venture to say how many birds were numbered in his collection when he left the Sierras, but certain it is that the number was in excess of all requirements or reason.

There are species little known, such as the Californian Pine Grosbeak and some others in the Sierras which no collector could be criticised for collecting on sight, but this idea of making a daily killing, shooting everything in sight be it sparrow, warbler, flycatcher, woodpecker or what not, simply to swell the number of skins of the season's work is gory and not compatible with the ideas which a conscientious ornithologist should hold. Many of these birds will never be used for comparison, for the reason that the plumages are constant as a rule in this zone, and many too common to be classed as desirable, will bring only a paltry price when sold. And I ask if it is not a very serious question whether any ornithologist may collect in such a wholesale and random manner and call it science?

Some may contend that only a comparatively small area of the country was worked over, but this does not alter the principle at all. I base my whole criticism on the proposition that if wholesale collecting is wrong, it is *doubly so* in the breeding season! It was during this time that most of this work was done. All the species were nesting and had either eggs or young, but no attention was paid to this as a rule. Birds were shot anywhere and everywhere without so much as a thought for the welfare of the nestlings and who can say how many young birds thus deprived of one or both parents died from starvation or exposure? This is not an overdrawn picture but what Mr. Carriger, myself and others witnessed daily for almost two weeks, and it went on for several months.

One ornithologist? F. M. Nutting, who was in the party, found the nest of a Pileated Woodpecker in a pine stub, containing young, and promptly shot one parent. This he brought to our camp one Sunday afternoon, evidently proud of his prowess at having stilled a bird which had perhaps lost its fear through duty to its young, and remarked that he *should shoot the other bird when he went back!* What a damnable sense of decency, let alone humaneness! I ask should such irresponsible beings be permitted to roam the woods, with no more perception of conscience than to commit such brutalities? It was an outrage which I know was not sanctioned by his principal.

The ornithologist should be the birds' best protector, even though he must at times shoot them for study, but what shall we say when he goes among them in nesting time, shooting

indiscriminately and leaving the young to perish? Every naturalist owes it to science to protect the natural beauties with which the Creator has blessed the earth, and how can the collector, with never a twinge of conscience, quiet the sweet voices of the woodland in a fashion little less than barbarous, for pecuniary gain? I may be called a "sentimentalist" as a reward for these words, and if so I accept the charge willingly. Well may the man blush who has no sentiment or consideration for bird life when he is in the midst of it; he lacks the higher aspirations of the true naturalist.

In the fall of 1897 large numbers of juvenile Hermit Warblers were taken, amounting in number if I remember correctly to about 100. While the plumages may have been interesting such a series as this was scarcely justified, and I question if it could be attributed to legitimate science. I have painted the picture of bird destruction as I saw and know of it, and totally without personal feeling. That this letter will have the effect of preventing such collecting in the future I have no hope, but if it be the means of drawing a response from those I have criticised or of calling forth the support of others, my object is accomplished. One of the primary inducements of these expeditions is to secure collections of skins to sell, and upon this hinges all the wrong.

In speaking with a well known ornithologist recently, and while talking of bird slaughter, he was frank enough to tell me that he "collected for what was in it." I admired his frankness and respect him for admitting the point without argument. And how shall we meet such frank admission of wrong, if wrong it be? Better that a restrictive law be enacted, even though it inconvenience all, than for such unwarranted destruction go on. Without any attempt at embellishing these facts with sentiment or satire, in both of which my pen might but crudely serve me, I invite open letters on the subject. We shall be glad to hear any Californian plead justification with sincerity, if he has collected in this manner, and the BULLETIN will be open to all with impartiality who wish to further discuss this question. I believe firmly that the making of large collections during the breeding season should be prohibited, and that the mercenary part of it should be severely condemned.

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