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SOME BIRD ACCIDENTS

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WITH THREE PHOTOS BY HERMAN T. BOHLMAN

TRAGEDIES are common in bird and animal life, but I rarely come upon them. The end is generally tragic and not from natural causes. The weak falls a prey to the strong; the sick bird is captured by a cat or some other animal. Several times I have found birds that have suffered a tragic end, but seldom have I witnessed the tragedy itself.

One day I was watching a pair of Yellow Warblers in the orchard. They were flitting about a vine-covered fence. I think they were building a nest, or just about to build one in the vicinity. The first thing I noticed, the male paused on the fence, fluttering his wings. His mate flew down beside him. He tried to fly to the limb of a nearby tree, but fell short and wavered to the ground. His wife was right beside him, chirping all the time. I went nearer for a closer view. He lay flat on his back, writhing in pain. I could see he was dying. His wife was on the fence scarcely a yard from my hand, fidgeting and calling for him. He died in my hand almost instantly, stricken by I know not what.

I had a closely similar experience one rainy afternoon when I was walking along the street in Berkeley, California. A male English Sparrow fluttered down almost at my feet. He floundered about in the water on the sidewalk and finally over into the gutter, where he died almost instantly. Three or four other sparrows were flying around, chirping in excitement, as they watched their fallen comrade.

Telephone and telegraph wires are the cause of many deaths among birds. A good example of this has been given by Mr. W. Otto Emerson in THE CONDOR, vol. VI, no. 2, page 37 (March-April, 1904). He tells of many Northern Phalaropes and Western Sandpipers that are killed, especially during the migrating season, by flying against the wires across the marsh.

During the spring of 1904 while making the trip out thru this region with Mr. Emerson and Mr. Bohlman, I saw a number of phalaropes along the road under

the wires. Some were dead, others wounded. A little later I saw a small flock flit across the road ahead of us. I saw the end of a wing fly in one direction and the wounded bird went fluttering to the ground. He had struck the wire with such force that the last joint of the wing was completely severed. Otherwise he was unharmed. These dead and wounded birds furnished foraging for neighboring cats. At another time, Bohlman and I saw several Western Sandpipers that had been killed in the same way out on the Alameda marshes.



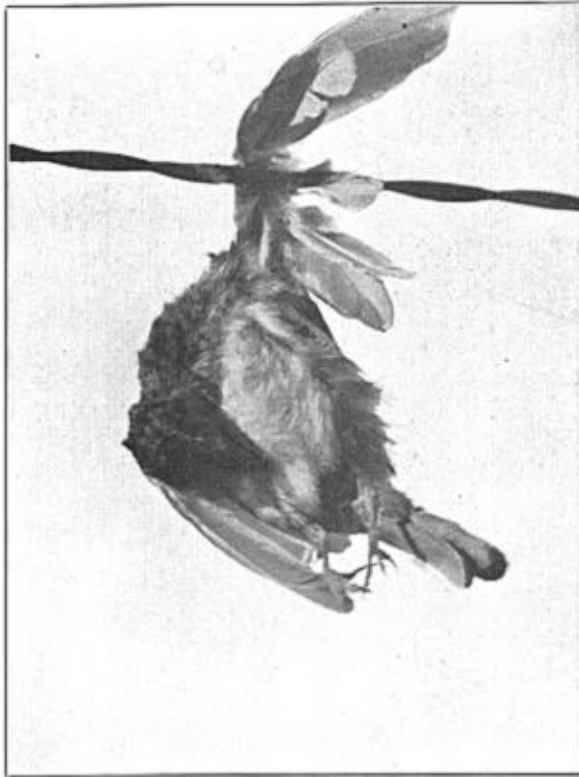
DEAD SONG SPARROW WITH FOOT WEDGED IN BETWEEN
THE WOVEN WIRES OF A FENCE

During the summer of 1908 while traveling thru eastern Oregon, we came upon a Horned Lark that evidently in full flight had caught its wing on the barb of a wire fence, for it was hanging dead. At another time I found the body of a thrush hanging to the barb of a wire fence. The wire ran straight across the top of a zigzag fence, and the bird in full flight had just skimmed the top of the rail to go full force into the wire before it was seen. The barb had caught in the

neck, and the force had swung the bird's body over the wire from below, locking it in a death grip.

In *THE CONDOR*, vol. VIII, no. 2, page 40 (March-April, 1906), I told of an accident where two young Night Herons were hanging dead in the tree-top. In the heron colonies it is not uncommon for a young bird to get its foot caught in a crotch and thus hang itself. Several years ago we took the picture of a Song Sparrow that was hanging dead in a wire fence. In some way the foot had been caught between the two twisted wires and the bird could not release itself, for the leg was wedged and broken.

During the past summer, we found a female Rufous Hummingbird hanging



DEAD HORNED LARK WITH WING CAUGHT ON THE
BARB OF A WIRE FENCE

dead in one of the lilac bushes in the yard. The bird was merely hanging upside-down with both feet clutching the limb and locked in a death grip. I do not know whether it died in the natural upright position and turned over afterward, or whether it died with head downward. After taking a photograph I examined the bird, but could find no cause of death. The tiny branch was bruised where the feet clutched it, showing that the grip had been, and remained, perfectly tight.

This incident reminds me of an experience that Mr. Bohlman had with a hummingbird several years ago. It was a cold rainy day and he was wandering thru the woods. He came to a hummingbird that was sitting apparently sound asleep in a small bush. He touched it, but the bird showed no signs of life. He cut

the branch carefully and carried the bird almost a mile back thru the woods to his house. In the meantime, the weather brightened, and as he was standing on the porch, the sun came out and shone upon the bird. To his amazement, the little fellow opened his eyes with a start and flew away. The bird was evidently an excellent sleeper. In my own experience with hummingbirds, I know that the sun-



THE DEATH OF A HUMMINGBIRD: HANGING WITH FEET
CLUTCHT TO TWIG OF A LILAC BUSH

shine is an important factor in the life of these midgets. The hummingbird is as devoted to his idol as any sun-worshiper of old. I have often seen the feathers of a hummingbird puff up and the bird get dumpy the minute the sun was hidden by a cloud. I have no doubt it is hard for the hummers to endure cold weather or a prolonged season of rain.

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