

THE HUNTER IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA VERSUS WILD ANIMAL LIFE

By W. LEE CHAMBERS

My yearning for birds began in 1891, when I became interested in wildlife in general. From 1892 to 1894, I was associated with the group of young ornithologists which formed the Southern California Natural History Society which later became the Southern Division of the Cooper Ornithological Club. This association was a great stimulus for me.

In 1894 my family moved to Santa Monica where the country was still wild and game was abundant. At this new location I had wonderful chances to watch huge flocks of wildfowl. I will never forget how we watched in the fall for the flocks of Cranes which came to feed on the barley in fields that extended from the present site of Wilshire Boulevard to the foothills, an area nearly four miles long and one and one-half miles wide.

We also saw occasional flocks of Mountain Plover. These birds generally accompanied large flocks of Killdeer, apparently for sociability. But what thrilled me most were the long clouds of ducks and geese on migration. I have seen ducks and geese in thousands covering the ocean off the present site of Playa del Rey and on the lagoons back of there. This area was called Ballona Swamp. In rainy winters Ballona Swamp extended over nearly all the low ground as far back as the present site of Culver City, then called "The Palms," and running over to the Inglewood Mesa, an area about ten miles square. Apparently it was one of the resting places of the migrating flocks. Often I stayed awake to listen to the continuous calls of the flying birds. These sounds, which were music to me, will never be heard again by anyone there, for nearly all the marshes have been drained and the place is almost solidly filled with houses. Human progress has wiped out this bird paradise.

The Santa Monica Mountains swarmed with coveys of Valley Quail, and deer were abundant. Every group of large sycamores was ruled by a Red-tailed Hawk or a Swainson Hawk. Hollow trees housed numerous Sparrow Hawks, Barn Owls, and Screech Owls. Everywhere, in season, we could hear the cries of woodpeckers, Flickers, Western Kingbirds, and Bullock Orioles. Smaller birds were abundant, making this a wonderful place for me; the years 1894-1895 passed rapidly.

One of the outstanding spots in my memory was the taxidermy establishment of Mr. and Mrs. John Brickner. Along in the middle 1890's they sold enormous quantities of small, mounted birds for millinery purposes. Hummingbirds were very common throughout this section and the Brickners caught most of their hummers by netting them. With Mrs. Brickner's unusual skill as a taxidermist, these gorgeous birds were beautifully mounted on long stickpins or on wires. It was common to see hundreds of these mounts pinned on a large slab of redwood bark, so lifelike they seemed about to fly away. I remember one lady in Santa Monica who had a quantity of these beautiful creatures pinned on her hat. She looked like a walking aviary!

In the summer of 1896, my father purchased for me an interest in a retail hardware store in Santa Monica, and it was my job to manage the sporting goods department, as we called it; the only items sold were guns, ammunition, and fishing tackle. Shotgun shells in our stock were mostly 10 and 12 gauge and the metallic cartridges were mostly .25-20, .32-20, .38-55, .38-40, and .44-40, all slow cartridges, powerful enough to kill deer but not to carry for a long shot; they gave the deer a chance.

About this time the Winchester people developed the first high power sporting rifle, the old 1894 model Winchester with its .25-35, .30-30, and .32 special loads. We thought these guns were great and they were popular, enormous quantities being sold. The Winchester 1895 model lever action army gun became popular early in 1897, and it was one of the most destructive machines against wildlife ever put on the market.

In the summer of 1897 we sold our interest in hardware and opened a sporting goods store fully equipped with implements for the destruction of wildlife. Up to this time and through 1898 there was no bag limit, and closed seasons were the only curtailment on hunting. Open seasons for birds in the California game laws for 1897-1898 were as follows:

Valley Quail, Bob-White, Partridge, Wild Ducks, Rail—October 1 to March 1.
Mountain Quail and Grouse—September 1 to February 15.
Doves—July 15 to February 15.

Market hunting was in full swing, but at that time there were not many market hunters and the game was plentiful. If I remember correctly, ducks brought only 25 cents each and quail 5 cents. Nevertheless, I have seen market hunters drive up in front of the store with a light buckboard literally heaped with quail or ducks.

Shortly after 1898 many new high power rifles came out and the market was flooded with them. Before the advent of these guns in so many models and patterns, hawks, owls, and other large birds were fairly safe and they were seldom molested. It seemed that everyone who purchased a new high power rifle had to target shoot, and it was the common practice for purchasers to go out in the wilds and shoot everything they could see in an effort to improve their marksmanship. It was not long until we noticed a decrease in the hawk and owl population. Many of the birds so killed were brought to my store; among them were two California Condors.

Beginning in 1899 the Fish and Game Commission gradually curtailed hunting privileges, and correspondingly the hunters developed the tendency to target shoot everything in sight. A duck hunter would practice on coots, gulls, cormorants and herons, and the deer hunter would try his luck on hawks, condors, owls, woodpeckers, or anything else he could see to shoot. The birds were no longer brought to my store, but the shooting continued in greater amount than ever.

A very excited man came to my store about February 25, 1900, and told of thousands of wild pigeons (*Columba fasciata*) being poisoned on the Wolfskill Ranch. The pigeons were eating the grain faster than it could be sowed and harrowed, and the ranch people had scattered some poisoned grain which was killing the birds. I had never seen wild pigeons, so I hurriedly rode my bicycle to the ranch which was near the present site of Sawtelle, then a large barley field.

When I arrived at the field I saw a large flock of Turkey Vultures feasting on the dead pigeons, the remains and feathers of which covered a large part of 160 acres. I gathered all the perfect birds I could carry in two sacks and rode back to Santa Monica. Harry Swarth made these into beautiful specimens for me on a fifty-fifty basis.

It is impossible for me to estimate how many Band-tailed Pigeons were poisoned, but the original flock must have been a large one. The poisoning and the vulture feast went on all day: I was present only at the end of the incident. As far as I know this never happened again in the Santa Monica area, and my notes do not mention pigeons again up to the time I moved from there.

In 1905, I sold my sporting goods store and started to work for the Wm. H. Hoeger Company of Los Angeles, one of the largest distributors of guns and ammunition in the United States. As a traveling salesman I went regularly over the southern half of

California, and I became acquainted with every retail sporting goods store and its personnel in this district. I listened to many tales of practice shooting. In Imperial Valley in the early days Burrowing Owls made excellent targets; a favorite Sunday "sport" was the shooting of "Billy Owls" with the result that this interesting little fellow was so persecuted that it is now too scarce to furnish the sport. But if the owl increases sufficiently, the shooting will be resumed.

Another favorite day's work for the "sportsman" was "plunking" pelicans as they sailed over Salton Sea. The object was to see who could hit the greatest number of this majestic bird. Rifles were used in this sport, but sometimes shotguns were employed. When pelicans were not flying, any bird that happened by was the target. Pelicans are now scarce on Salton Sea, so this sport is dead.

This target shooting is encouraged by the ammunition companies in their so-called "pest drives." To be sure, these companies designate Horned Owls, Sharp-shinned and Cooper hawks, and Crows as vermin, and they encourage the offering of prizes for the most pests killed on these vermin drives. The topic is so big and there is so much to be said about the "pest" drives that I will leave it for another time.

Here is where the harm comes to the wildlife. Mr. Average Sportsman today buys a nice new, high-powered rifle and is given literature on vermin and pests, or he reads about these in the game and hunting magazines. On his trip out in the country on little-traveled highways he sights a hawk on a telephone wire and, although it is against the law to shoot from a public highway, he sees no one about and takes a bead on the bird, which he generally shoots and leaves where it falls. If he drives off the highway to a sparsely inhabited country, he may spend an hour in one spot, shooting any bird that comes in range of his rifle. When this territory is exhausted he moves a few miles farther and repeats the slaughter. I wonder how long our avian population can stand this destruction. It must be remembered this hunter is only one of approximately 200,000 in California legally entitled to target shoot, and it is seldom that anyone is arrested for this kind of shooting.

A new factor in bird destruction is the new "hopped up" .22 caliber ammunition. Guns have been remodeled to take care of these new high power cartridges, and about thirty-five new models of .22 rifles have appeared within the last six months. A great many models are coming out regularly equipped with telescope sights. These new guns are being advertised extensively by the factories, and the sporting goods stores are making a nice profit. This .22 rifle business has increased about 25 per cent during the last two years and the profit is very acceptable to the sporting goods stores.

All this means more targets will have to be found. Birds, animals, road signs, insulators, rocks and anything in sight will be used. The worst drain naturally will fall on our avian friends. The sporting goods dealers know this is a common Sunday sport and encourage it, although they know that thousands of protected birds are killed in this manner. A great many hunters (or target shooters) know it is illegal to shoot everything in sight, but there are not enough game wardens to give the country the protection from this vandal shooting which it should have. Anyone who has driven along the highways has noticed that many road signs are shot so full of holes that they are ruined. Ask the Auto Club what they think of these vandals. Quite recently some target shooters tried their skill on tanks used for water storage to fight forest fires, and shot them full of holes. This kind of shooting in a way helps the conservationist, for it brings the vandalism before the authorities in a forceful manner.

The following paragraphs are very much to the point and are taken from an editorial in the January Nature Magazine (vol. 27, 1936, p. 42). Quotations are from Mr. Jay N. Darling's remarks in another publication.

"No major sport in the world (with the possible exception of the wrestling game," he said, "has suffered so much from abuses within as the time-honored recreation of wild-fowling. The boys like it so well they've about ruined it. . . .

"Speaking by and large, everything goes in the great conglomerate fraternity of those who take fish and game by fair means or foul. Nothing is barred. You may shoot out of season, exceed the bag limit, buy ducks of a bootlegger, bribe a game warden, have your Senator intercede with the judge, and still be accepted in good sportsmen's society. If you can carry home one bag limit in the open, hide a gunny sack full under the seat cushions, and stuff another dozen in your spare tires and get as far as the club ice-box with them, it's heigh-ho and a great joke on the Fish and Game Department. You can tag one possession limit for yourself, another for each one of your business associates and one for the village dog-catcher—just so they are out of your possession—and still call yourself a sportsman. Ducks by the thousands trapped, shot on the water at night, shipped in eel kegs to hotels, commission houses and night clubs—are bought by the gentry of the sportsman's world with no resulting stigma. Baited slaughter pens with a guaranteed bag limit to all comers for \$25 and a photograph of yourself with Charley, the guide (who shot them), go unchallenged in respectable circles."

This is plain speaking from a man who knows and to whom the gunners can scarcely refer with their usual sneer: "Bah! Sentimentalist." Mr. Darling further points out that there appears to be no penalty for hitting below the belt or fouling "in the realm of those who hunt and fish and call it sport." Everyone will agree with Mr. Darling when he says that "there are, of course, fine sportsmen." But, he adds, they "give a good name to many a racketeer whose abuses of the sport are responsible for the restrictions visited upon all alike."

Mr. Darling even cites one of our leading wealthy sportsmen who, finding the duck-shooting regulations onerous, finances a duck census to prove that those who contend there is a duck shortage are fools, and seeks "to organize a revolution against all those who stand in the way of the inalienable right of every American to shoot when and how he pleases." And, at that, we have a feeling that Mr. Darling has left a lot unsaid.

I had the honor and pleasure to have known very well the late Dr. E. W. Nelson, when he was Chief of the Biological Survey. He, also, was of the opinion that the hunters would, if left the opportunity, eventually shoot everything which would fly within their range. I have been active in selling guns and ammunition since 1896, in the lower half of the State of California, and have had the good fortune to be associated with scientific ornithologists as well as hunters; so I feel qualified to endorse for my territory Mr. Darling's statements as to the average man with a gun.

In connection with my pessimistic predictions please remember that in southern California from 1891 to 1936 some of our birds and animals have already disappeared and many are now making their last stand, and most of the ones left are but pitiful remnants of the former numbers.

As this article is being finished another deer season has started in California. The past three weeks have broken all our records for the sale of deer rifles and ammunition. Every jobbing house in southern California has the same report. This means a big addition to the practice-shooting fraternity. These new rifle owners will have to find targets!

I am criticising no one person, but I do blame the primitive instinct in man to pursue and destroy, and I firmly believe that the future of birdlife in this territory is doomed unless something is done to stop the tremendous slaughter by target, or practice, shooting. Large sanctuaries offer the only positive protection, and outside them everything larger than a sparrow is destined for destruction.

Eagle Rock, California, June 1, 1936.