

CORRESPONDENCE

"ROUND ROBIN LETTER" A SUCCESSFUL BIRD STUDY STIMULUS

At the present time bird study in America stands at a high point of efficiency and system. The various methods of studying bird-life have been worked out and developed for years, and new ideas and problems pertaining to the subject are continually coming into significance as the number of disciples of Wilson and Audubon increases.

A somewhat new method of stimulating interest in bird study has been very successfully put into practice in Iowa in the winter just past. This plan, which is essentially different from any other that I know, is a "chain" letter replete with bird notes and experiences. It is familiarly known as the "Round Robin" letter.

Though the plan is simple its potentialities are great. The letter is circulated among five or more bird students. The person who starts the letter chain writes a *bird letter*, sends it to the second observer who adds to it his letter and forwards it to the third station, and so on until the entire circle has been completed. When the letter returns to the first writer, he removes from it his first contribution, writes a new one, and again sends it on. Thus the bird letter makes the rounds and the matter is always new and up to date.

This plan was introduced in our state by Mr. Charles J. Spiker, a New Hampton bird enthusiast. Our chain contains seven of us Iowa bird students, representing as many regions of the state, and we have all found the letter highly entertaining and instructive, not to mention the stimulus and enthusiasm it has given us during the winter season, when birds are scarce and interest is usually lax. Seven is about the proper number of observers to conduct a circle successfully, because this keeps it circulating in a reasonable length of time. More than seven or eight contributors would necessarily make the letter much slower and lessen the interest. With seven in the chain, the letter has about four days for each station—three days in which the letter may be read and a new one written, and a day's passage in the mails—if it is to be run on a regular monthly schedule.

The contents of the "Round Robin" letter are always intensely interesting and contain a personal element that is never found in bird magazines or similar publications. Since the letters are usually long, the bundle is bulky and contains a great deal of reading matter. Up-to-the-minute bird notes, descriptions of favorite "birding" grounds, bird books, feeding station and bird-banding experiences, are some of the topics brought up for discussion and exchange. In our chain we also have a department of photographs which further adds to the interest. At all times there is a brotherly spirit and a mutual understanding that one seldom finds with people not personally acquainted. The farmer-bird-lover and the city banker are alike interested in some diminutive Warbler; the busy housewife gives the college student or perhaps minister some pointers on identifying a Hawk; bird lovers are members of

a great natural brotherhood, irrespective of occupation in life. These bird letter chains will eventually lead to a meeting, perhaps at some picturesque spot such as a state park, where the writers will become personally acquainted with one another. In this era of autos and good roads, this can be easily accomplished.

I have given only a brief outline of the Round Robin idea. That it has many possibilities is evident. It can no doubt be developed in many ways and prove useful to bird-thinking people in other parts of the country. A letter representing various states instead of localities in one state would no doubt be successful, and there are other angles to work from. Get your circle of bird students together and start your letter rolling. We Iowans have enjoyed ours very much and should like to see the plan put into practice in other states.

FRED J. PIERCE.

Winthrop, Iowa, March 5, 1923.

Milwaukee, Wis., March 27th, 1923.

MR. LYND S JONES,
Editor-in-Chief of The Wilson Bulletin,
Oberlin, Ohio.

Dear Sir:—

The editorial in the current issue of The Bulletin emboldens me to send to you the enclosed copies of an exchange of letters some time ago between Professor F. E. L. Beal and myself. Hitherto I have refrained from acting on Professor Beal's suggestion, but you are free to use the letters if you so desire.

My thought in sending them to you is that their publication either in full or in abstracted form might encourage others to similar experiments to their intense personal satisfaction even if nothing of real scientific value resulted.

Very truly yours,

GARDNER P. STICKNEY.

U. S. Dept. Ag., Washington D. C., Jan. 14th, 1914.

GARDNER P. STICKNEY,
Milwaukee, Wis.

Dear Sir:—

Your very interesting letter of the 10th inst. is at hand. Thank you for the account that it contains. It is an excellent illustration of the changes that occur in the food habits of birds under changed conditions. When the storm cleansed the air of their usual food they at once turned their attention to the berries as the most available substitute. It is a little singular that these birds should be so far north so late in the year. The flycatchers are mostly rather early migrants.

Another point of interest is the ease with which you succeeded in winning their confidence and made friends of them. It is a sad

commentary on the character of man, that, as a rule all other creatures avoid him and retreat at his approach. Thousands of instances show that a large part of the animal world is ready to reciprocate our friendship if we will only make the first advances. Unfortunately the ruling passion of the human race seems to be to exterminate the rest of the animal kingdom.

It seems to me that your account of this little incident is worth preserving and I hope you will send it to some of the numerous Nature publications who no doubt would be glad to print it. Thanking you again, I remain,

Very truly yours,

F. E. L. BEAL.

January 10, 1914.

PROF. F. E. L. BEAL,

Care Biological Survey,

Department of Agriculture, Washington, D. C.

My dear Sir:—

I have just been reading with great interest the bulletin of the Biological Survey written by yourself on the food of certain flycatchers. I was particularly interested in that section of your paper bearing upon the yellow-bellied flycatcher (*Empidonax flaviventris*), noting that, according to your laboratory investigations, the food of this bird is composed so very largely of animal matter.

It happens that the last two weeks of September, 1913, I spent with two companions at our fishing camp in Northern Wisconsin and had an opportunity to observe a number of these birds at very close range. Our camp, located in Section 15, Township 44 North, Range 4 East, is upon an island of about an acre and a half, and between the log camp and the shore to the South there are four or five small mountain-ash trees. These trees were in very full fruit when we reached camp about the 15th of September. About a week later we had a very heavy twenty-four hours snow-storm of very wet snow, covering the ground to a depth of about four inches. Almost immediately after the cessation of the storm, birds of various sorts appeared in the mountain-ash trees feeding on the berries. There were a good many hermit thrushes, a large flock of cedar-birds and a number of flickers and some smaller birds. Each one of these birds bolted the berries, that is, the bird would pick a berry, hold it for a minute and then swallow it whole. In the afternoon of the day following the storm, two yellow-bellied flycatchers appeared among the other birds in these small trees and seemed to be very fond of the mountain-ash berries. Instead of handling the berries as the other birds did, the flycatcher would pick a berry and crush it between its mandibles, getting out the pulp and dropping the skin, rather perfectly clean, to the ground. There were so many of the birds of various sorts and the berries were going so

rapidly, that I detached four or five bunches of the berries and took them into camp.

It took only two or three days for the birds to otherwise entirely denude the trees of the berries and after the last berry had been picked from the trees, I noted two flycatchers hopping around on the ground and picking up the berries which had been dropped as the various species were feeding in the trees. The flycatchers were very tame and it occurred to me that I might feed them with some of the berries which I had previously picked and had in the camp. Working very carefully in an hour or two I had these two yellow-bellied flycatchers on my knee, picking the mountain-ash berries from between my thumb and fore-finger. It was a very delightful experience and it was interesting to see how thoroughly the flycatchers would clean the berries, eating everything but the skins, which they invariably dropped to the ground. The birds stayed around for two or three days, in fact as long as I had any berries to feed them, and then disappeared. The last day that they were with us was bright and sunny and they spent most of their time fly-catching, but would occasionally come back to me and take a berry.

This experience of mine was so unusual that I think it may be of interest to bird students generally and this is my excuse for burdening you with the above account.

Yours truly,

GARDNER P. STICKNEY.