

THE WILSON BULLETIN

A QUARTERLY MAGAZINE OF ORNITHOLOGY
Published by the Wilson Ornithological Club

Vol. XVI

JUNE, 1929

No. 2

Vol. XXXVI (New Series) Whole Number 147

THE HEATH HEN CENSUS FOR 1929*

BY ALFRED O. GROSS

With Photographs and Frontispiece by the Author

The annual Heath Hen census on Martha's Vineyard Island, Massachusetts, was taken March 30 to April 3, 1929, under the auspices of the Division of Fisheries and Game. The weather conditions were ideal during the entire period of the census. Since the last annual census taken for the Federation of the Bird Clubs of New England, Inc., in April, 1928, all active protection of the Heath Hen has been conducted by the State Department. Mr. Allan Keniston, Superintendent of the Heath Hen Reservation, has continued his trapping operations and vermin control and has thoroughly patrolled the entire region occupied by the Heath Hen. The last birds have been more or less restricted to the vicinity of the farm owned by James Green, located near West Tisbury about four miles from the Heath Hen Reservation.

The recent history of the Heath Hen is well known, but a review of the numbers of birds seen during the past two years will assist us in understanding the present status of the birds. In the 1927 spring census we were able to account for thirteen birds, two of which were females. In the autumn of that year only seven birds made their appearance. This flock appeared regularly on the open meadow at the Green farm, but during the course of the winter it dwindled one by one until only three males remained at the time of the annual census in April, 1928. At the approach of summer the three birds dispersed, as usual, to the scrub oaks where in the course of their wanderings one more bird was lost, as only two Heath Hens returned to the Green farm last fall. Special attention was given to these two birds and an effort was made to locate them each day. According to Mr. Keniston's daily reports they were both at the Green farm until December 8, 1928. Since that date only one bird has been seen.

* The official Report of Dr. Gross to the State Division of Fisheries and Game, Department of Conservation, Massachusetts.



THE LAST LIVING HEATH HEN ON EARTH?
To the best of human knowledge at present the bird here shown is the last living individual of its kind



THE HEATH HEN

The two figures shown above are from photographs, taken in the wild, of the last surviving individual of the race. The photographs were made from a blind by Dr. Gross on April 2, 1929. The three pictures shown on this page and in the frontispiece were taken during a period of ten minutes, after which the wary creature left the field and went into the scrub oaks. In one of the pictures the bird was within three feet of the camera.



THE HEATH HEN

The two pictures shown above are from photographs made in the spring of 1924 by Dr. Gross, on Martha's Vineyard Island. The upper picture shows the bird in a characteristic attitude of repose.

The entire region formerly occupied by the Heath Hen has been thoroughly combed again and again in the hope that other individuals would be located. Many interested persons of Martha's Vineyard aided in the search, and every place which could possibly harbor a few birds was visited. To stimulate further efforts to find birds a reward of \$100 was offered jointly by Mr. Thornton W. Burgess, Mr. Francis A. Foster, and Mr. John E. Howland, to anyone who would locate three Heath Hen, including a female, in any part of the Island. Later an offer was made by Mr. Burgess to anyone who would locate



HEATH HEN ENVIRONMENT

A sample of the scrub oak on Martha's Vineyard Island, in which the Heath Hen has made its last stand, although the one surviving bird known to exist is not on the Reservation.

a single bird other than the one known to be on the Green Farm. These rewards have never been claimed, and therefore it is reasonable to infer that the lone bird at West Tisbury is the very last of his race.

During the census the observers saw the bird each day in the open field near the buildings of the farm. It came out of the scrub oaks bordering the field soon after daylight in the morning, and again late in the afternoon of each day. The bird was wary and seemed constantly alert for any impending danger. It was quick to squat in the grass when a hawk chanced to fly over the field, and at one time the swoop of a Marsh Hawk caused the Heath Hen to fly into its retreat in the scrub oaks. The bird though wary came very near

to our blind at times to feed on the grain and seeds scattered there to attract it. Fortunately, this gave the observers excellent opportunities to make photographs and moving pictures at very close range of the last Heath Hen living a normal life under natural conditions. This last bird is a plump male, and its plumage is in perfect condition; it has every outward appearance of being a perfectly healthy individual.

We did not see the bird "boom" while it was on the field, nor has it been seen or heard to boom by those who have been keeping it under daily observation throughout the spring. One morning, however, we saw it fly to the top of an oak tree, and there it went through a series of characteristic performances. It erected its tail, threw its pinnate feathers forward, spread its primaries firmly against the sides of its body and inflated the orange-colored sacs in the true nuptial dance style. Even from that vantage point there were no fellow Heath Hen to admire or to challenge him. It is unusual to see a Heath Hen perched in a tree, and the "booming" in such a situation is a real departure from the customary performance. But a bird bereft of all of its companions might well be expected to do that which is unusual.

How long this bird will continue to live, whether a day or a year or longer, only time can answer. The death of this bird will also mean the death of its race. It is the intention of the Massachusetts State Division of Fisheries and Game to allow the last Heath Hen to live its remaining days in a normal way among the scrub oaks of its ancestral home on Martha's Vineyard Island. As long as it lives it will be carefully observed and protected by the Superintendent of the Heath Hen Reservation. Never in the history of ornithology has a species been watched in its normal environment down to the very last individual.

BOWDOIN COLLEGE,
BRUNSWICK, MAINE.