

YOUR PRESIDENT SAYS

In recent years conservationists have been emphasizing the importance of habitat preservation — and rightly so. Prohibition of shooting will not maintain wildlife unless there are places where they can breed and feed during their normal life cycle.

In the United States most bird species are now accorded legal protection. What is more: popular sentiment increasingly supports and gives effectiveness to the law. But many people who would be outraged by the killing of a single songbird, acquiesce in the needless cutting of ancient forests, the drainage of swamps and the filling of salt marshes, without realizing that thereby entire populations of many species are being extirpated. Industrial progress often requires destruction of natural environments, but the public must be made conscious of what is being lost as well as what may be gained, so that relative values may be weighed intelligently, and something preserved of natural environments that man-made machines cannot replace.

When we urge the conservation of wildlife, we do so primarily for the sake of ourselves. The greater our urbanization the more contact with the natural countryside becomes a recreational need. Birds — in their unfettered energy and graceful form — epitomize the spirit of the wild. This (and the ease with which they may be observed) may account in large measure for the growth of bird-watching as a hobby.

While today in the United States the basic conservation problem is habitat preservation, we should not be misled into assuming that laws regulating or prohibiting killing are unimportant. Some of the hunting fraternity (incidentally urging longer open seasons and bigger bag limits) would have us believe that the reduction in game is due not to gunning but only to disappearance of habitat. The falsity of this contention is readily shown. The species exterminated on our continent were directly killed off by man, while habitats were still ample. Only when we are dealing with fully protected species having an adequate breeding stock can habitat be regarded as the sole important factor. The reproduction rate of our birds evolved over thousands of years to meet the drain to which they were subjected by natural conditions — chiefly the hazards of migration, winter, disease and predation. Reproduction was not adjusted to the additional losses from mechanized man using a shot-gun. In the case of the larger birds which men have regarded as targets (whether called game or not) it is apparent that direct killing remains a major consideration.

Let me draw examples from an area with which I have some acquaintance, though the situation is paralleled elsewhere in our State. Until about the middle of the last century Long Island was a paradise for migrant ducks and shorebirds, which were shot extensively for sale in the public markets. Later the large colonies of breeding gulls, terns and herons were slaughtered as millinery decorations. By the first decade of the Twentieth Century the killing had wiped out almost every gull and tern colony, had extirpated the southern herons, and had reduced to a pittance the migrant ducks and shorebirds. Meanwhile suitable habitats on Long Island have been steadily reduced or totally wiped out, the trend being accelerated after World War II.

Yet since the 1920's these species have all *increased* on Long Island, despite the diminution of habitat. The explanation is obvious; prohibition of direct killing by man gave breeding stocks a chance to build up and reoccupy the surviving habitats.

It was not until 1916 that conservationists succeeded in having the Federal Government assume the protection of migratory birds. The feather trade was ended. National hunting regulations were established, including prohibition of spring shooting and later of all hunting of shorebirds (except Woodcock). The results gradually became apparent. In 1923 Griscom's "Birds of the New York City Region" indicates that neither Herring Gull, Least Tern, Black Skimmer, Yellow-crowned Night Heron, American Egret nor Snowy Egret were breeding on Long Island, and a number of the fresh water ducks and larger shorebirds were so rare as to be regarded as accidental. By 1942, when Cruickshank's "Birds Around New York City" appeared, all of the Larids and herons mentioned (except the egrets) were breeding, and the shorebirds and ducks had definitely increased, though not to anything like their former number. By 1953 both egrets were nesting, while the other colonial species have extended their breeding stations, and such a formerly rare duck as the Gadwall is breeding locally.

This has been achieved solely as a result of protection — not merely on Long Island but elsewhere in North America. It has happened despite habitat reduction, because in the case of these persecuted species the population had been so slaughtered off that there were not sufficient birds to occupy even the still available habitats. It must be borne in mind that habitat reduction can have the effect of creating an illusion of increased numbers by concentrating the birds in the few remaining localities which remain suitable. This makes the birds even more vulnerable if shooting is permitted. In the West the growth of the human population during the past twenty-five years has resulted in such a drastic change of habitats and such an increase of hunting pressure that shooting regulations have been inadequate to reverse the down-trend in ducks, although these regulations doubtless slackened what would otherwise have been a cataclysmic decline.

Constant watchfulness by conservationists is still required to counteract the pressures to which the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service recently succumbed when it extended the season on ducks and permitted the shooting of snipe. If this foreshadows the opening of a shorebird season, then the larger species are doomed, for their unsuspecting character and flocking behavior makes them an easy target for the unselective shotgun. The ground recovered as a result of the conservation battles of the first quarter of the century can be wholly lost with a few years of inadequate gunning regulation. But in a Democracy the pen is a mighty weapon. Letters from many people interested in conservation to the Secretary of the Interior, the Director of the Fish and Wildlife Service, and even to the President, can strengthen the position of the government biologists whose primary duty and interest is the protection of our wildlife.

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