

BIRDS OF NEW YORK 1910 TO 1930

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When the first volume of the *Birds of New York* was published twenty years ago, a very earnest attempt was made to outline the distribution and migrations of New York birds as accurately as could be determined. Since then an enormous amount of field work has been carried on by the field-glass and bird-banding brigades which have largely succeeded the oologist and taxidermist brigades of forty years ago.

The determinations by these modern ornithologists are surprisingly accurate. A brief retrospect will illustrate. Thirty years ago I destroyed much shoe-leather in chasing about the country to see Bohemian Waxwings which proved to be cedar-birds, Orchard Orioles which were immature Baltimores, Blue Grosbeaks which were indigo birds, and Passenger Pigeons which turned out to be perfectly good Mourning Doves.

Now such experiences are mostly reminiscences of the past. The numerous colored plates now in circulation, reproduced from the paintings of the lamented Fuertes and other talented artists, the bountiful supply of bird books descriptive of our native birds and the excellency of the modern binoculars have combined to develop a long line of observers whose work is thoroughly reliable.

There has accumulated, during these twenty years, a great amount of supplementary information on the migrations, breeding, and general distribution of New York birds; but it is surprising to find that not a single species, not mentioned in the "*Birds of New York*", has been added to the list. To be sure, an actual specimen of the Gray Goshawk, taken near Auburn, is now in Rochester, and actual records of the breeding of Turkey Vultures and of Baybreasted Warblers have been added to our previous suspicions of breeding. (It is, in passing, strange that no waifs from the south or west or north or from Europe have been wafted to our shores during these 20 years. No less than 32 species of North American birds are recorded by Saunders and Clarke as accidental visitants to Britain but barely a dozen European waifs have ever been recorded from New York — and no new ones during the last 20 years.) But the principal alterations in the records are of change in relative abundance and of the geographical distribution of breeding species.

During the past 20 years the writer's principal attention to bird-study, aside from teaching the science of ornithology in the college class-room, has been a study of the various factors which determine the relative abundance of species, in the hope that more definite knowledge could be assembled to aid in the preservation and encouragement of our avifauna. In this work many censuses of definite areas have been made with notes on the character of each area, its soil, vegetation, moisture, temperature and any other factors which might presumably affect the success of the birds inhabiting the tract. And careful comparisons with the nature and avifauna of each tract 20 and 40 years ago have been made whenever possible.

*E. H. Eaton died March 27, 1934. He read this recently found unpublished manuscript at the Amer. Ornithologists Union meeting in Salem, Mass., on Oct. 21, 1930. We hope to publish a similar summary of New York birds covering the period 1930.-1950.

These studies have revealed a much greater change in the status of many birds than one would naturally expect, very few species having retained their status of twenty years ago unaltered. Sectional changes are of course to be expected in such cases as deforestation and draining of marshes, but a decided widespread variation in abundance has been observed in at least 61 species of our New York birds. We will give brief summary of the more conspicuous changes with some of the probable causes.

Gulls and terns have increased due to greater protection on their breeding grounds and the suppression of the traffic in plumes. The Black Tern is more and more invading the New York marshes as a breeding species. We have too many Herring and Ring-billed Gulls for the welfare of our frogs, toads and marsh birds.

Of our Anatidae in general, they have declined. The Canada Goose, Black Duck, Goldeneye, American and Red-breasted Mergansers have nearly held their own. The Ring-neck is a more regular but not abundant migrant. The Redhead and Canvasback are more common as winter residents on Seneca and Cayuga Lakes, and the Whistling Swan is decidedly more common in those years when it passes over western New York instead of the western end of Lake Erie. The Ruddy Duck is rather scarce and the teals reduced to one-tenth of their former abundance. The Bufflehead is steadily declining. The closed season on the Wood Duck has not been so effective as it has in the case of the Swan, because of the difficulty of enforcing the law. Every summer large numbers of Wood Ducks are reared in the few remaining strongholds of this species in central and western New York, but the majority of them are slaughtered before they can migrate southward, and in the South their fate is scarcely improved.

The general wildfowl situation is clearly due to the combination of two unfavorable factors — namely a reduction of the breeding area and too extensive shooting. To improve the situation it is imperative that extensive Federal and State preserves be established and that shooting be more restricted. In the case of the Whistling Swan a closed season has done wonders because the breeding grounds are largely unaffected by the development of agriculture in the Northwest, but those species that nest largely in the prairie provinces and in the northern tier of states are in real danger.

Of our New York herons, the breeding species are barely holding their own because of the progressive elimination of swamps and marshes, and because there is no state law protecting the Bittern and Great Blue Heron. The southern herons which visit us in summer, after their breeding season, have shown a steady increase in recent years, especially the American Egret and Little Blue Heron. This is unquestionably due to the greater protection which has increased their numbers in the South. A count of birds in a trip through Florida last winter by Mr. Savage and the writer clearly indicated that the Louisiana and Little Blue Herons are common enough, the Egret increasing, and the Snowy Heron not increasing as rapidly, — probably because its plumes are more in demand and there are too few protectors to enforce the law.

Our shore birds have shown a tendency to increase after the shameful slaughter to which they were subjected twenty and more years ago, with the exception of the Esquimo Curlew, the Golden Plover and the Upland

Plover. These three species, I fear, are receiving the "Coup de grace" on their wintering grounds in South America, but the smaller species, especially those that winter on our southern shores, are coming back. The most spectacular improvement is that of the Killdeer which shows several hundred percent increase in the interior of New York and is extending its range. Most of the northern species also show improvement, especially the Knot, Dowitcher, Red-back, and the Black-bellied and Semipalmated Plovers. This change is unquestionably due to the restriction of shooting along the coast and in the interior. The Woodcock and Snipe are still in a precarious situation because they are not yet sufficiently protected, especially where they are concentrated in their winter quarters.

Our New York Gallinae furnish a sad tale. The Heath-hen and Wild Turkey disappeared from the state long before I was born. During the last 20 years I have seen the Bobwhite practically disappear from the interior of the state and the Spruce Grouse from the Adirondacks, and the Ruffed Grouse decline to almost the vanishing point in the more thickly settled country districts. This decline of the grouse is nothing new. I have been a personal observer and sympathizer since fifty years ago in November when I killed my first cock grouse. Of scores of inimical forces conspiring against this glorious bird I will mention a few which I have *personally seen in operation* — The destruction of coverts and food-producing plants by deforestation and pasturing, especially the isolation of coverts in the more settled areas by the destruction of connecting links; the diminution of the food-supply by various agencies, as the chestnut-blight, the successive failure of the beech-nut crop and the widespread attacks on thornapple fruit by fungus; the automobile and the gun; the dog, cat, fox, weasel and mink; the Goshawk, Cooper's Hawk, Great Horned Owl and Crow, unfavorable weather in the breeding season; and finally disease. But in the open country where the grouse has utterly failed the pheasant has succeeded, in spite of the fact that the crows get 75% of the eggs that are laid in April and early May, and the farmers mow over a large proportion of the eggs that are being incubated in June and July, and many farmers shoot the birds at every opportunity, claiming they are injurious, and every open pheasant day in my county sounds like the battle of the Marne, the hunters coming from 50 and 100 miles away to join in the slaughter, and the Conservation Department has forbidden further importation of eggs or pheasants into the county; and yet the ring-neck is more plentiful today in Ontario County than it was 20 years ago. The terrain of rolling plains with numerous fields of grain and cabbage and alfalfa and frequent patches of swampy cover is adapted to the needs of the bird, and the pheasant is a persistent breeder which can cope with the cat. This is the explanation of the anomaly.

The recent history of our hawks and owls is a pitiful chapter. The Barn Owl is trying zealously to colonize New York from the south, and we have had the record invasion of Snowy Owls, Goshawks and Gyrfalcons quite recently (1926-27 but nearly all our records of these species are of specimens that were killed by gunners. We do not mourn for the Goshawks and Snowy Owls as much as some people think we ought to do. But all our other hawks and owls, with the possible exception of the Marsh Hawk, are reduced to one-tenth their former numbers. This applies to the Short-eared and Long-eared Owls as well as the Great-horned Owl. They are killed by 90% of the hunters on every possible occasion in spite of the law or in ignorance and usually left to rot in the field. The same is true of the

Rough-legged, Broad-winged and Sparrow Hawk. I never found the remains of a game bird in a Rough-legged Hawk but almost entirely small rodents; I have cleaned up the skulls from 385 pellets cast by the Long-eared Owl and exhibited these birds and their work and explained their value to sportsmen's organizations but only those who are real nature-lovers respond. The vast majority listen only to the cry of "Kill the vermin", "Shoot the hawks and owls". These conditions are the principal cause of the decline of our raptors.

Meanwhile the Turkey Vulture has made a phenomenal advance in New York. Numerous reports of these birds come from all parts of southern and western New York. Their nest has been found in Genesee and Westchester counties. We see several of them on every trip to the Oak Orchard Swamp and to the hilly country which lies west of Naples. This invasion of the vulture has been growing in magnitude for many years, and the birds are largely unmolested, the sentiment which protects them in the South having been absorbed by the countrymen of New York.

Of our woodpeckers, curiously enough, the one that shows an increase is our largest and showiest, — the Pileated Woodpecker, while all the rest are scarcely holding their own. The Flicker which might be expected to flourish in agricultural communities has found a serious menace in the increase of the Starling and the consequent fight for the nesting hole.

This Starling introduced in 1890 had reached Newburg in 1905, bred first at Geneva in 1917, and now is firmly established throughout the state except in the wooded mountainous districts. As early as 1924 it was one of the common birds from Malone to Staten Island and from Westfield to Orient, and it would run a close, if not a winning, race with any species for the position of most numerous bird in New York State.

The Raven is now practically, if not entirely, extirpated from the state; but the Crow keeps on increasing or at least holding its own in spite of the curses and the guns of most sportsmen and many farmers.

The Prairie Horned Lark declined after 1910, but is now steadily increasing again.

Of our Icteridae, the Bobolink declined seriously and then increased again as a New York species; the Baltimore Oriole has also had considerable fluctuation in numbers; the Meadowlark is decidedly less numerous in spite of legal protection than it was way back in the days when it was on the list of legal game; the Red-winged Blackbird is still one of our abundant species in spite of the draining of our marshes because of its nesting more in the meadows and also by concentration of nests in the marshy areas combined with wide foraging over the surrounding fields for food; and the Cowbird, my *bete noir*, is still doing her best to exterminate the warblers and vireos and indigo birds that live near my summer camp.

Our two shrikes are decidedly less common than formerly, the Migrant Shrike being now one of our scarcest summer residents. For the decline of this bird I blame the automobile, which likewise is fated to bring our Screech Owl and Red-headed Woodpecker into the list of disappearing species.

Of the Fringillidae, the Savanna Sparrow is more common, the Field and Vesper less common, the Grasshopper Sparrow much more generally distributed, and the Henslow Sparrow has appeared at numerous stations where it was unknown before. For this spread of the latter species we may thank the increase of abandoned farms in many sandy and upland districts.