

SOME COMMENTS ON SCIENTIFIC COLLECTING

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As one who loves and reveres nature; as President of the Federation of New York State Bird Clubs; as Professor of Ornithology and Biological Acoustics at Cornell University and as a Director of the Laboratory of Ornithology at Cornell, I would like to go on record as recognizing the value and importance of scientific collection of birds. I further believe that it is tremendously important that scholars continue to be permitted to collect birds in connection with specific studies, and that unless this is possible Ornithology will lose much of its prestige as a science.

It is regrettable that in the past many collections have been made with no more scientific purpose than goes into a collection of match boxes or miniature ivory elephants. While such collections of birds in the hands of scholars may have some value, depending on the accuracy and extent of the accompanying data, I believe that such collecting no longer serves any high scientific or educational importance and should be prohibited. Laws to accomplish this are already on the books.

Many of us are honestly opposed to seeing any animal killed unnecessarily. To many, any killing is an unpleasant business and I believe this is a very natural reaction of man. Most of us will admit, however, that sometimes killing is necessary. We need food. Sometimes we need to protect ourselves against aggressive or destructive animals or even against other men. Ornithologists are coming, more and more, to appreciate that much more can be learned from a living animal than from a dead one; but there are still, and probably always will be, problems which can be solved only by additional collecting.

Unfortunately some collectors of birds have not been very considerate of the very natural opposition or revulsion of most people to unnecessary killing. Even when collecting is fully justified and authorized, it should be carried out with every effort made not to offend the natural sensitivity of the layman. Killing, one might say, is never a pretty thing. When necessary it should be carried out quietly. There is no room for, and no reputable institution or ornithologist will tolerate, the individual who, drunk with the power granted him by the Federal and State governments to collect birds for scientific purposes, flaunts this authority as a means of self-aggrandizement before as many people as possible. Such individuals, though fortunately they are not common, have done ornithology a great disservice and brought justifiable criticism on themselves and the institutions they claim to represent. I believe we should all work towards the extirpation from our ranks of this show-off who collects birds primarily to attract attention to himself.

In my opinion, general collecting can no longer be justified. By this I mean the type of collecting carried out by a professional who hopes to sell the material, or by the amateur or student who apparently feels that he must justify his trips afield by bringing back some specimens. Sometimes an attempt is made to justify such collecting as training for students. Every year tens of thousands if not millions of songbirds are killed or die naturally where they could be picked up and turned over to scientific institutions. Modern freezing techniques would make such "collections" a very effective

project for any amateur ornithological group. In 1954 the New Jersey Audubon Society collected and turned over to Cornell over 400 specimens picked up dead on Cape May during the fall migration. In the same year over 300 specimens were found dead and sent into Cornell from all over New York State. These 700 plus specimens were secured with a minimum of time and cost and many of them were made up as excellent museum specimens. Others were made up as skeletons.

To give an idea of the cost of collecting in the usual manner, consider an example. In 1955 Cornell sponsored an expedition to the midwest. This expedition was carefully supervised and staffed with graduates and undergraduates especially selected for their ability in the field and carefully trained in techniques. In collecting 1027 specimens, the average per man per day was under four birds. Even with volunteer student help, the cost of each bird must have been well over one dollar. It should be pointed out that this average was low because the collectors were selective as to the species taken, but even with higher averages taken in general collecting, the true cost of a specimen is probably well over two dollars. Based on cost alone, general collecting should not be indulged in unless it is shown that full advantage is taken of all available birds accidentally killed or found dead. This source of bird specimens has barely been tapped.

The confusion which exists today in the two kinds of Alder Flycatchers well illustrates the need for specimens which cannot be supplied by existing collections. In museums today there are perhaps not more than 25 birds of known song type. Most previous collectors referred a specimen to one type or the other depending on where the bird was taken. Now we know that in some localities at least, both birds breed in the same areas but apparently do not hybridize. Additional collecting of birds of known song type is absolutely essential if this problem is to be understood. The solution of this one problem may do much to advance our understanding of factors which prevent birds which to us appear almost identical from interbreeding.

In conclusion, it appears that there are many and important reasons why scientific collections should continue to grow, but I for one do not want to have songbirds needlessly killed even though it can be shown that the number of birds collected will have no harmful effect on the population as a whole. I hope that the member clubs of the Federation and the individual members will join in taking an objective, humanitarian and scientific attitude toward collecting, backing laws which permit true scientific collecting when it is absolutely necessary for scholarly or educational purposes, but being ever on guard to prevent abuses under the guise that shooting birds is in itself scientific.

It has been a long up-hill fight to secure for birds the protection which they enjoy today and much would be lost were we to deny the scientific ornithologist material which he honestly needs for his studies. The collectors among us must remember too that they have a very real responsibility in this matter. They must conduct themselves in a manner becoming to true scientists, avoiding either the fact or the appearance of abusing their privileges; and the collectors must further realize that the layman has the right to know why a bird which he wishes to observe has been or is to be shot and carried off by the collector.

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