

CONSERVATION NEWS

DOVES, OWLS, EAGLES AND OUR FOREST PRESERVE

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The inability to enjoy the woods and wildlife without having to tamper with, or even take revenge on it, lies behind a couple of recent happenings that could affect conservation in New York State. One of these was an attempt by a high state official to embarrass — this time by labeling as "imitation" Indians and amateur "mountaineers" — those who prefer the State's wilderness as they find it and not with hot and cold running showers. (We are thankful that the proposed bill for rezoning the Forest Preserve has been abandoned).

The other is the New York State Conservation Council's action urging removal of the Great Horned Owl from the list of protected birds. The organization, comprised of representatives of sportsmen's clubs also called for an open season on Mourning Doves.

Man apparently cannot resist the impulse to show his mechanized muscle over what is left of America's out-o-doors. He either has to tear it down and reconstruct in his own image or else he has to go out armed like Daniel Boone.

This was inevitable in the days when the forest and its creatures were felt to be both challenge and threat to the young, woods-clearing, industrializing nation. Shouldering aside the trees and blasting the beasts and birds with those reverberating old muskets boosted the mass feeling of self confidence. Even today the lumberers, miners, and highway builders boast heartily of "man's conquest of nature", "taming the wild", and "harnessing the power of nature". This brawny simplicity may have been adequate for the pioneers with their particular problems, but it does not suffice for today's complexities.

Eight million persons in New York City may not all want to go picnicking in the Forest Preserve. But every single one of them needs the drinking water provided by the watershed of the Forest Preserve. When any state official seeks to set aside most of it for other uses, he, in effect, is putting his own priorities on the area. In elbowing aside the Preserve's chief function as a supplier of fresh water, that state official is hurting himself — and every one of us — against all reason.

So is the State Conservation Council. Their wanting to open up their guns on the Mourning Dove is obvious foolishness. There might not be any native Mourning Doves left in New York. Federation Conservation Chairman Joseph A. Blake, Jr., wrote the Council to this effect. During the hunting season in the south the native birds there are augmented by the migrants. So the shots are scattered over the whole field rather than narrowed in on the local population as would be essentially the case in this state.

In its backward stance regarding the Great Horned Owl, the Council has done an about face away from all the evidence demonstrating this bird's ecological value. Good heavens! I should think the farmers would be rushing to their Grange halls to stage protest meetings. These owls eat the very creatures the farmers complain about — mice, rats, mink, weasels, skunks, etc.

This reminds me of the incident told by Prof. James Goetz of Pace College and a member of the Brooklyn Bird Club. A wildlife photographer and lecturer, he was in Texas last year scouting an area for rattlesnakes to photograph. Not finding any he made inquiries of the unshaven ranch owner who stopped by in his pick-up truck.

"I bet you won't find any", the rancher replied. "I've been shootin' them for the 20 years I've been here." Prof. Goetz maintained a scholarly poker face. "You won't find no coyotes here either", the man bragged. "I've been gettin' rid of them. And those eagles, too". There followed one of those conversational pauses. Then the Texan looked pensive and he drawled, "But you know, I've been havin' a hell of a time with mice."

I do not know why, but predators seem to provoke an unfathomable, irrational hatred. It is so intense that it would seem to come from more than just the notion that they might be killing some chickens or lambs. It is as though man had

retained some primordial memory of an age when creatures of prey might have been a threat to life. Perhaps, somewhere, he in his subconscious man still feels he must retaliate.

Psychologists tell us that words can be keys to our subterranean emotions. Notice the word "Varmit" which is used so profusely in the sports magazines when they are talking about eagles, crows, wolves, snakes, owls, etc. This is a word that a man can spew through bared teeth.

I think the writer must have had his teeth bared when he wrote his onslaught against "The Eagle" (both of them) in the November 1961 issue of **Sports Afield**. At the very beginning he bluntly asserts that the Bald Eagle "is no good". He credits the biased stockmen and airplane hunters of Golden Eagles with testimony that only further inflames this sheer hatred.

One hunter claimed "that an eagle in the midst of plenty will eat only the hearts and drink his fill of blood." The author of this article reports a stockman saying "he roped an eagle so heavy with food that it couldn't get off the ground. The man yanked the big bird's head off and lambs' hearts tumbled out". It is true that the eagle can't always get off the ground. It is not true that it is such a fastidious gourmet. Fortunately the conservation picture is not quite as black as some have painted it. The fact that many states protect predatory creatures (including New York which currently protects all the owls) is testimony to the growing public concern

for common sense in matters dealing with their out-of-doors.

Passage by the United States Senate of the Federal Wilderness Preservation Act was a triumph of an aroused citizenry expressing themselves through conservation organizations and through a deluge of letters. They can clinch this victory with another deluge of letters on the House of Representatives which will consider the bill at this session. Since the bill has mostly involved the western legislators, leaders in the fight say there is a great need for rounding up votes from among the eastern congressmen. PLEASE, write your representative.

Forest Preserve Bill Dropped: After the controversy stirred up in the hearings, victory came quietly when the proposed Forest Preserve Bill was abandoned a month before the Legislature opened in January. Further hearings were cancelled.

This action was announced by Assemblyman Robert Watson Pomeroy, chairman of the Joint Legislative Committee on Natural Resources which had sponsored the bill. It was dropped after the State Attorney General had ruled that the Conservation Department did have the authority to prohibit motorized equipment in the Preserve.

The ruling had been requested by Assemblyman Pomeroy. Such authority had been urged in the bill. But to have carried out such enforcement the bill had proposed setting aside 16 'wilderness areas' within the Preserve leaving the rest open for multiple use.

Interestingly this was the provision that was attached both by conservationists and developers. The latter charged that too much of the Preserve would be kept within the 'wilderness areas'.

What is going to happen now is anybody's guess. But rezoning of the Forest Preserve has been under consideration by state officials for at least a decade. It does not seem likely that it is going to be entirely given up. Assemblyman Pomeroy himself said in his statement that "The Committee will continue its Forest Preserve studies toward the development of a long-range plan to assure watershed protection, extend recreational opportunities and improve game habitat."
