

CONSERVATION NEWS

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It was one of those second-hand stores where the sets of glassware and china appear so obviously to be from old family homesteads breaking up in the age of ranch-type houses and senior citizens projects, and the book shelves in an out-of-the-way corner are stocked with once-read novels by Edna Ferber, Mary Roberts Rinehart and Kathleen Norris, mixed with drab-covered arithmetic and other texts from too-quickly gone decades. The spine of one thin volume snatched my curiosity — “Wings” by Gene Stratton-Porter. Plucking it out, I was almost startled to find on the browning paper cover a portrayal of two Belted Kingfishers perched on branches before a bank dug out for their burrow and peering over the water, one with a small fish clasped in its bill. Just the fact that an artist would choose this bird is a strong argument for its protection.

S 376, a bill to protect the “Old Rattler” in New York State, was introduced in this session of the legislature by Senator Bernard Smith, chairman of the Senate Conservation and Recreation Committee. It is expected that an Assembly bill will be introduced by Mrs. Constance Cook to remove the Kingfisher from the list of birds now unprotected, where the picturesque *Ceryle alcyon* keeps precarious company with the Crow, Starling, English sparrow, Grackle and wild Rock Dove.

The book “Wings” turned out to be an interesting bargain for a nickel. The browning, fragile pages (printed in 1925 although copyrighted nearly 30 years earlier) told of the author’s experiences with birds, including attempts to photograph “Kingfishers in the Gravel Pit.”

Perhaps it is the size, distinctive shape, even the uncombed-looking crest accenting the striking colors — but the Kingfisher always seems to arrest one’s attention even if momentarily. Quietly observing every detail and movement can be a memorable experience — “Above the railroad bridge I saw a kingfisher twice sustain himself in one place, about 40 feet above the meadow, by a rapid motion of his wings, somewhat like a devil’s needle, not progressing an inch, apparently over a fish,” wrote Henry David Thoreau for May 10, 1854. For April 22, 1855 he observed that “The bluish band on the breast of the kingfisher leaves the pure white underneath in the form of a heart.”

Walt Whitman in one of his “Specimen Days” prose sketches “Three of Us” describes watching two kingfishers “as they fly and sport athwart the water, so close, almost touching into its surface. Indeed there seem to be three of us. For nearly an hour I indolently look and join them while they dart and turn and take their airy gambols, sometimes far up the creek disappearing for a few moments, and then surely returning again, and performing most of their flight within sight of me, as if they knew I appreciated and absorb’d their vitality, spirituality, faithfulness and the

rapid, vanishing, delicate lines of moving yet quiet electricity they drew for me across the spread of grass, the trees, and the blue sky."

"The kingfisher has been described," wrote Dr. Sally Hoyt Spofford in the June-July 1961 issue of *The Conservationist*, "as handsome by some; ugly by others; as clownish, graceful, awkward, stupid or bright. Take your choice."

But my impression of one on a branch last summer with the salt bay seemingly at its service was of dignified comicality. In its high white collar it appeared puritanically clerical. The stout bill, pointed directly towards the water, effected the picture of the stereotyped, sharp-eyed, firm occupier of the old New England pulpit continually surveying the sea of faces during the sermon for any drowsers. Only my "clergyman" was clearly a fisher of fish as it suddenly plunged and extracted its struggling meal from the water. But in some of its other dives it returned empty-billed indicating that the predator's search for food is not always successful.

"Yes, this handsome and mildly bizarre bird eats fish," reported Dr. Spofford. But it doesn't seem to have the licensed fisherman's eager preference for the fish that can desperately break water or dash deeper dragging hook and line with it. "Indeed, most of his fishing is done in stretches of sluggish water where abound the so-called 'trash fish.' Trout, bass and other game fish are not given to much loitering near the surface of stagnant pools. Chubs and suckers are taken very often by kingfishers, as they are, indeed, much easier for them to catch," she continued.

They also eat crayfish, beetles and many larger water insects. Did you know that kingfishers sometimes eat berries or chokecherries? Dr. Spofford reported this in the article mentioned above, entitled "Are Kingfishers Worth Saving?"

You bet they are.

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FIELD NOTES

Outlying Colony of Prairie Warblers: In the summer of 1955, Richard A. Herbert, Thomas Lesperance and Dr. Walter R. Spofford saw several Prairie Warblers (*Dendroica discolor*) at Burnam's Siding near Port Douglas, Essex County, N.Y.; Mr. Lesperance had heard them there before (*Kingbird* 5:89, Oct. 1955; also pers. comm.). On June 21, 1963 I went to the location and immediately heard the familiar song of this species — a series of ascending, harsh, buzzy notes, and shortly saw its author. I believe there were two males present, though not observed simultaneously. The site is along railroad tracks above a steep slope pitching down to Lake Champlain. This rather barren slope has a scattering of red cedars and staghorn sumac. On the other side of the tracks is a small meadow with shrubbery bordering extensive mixed woodland typical of the area. The location of this colony is about 125 miles from the nearest breeding locality mentioned in the *AOU Check-list*: Concord, N.H.

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Ed. Note: Dr. Spofford also comments that "there are a number of regions up in that direction where I would like to look for the Prairie . . . pitch pine and oak scrub,