

BIRDS AND OUR ENVIRONMENT

EDGAR M. REILLY, JR.

One might insist that there is only one environment and that it is the same for both birds and mankind. But this is only true as far as the basic requirements (air, water and land) are concerned. Actually every animal and plant species has its own special environmental requirements for survival. Man can destroy his own environment but as long as air, water and land exist he cannot destroy *the* environment; he might destroy all life in *the* environment but *it* will still survive — receptive to any form of life.

Unfortunately man has a tendency to either destroy some species in their environment or to destroy particular parts of other species' environment so that those species perish. Oddly enough, the exterminated species were more often valuable to man, rather than pests. All too often the pest species survive and multiply, as witness the Norway Rat and, to get to the birds, how about the House Sparrow and the Starling? Why does this happen so often? Why is it seemingly impossible for man to share the environment without destroying vital parts of the environments of certain birds? When a species dies (becomes extinct) hasn't man lost something from his own environment?

All these questions have definite answers; taking them in the order presented will make each ensuing question a little easier to answer — and to understand. The House Sparrow and the Starling are primary examples of what man considers pests; they are common, noisy, dirty (or seemingly so), live amongst people, eating items spilled or wasted by or stolen from man. They thrive despite many efforts to extirpate them in the United States. Both species were introduced to North America by well-intentioned, but biologically-ignorant, people. Had man known more about *all living* things and about the two species in particular, he would not have brought them here intentionally; and had they arrived accidentally they might not have spread so rapidly and abundantly. Why? Because in natural invasions the new species generally brings along its own natural enemies: diseases, parasites, predators (at least they follow quickly) and these enemies keep populations from exploding.

We should also understand what a pest species is. It is not just a plant or animal which annoys us or is poisonous to us; it is also able to survive in relatively close proximity to man and to take advantage of many things in man's particular environment. Both birds can stand the smog, dirt, and noise of our biggest cities. They even huddle during the winter months near chimneys and other warm parts of our buildings. They are great scavengers about our garbage cans. They are

wary of man but their quick movements to evade man are not nervous, ulcer-producing reactions to the hustle and bustle in our cities. One of the most man-annoying attributes they possess, is the ability to ignore or survive the control measures we have tried so far.

Why does this sort of thing happen so often? Well, we're not as smart as we think we are and errors of the past are often repeated because "we think we know how now" or else "it can't happen with this species." The role of the Great Auk, the dodos (there were more than one species of these), and the Passenger Pigeon, not to mention the Eskimo Curlew, has been that of common wild animal species useful to man at the table and now they are no more. A chicken farmer does not butcher each year because he knows the productivity of his flock. There were many signs that we were taking too big a harvest of the now extinct wild birds but perhaps man thought God would provide. God provided the proof that man had better watch the world in his temporal care a lot better. A recent TV show had a man telling the interviewer that "we've always killed whales here and eaten some of the meat. Why can't we continue to do this even if they are getting scarcer?" That man still knows too little and acts too selfishly is the only answer we can provide for the question.

Why can't we share the environment? We can if we want to make the effort. The Whooping Crane will probably soon become extinct — it was always a rare species and its environmental desires too concise. Any disturbance on its breeding or wintering grounds results in nervous flurries. Lone pairs nesting in remote regions were always at the mercy of predators. Yet man has shown he could help this species survive despite the natural handicaps. We could help maintain more of our attractive native birds in abundance if we protected our natural areas better. We could use attractive native trees, shrubs and plants about our rural and suburban homes instead of sometimes sterile, usually non-bird-food-producing exotic plants. In our area the Hemlock produces highly desirable food for Siskins, crossbills and other finches; so why Norway Spruce, Blue Spruce, etc. which these birds can seldom use? Beautiful gardens exist without excessive use of insecticides and part of the beauty of such gardens is the picture of nature at work. Birds are a big part of a beautiful garden — their songs from high in the maples or low in the shrubbery indicate the presence of insect-eating friends and not just a pretty song. We spray against all kinds of garden pests and hardly ever produce the perfect blemish-free flower — what we do with our sprays is to drive out our friends. One reason for the scarcity of the lovely Bluebird is that we demand "perfect" apples from the supermarkets. To get the more perfect apple the orchardist must spray at least fifteen times a year. If the Bluebirds

can survive the spraying, they soon succumb to the shortage of insects. And the orchards which once supported hundreds of Bluebirds have now become a mecca for Blackbirds, Starlings, Cowbirds and other "pest" species, attracted by the abundance of "perfect" fruit. We're caught in our own machinations; we *have* to spray our orchards because we've killed off the natural controls so that the unchecked orchard insects run rampant unless sprayed.

The fate of all species, like that of all individuals, is to eventually die. They may evolve into new species or, like the dinosaurs, simply disappear from the face of the earth. Theoretically man could manage his environment so that only the plants and animals directly useful to him survive; every living thing would have its exact role and place. Some agricultural experts have made such forecasts — even while admitting that they couldn't eliminate some of our most serious agricultural pests. Who would select those who were to remain? Would the beautiful orioles be eliminated because they ate some of our fruit? We might look at the present record and note that the population of many bird species are alarmingly low. They have yet to appear on the endangered species lists but the roster includes the House Wren, the Yellowthroat, the Redstart, the Hermit Thrush, the Baltimore Oriole, the Bluebird, the Red-tailed Hawk, the Spotted Sandpiper and others — all friends; all attractive; all part of our more pleasant scenes. Strangely missing, in fact becoming more abundant, are the Red-winged Blackbird, the Common Grackle, the Starling; all predominantly pests. When our friends have disappeared and only the "select" few remain will not man have lost something more than the material things: his soul?

Old Chatham, New York 12136

1974 ANNUAL MEETING

The Jamestown Audubon Society and the Lake Erie Bird Club will host the 27th Annual Meeting of the Federation of New York State Bird Clubs on October 18-20, 1974. Headquarters for the meeting will be the Holiday Inn of Dunkirk-Fredonia.

In addition to the papers read at the annual meeting, it is planned to hold workshops on bird identification. If you have an idea for a group of birds which you would like to have included, or if you would like to lead such a workshop, or if you have any suggestion as to someone who might be especially well qualified to lead a workshop, please contact: Allen H. Benton, Department of Biology, State University College, Fredonia, New York 14063