

SIXTY YEARS' OBSERVATIONS OF BIRDS AND MAMMALS ON A LONG ISLAND DUCK FARM

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Having lived all my life, 77 years, on Oceanic Duck Farm at Speonk, Long Island, 70 miles east of New York City, I have made many observations of birds and mammals attracted to a duck farm. Many of these present a real hazard in the raising of some 100,000 Pekin ducks annually.

The farm was founded in 1883 by my father, Eugene O. Wilcox (1854-1926), making it the oldest commercial duck farm in the U.S. and probably the oldest commercial poultry farm in New York State. The Poultry Dept. of Cornell University awarded The Poultry Pioneer Award to me at Cornell on July 20, 1976. This occasion brought back memories of when I was a pupil of Dr. Arthur A. Allen (1885-1964) at Cornell in 1919-1920. He was probably the greatest teacher of Ornithology in the U.S. and he established the first course in Ornithology at any university in the U.S., about 1916.

The two worst predators attracted to our duck farm are Herring Gulls and dogs. Our Pekin ducks are marketed when full grown, at 7 weeks 4 days of age. They are kept upland for the first five weeks and then moved onto water. Dogs, foxes, raccoons and rats are the most numerous predators on our upland ducks, and Herring Gulls, dogs and foxes on ducks on water. The worst are probably Herring Gulls, which kill about \$500 worth of live ducks annually, although dog damage amounts to \$400-500 annually as well. Fortunately, Suffolk Co., through dog license fees, pays us for damage due to dogs.

A farm of this size, with about 9000 ducks on water at all times from April 1 to November 15, attracts Herring Gulls from Moriches Bay, one-half mile to the south. They eat the dead ducks, about 10 to 20 every day, which we gather up early every morning. If there are no dead ducks, the gulls will go after live ducks, pecking at them in the rear until the intestines are exposed and at times dragging along on the ground. Intestines and internal organs appear to be the favorite part of the duck for the Herring Gulls. The gulls have a food call which quickly attracts other gulls to the farm and then it is necessary for the duck farmer to take quick action by shooting under permit, or suffer serious losses.

In recent years, the three nearest nesting colonies of Herring Gulls

to our farm have been a small colony four miles west, at Moriches Inlet, with first nesting there in 1938, and two larger colonies ten miles east at Shinnecock Bay, with first nesting there in 1949. In the last 46 years I have banded 13,644 Herring Gulls and have had 640 recoveries. The young gulls of the year appear on our farm the first week in August, from the colonies at Shinnecock. They quickly learn to eat the ducks. Older non-breeding gulls can be on the farm at any time for the entire season. No adult gulls are found on the farm during May, June and July as they are at their nesting colonies and do not stray very far away during that period. I had always believed that Herring Gulls nested when they were three years old but a few apparently do not. A Herring Gull with band 606-14928 was three years old when collected, but was still not fully adult as there was black on tips of tail feathers. Also a bird with band 676-09245 was four years old and still not fully adult as there was black on tips of tail feathers and some dark on the wings.

It is well known that gulls drop hard clams, mussels, scallops and other shells from a height of 50 feet or so onto hard surfaces such as roads, tennis courts and even flat roofs in order to break open the shells so that they can eat the contents. Not so well known is the fact that on duck farms where breeder ducks are kept for eggs, the Herring Gulls will take the eggs that are laid outdoors and drop them into the water. Upon impact with the water, the egg will break open and the gull quickly dives down to eat the contents. They apparently cannot pierce the hard shells of duck eggs with their bills while the eggs are on the ground. Unlike other poultry, breeder ducks only lay their eggs at night, while they are shut in lighted breeder houses, but an occasional female will lay an egg outdoors after they are let out at 7 a.m. Crows can usually break the eggs with their bills while the eggs are on the ground, but apparently the gulls cannot.

Only in the last six or seven years have Ring-billed Gulls appeared on the duck farms, but they never eat the dead ducks or molest live ducks. Their only interest is to eat duck pellets in the hoppers, eating right alongside the ducks. As soon as I noticed this unusual behavior, I cautioned other duck farmers not to shoot these gulls as they were perfectly harmless.

Grackles are also harmless, and readily eat the flesh from the dead ducks, whose carcasses are picked up daily by a processing plant at Center Moriches. They remove the feathers and use the duck carcass in making a dried meal. We are glad to give these dead ducks away in

order to get them off the farm. Meanwhile it makes a good living for the man who picks them up at the 25 duck farms as the feathers are worth over \$2.00 a pound (it takes four ducks to make one pound of feathers).

We used to have trouble with Great Horned Owls on our farm, but not in the last forty years. The Cornell Duck Disease Laboratory at Eastport, two miles from my farm, had a problem some years ago with a Great Horned Owl taking ducks at night. I set traps for it and finally caught it on July 2, 1961, banded it and released it at Hampton Bays, ten miles to the east. The owl did not come back.

Hawks were never a problem but on occasion eagles were attracted to duck farms. Bald Eagles have been seen on our farm as follows: immatures July 25, 1927, April 2, 1929, June 8, 1929, February 17, 1930, October 19, 1976; adults July 12, 1930, February 20-27, 1932, March 12-30, 1933. Another immature flew over the farm on January 23, 1977. None were ever shot on our farm. An immature was shot on October 11, 1945 on the Hallock farm, adjacent to ours, after it had killed four breeder ducks and partly eaten them. The owner did not know it was an eagle. It weighed 10.75 pounds (length 37.25 inches, wing 25.50 inches, tail 13.50 inches and wing spread 88 inches). Another immature was shot on July 4, 1945 on a duck farm at Moriches. It was a female and weighed 6 pounds 6 oz. (length 35.50 inches, wing 23.50 inches, tail 13.00 inches and wing spread 84 inches). Again it was mistaken for a large hawk. An adult appeared on our farm October 26-27, 1965 feeding on a dead duck and, unlike immatures, it was very wary and left after two days, before I was able to photograph it. Another immature was present February 14-March 11, 1971 on two adjoining duck farms at Center Moriches. I cautioned the owners not to shoot it and it was so tame that I actually walked under the oak tree where it was resting, in order to photograph it. Two Golden Eagles were shot on a duck farm at Flanders in October, 1926.

In the early years we were also troubled with Snapping Turtles killing ducks, but not in recent years, as their numbers have been greatly reduced; we have had no killings in the last 25 years. Fifty years ago they were abundant and very troublesome. As boys we caught them, fed them for some time, then shipped them to market in New York City. A 25 pound turtle can easily pull a full grown duck under water, drowning and then eating it.

Another bird that is very troublesome because of its great num-

bers is the Starling, which eats hundreds of dollars worth of duck feed every year on all the duck farms. Some farmers have used large traps, capturing as many as 5000 in a season. Other farms have played recordings of the Starling's distress call, which has been successful in chasing away at least for one day all Starlings within a quarter of a mile. On our farm we have only used shot guns which usually kept them away at least for one day. I have never tried to trap large numbers for banding except in 1966 and 1968, when I trapped and banded 3000 in August, September, and October of those two years. I have banded a total of 3316. A characteristic of this bird is the fact that very few of the banded birds have ever returned. I was not certain, before banding, whether these birds migrated or simply stayed all year in the 20-mile area where all the duck farms are located. From the table below it can be seen that some left Long Island, travelling as much as 480 miles to the north or 550 miles to the south of Speonk. The following returns are for Starlings banded at Speonk and recovered outside Long Island:

BAND	BANDED	RETURN	DISTANCE
743-85964	Aug. 25, 1966	Mar. 22, 1967	New London, Conn. 48 miles NE
712-66034	Oct. 23, 1966	Jan. 1969	Salisbury, Md. 240 miles S
712-66035	Oct. 23, 1966	Mar. 24, 1969	Wiscasset, Me. 274 miles NE
712-66093	Oct. 26, 1966	Oct. 22, 1967	Johnston, R.I. 92 miles NE
712-66120	Oct. 26, 1966	May 1, 1967	Plainville, Mass. 107 miles NE
712-66095	Oct. 26, 1966	Apr. 1975	Springfield, Mass. 88 miles N
712-66159	Oct. 27, 1966	Feb. 11, 1968	Framingham, Mass. 127 miles NE
712-66215	Oct. 28, 1966	May 9, 1967	Biddeford, Me. 221 miles NE
712-66231	Oct. 28, 1966	Apr. 1968	St. John, N.B. 480 miles NE
712-66262	Oct. 29, 1966	Apr. 8, 1969	S. Carver, Mass. 123 miles NE
712-66297	Oct. 29, 1966	Nov. 22, 1966	St. Pauls, N.C. 550 miles S
712-66383	Nov. 1, 1966	Feb. 20, 1967	Wilmington, N.C. 550 miles S
742-96180	Aug. 8, 1969	Mar. 6, 1973	Litchfield, Conn. 70 miles NW

In addition to all the common birds usually found on farms where there is an abundance of food, a few other interesting birds have appeared, all eating duck pellets at the hoppers. These include a Ringed Turtle Dove on October 9-15, 1966, an Egyptian Goose in November, 1976, and a Lesser Snow Goose which I caught, banded and released on November 3, 1976. Many wild ducks come into the pens, especially Mallards and Black Ducks which come only after dark to eat the pellets, especially in October and November. Both Green-winged and

Blue-winged Teals alight in the duck pens every year, swimming around with the Pekin ducks, but on only one occasion have I seen them eat duck feed. On April 30, 1936, eleven Blue-winged Teals were observed eating duck feed (wet mash) with our breeder ducks. This was before we had pellets and we used a wet mash in open troughs on the ground. By 1941 wet mash had been discontinued and the farms were using dried pellets in hoppers, allowing the ducks to eat at any time of day or night. Instead of marketing ducks at ten weeks of age, the new system of using pellets has enabled us to market the birds at seven and a half weeks.

Some unusual birds have appeared on the farm. A Western Kingbird was caught in a mist net on November 19, 1960, and remained for a week after being banded. Summer Tanagers are not common here but I succeeded in netting a female on October 22, 1960, and an immature male on April 28, 1961; a third bird, an adult male, was banded on May 4, 1972, and was actually caught by hand! My son and hired man were cleaning out a cold brooder house when the bird came inside the building, allowing them to approach to within two feet. A few minutes later I arrived, and the bird actually alighted on my station wagon. I ran and got a scoop net, hoping to capture it as the bird was so tame. It was catching insects on the ground. It alighted three times on the handle of the scoop net. The third time I caught it with my left hand as I held the scoop net with my right hand. It had probably just arrived from the south and was hungry, but I have no explanation for its tameness. It weighed 25.8 grams, with the wing 90 mm. and the tail 67 mm. It reminded me of the eleven Red Phalaropes I have banded on 5 occasions. The most unusual was my first experience with the bird on April 28, 1937 when I banded five of them. I approached so closely to them as they were feeding on jelly fish on shore, that I actually caught two of them with a scoop net. Of seven Dovekies I have banded, I actually caught one on November 3, 1966, with a scoop net as it was swimming under water at Quogue in the canal. Other birds I have caught with a scoop net have been three male and four female Willets, all caught on their nests, as well as a male Clapper Rail on its nest. The tameness of the Summer Tanager also reminded me of the occasion on June 7, 1971, when, with my hands, I actually lifted a female Clapper Rail off her nest with ten eggs, replaced her on the nest, and she remained, something that only happens once in a lifetime. She had just laid her last egg that day, and so had just started incubation.

The eggs hatched 22 days later. I have also touched the back of another Clapper Rail on its nest, but that bird went right off the nest.

Another bird that likes to associate with the ducks is the Common Gallinule. They started nesting on a small island just outside the duck pens on the Hallock farm, which is right next to our farm. A second pair started nesting on our farm in 1929 on an island just beyond our duck pens, about 1000 feet north of the pair on the Hallock farm. I succeeded in banding five young in August, 1929, all caught in a sparrow funnel trap baited with duck feed (wet mash), as I had seen adults and young eating the duck feed in troughs on the ground along with the ducks. In 1933 I banded two adults and four young. In 1936 I banded three adults and seven young. Then in the fall of 1936 a new sand bank about four feet high was built between this island and the duck pens and the gallinules never came back to our farm. One of the adults I banded on August 5, 1936, at Speonk was found dead on September 1, 1937, 4½ miles west of Speonk, just outside the duck pens on an East Moriches duck farm where they nested in 1937. They left the nesting area at Speonk on October 30, 1936, and the earliest seen on the farm was April 24, 1933. It was interesting to watch them get over the three foot two inch wire mesh fence that we use as the outside fence in our duck pens. They did not fly over the fence but approached it, then with their long toes in the wire, and flapping their wings, they walked right up the fence to the top and then jumped down to the water or ground.

Over many years because of the sharp eyes of our Pekin ducks, I have been able to see many birds flying over the farm that I would otherwise have missed. Ducks, because their eyes are set high up on the head, can spot a hawk or other high-flying bird that a human would miss. If they see a high-flying bird, hundreds of ducks will turn their heads to the side and immediately I know by looking up I too can spot the bird.

Of course, most of my banding and observations have been away from the farm. I banded my first bird in 1927, a Yellow-billed Cuckoo, caught on the farm in a feed house. Since then I have probably banded more rare and unusual birds than any other bander in New York State, and probably more individual birds than any other bander in the state with a total to date of 130,154, plus another 1,769 banded outside the state.

Oceanic Duck Farm, Speonk, New York 11972