

The Changing Status of Birds as Regards Their Abundance

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Every observer of the outdoors, of the things in nature, knows and notes with ever increasing wonderment that no two years are alike. This is not only true of such obvious features as the weather with its many complications, but also of such phenomena as the behavior and abundance of plants and animals. What recondite forces and factors coax plants and animals into abundance one year and not the next?

The average citizen has the notion that things in nature are as they are, with little or no change, except where man with a heavy, often frivolous hand interferes. As a matter of fact nothing in the world and in nature is stable and unchangeable. Everything is in a constant change or flux, as the ancient Greek philosopher said: *Panta rhei*, i. e. everything flows. Thus life-forms seem to appear on the stage of life, do well for a while, and then decrease and finally disappear. This is true also of such organisms that we would very much like to have stay and increase in numbers, such as the birds. One must become conscious of the complexity of nature, of the intricate interplay of physical forces, and of their delicate balance and adjustment.

In a state like Illinois, where so much work in natural history is done, it is, I think, desirable to stop momentarily and take an inventory. In this present paper I would like to make a little excursion into ornithology and present a few facts regarding the decreases or increase in numbers of certain species of birds in the Chicago area, during the last decade or so. I shall begin with species in which a decrease is most noticeable to those in which it is less so.

The Lark Sparrow, *Chondestes g. grammacus*, has just about entirely disappeared from our area, as seems to be true of the eastern part of the country in general. Who can find the reason? Fortunately, the western form, *strigatus*, is very abundant in its chosen range.

A similar deplorable decrease is true of the Cliff Swallow, *Petrochelidon a. albifrons*. Formerly its colonies of gourd-shaped nests could be seen on the barns of many, if not most, farms, but now only a few straggling colonies remain in most states east of the Mississippi. Perhaps the more general painting of barns and the consequent falling down of their nests before any young can be raised may be a partial explanation. In fact, a similar calamity is befalling most swallows. That beloved harbinger of spring, the Barn Swallow, *Hirundo erythrogaster*, is woefully decreasing in numbers. This is true of the Purple Martin, *Progne s. subis*, in some places and to a lesser degree. Only here we are able to assign a definite reason, viz. the coming of the automobile and the consequent disappearing of many or most horse stables, the breeding places of flies. To this may, no doubt, be ascribed the decrease in the number of the Nighthawk and the Chimney Swift.

The Migrant Shrike, *Lanius ludovicianus migrans*, has almost disappeared from the roadside in our region. Formerly a pair could be seen every two to three miles along the road, now one may drive for days without seeing one. Here the very general cutting down of the osage orange hedges may be partly responsible, although, on the other hand, there are still plenty of field mice, grasshoppers, and sparrows for their commissary, and hawthorns and plum thickets for nesting sites. However, I know of localities in other parts of the state where they are still tolerably common.

Even that well-beloved little acrobat, the Chickadee, *Penthestes a. atricapillus*, formerly so abundant, especially as a migrant, is of late becoming strangely rare in our woods and gardens. Where formerly dozens and scores could be seen, now I often see no more than three or four during the spring or fall migration. What occult cause is operative there?

To a lesser degree this is true also of the Bluebird, *Sialia sialis*. Whereas they formerly nested in my garden, I now see only three to five in the spring or fall migration. In this case the coming of the Starling, also a cavity breeder, may be a partial explanation. In other regions they seem to be as common as ever.

A tragic case is that of the Red-headed Woodpecker, *Melanerpes erythrocephalus*. Its numbers are going down rapidly owing to the automobile. The bird often settles on the highway to pick up insects, and when a car comes can not get under way fast enough to avoid being struck and killed by this deadly weapon. During a drive of several hours in southern Wisconsin I counted seven dead Redheads on the road.

In former years the voice of the Whippoorwill, *Antrostomus v. vociferus*, was one of the commonest sounds heard in these states in the summer evening. Now it has vanished as a breeding species over a large area. This is probably due to the fact that the farmers use their woodlots as pasture for their livestock which makes breeding of this ground-nesting species impossible.

For an entirely different reason the numbers of the Yellow Warbler, *Dendroica aestiva*, the Red-eyed Vireo, *Vireo olivaceus*, the Warbling Vireo, *V. g. gilvus*, and perhaps of the Chipping Sparrow, *Spizella p. passerina*, seem to be going down, namely because of the depredations of the Cowbird, *Molothrus ater*, which lays its eggs in the nests of these and other species, with the result that the young of the rightful owners perish. Among the flycatchers, the Kingbird *Tyrannus tyrannus*, and the Phoebe, *Sayornis phoebe*, seem to be going down in numbers for no apparent reason, except the diminished supply of flies as in the case of the swallows.

Deplorable as it is when members of our flora and fauna diminish in numbers or even disappear entirely owing to natural causes over which man has no control, or to unavoidable conditions brought about by our civilization, it becomes downright criminal when it is due to man's carelessness, ignorance, stupidity, greed or a primeval lust for killing. And it is precisely to these that the rapid disappearance of whole orders and families of our avifauna is due to. Here belong our hawks and owls. Not so many years ago one or more of these wonderful fliers could be seen gracefully soaring over every woodlot in these states, thereby considerably enhancing one's enjoyment of the outdoors. Now one may walk or drive for hours or even days without seeing one of them. A pitiless war has been waged against them by farmers and sportsmen, on the plea that they are destructive to poultry and game birds. This in spite of the fact that as early as 1893 our federal Department of Agriculture published an exhaustive treatise on the food of our birds of prey, under the title "Hawks and Owls of the United States." On the basis of hundreds of stomach investigations, carried on over a long time, this shows that most of our hawks are more beneficial than

harmful to the farmer by destroying vast numbers of rodents, so destructive to crops, and that most owls are purely useful. Now, as to the contention of sportsmen that hawks and owls are predators, destructive to game birds. Before Columbus discovered America, who shot the hawks and owls? Was there a dearth of game birds then? Were any of them in danger of extinction as many are now? They blame this alarming condition on a variety of causes, the drought, excessive heat, cold, the fox, crow, hawks, owls and other "predators", only not on the true reason, excessive shooting. This is also the mental niveau of some political state departments of conservation and their heads.

For the same reason many ducks and shorebirds also the Prairie Chicken and Bobwhite, are approaching the verge of extinction. An army of seven million hunting license holders march out yearly against the pitifully small remnants of wild things. Let us call a stop to it before it is too late.

Similarly our swamp birds, rails, gallinules, and others are rapidly leaving the scene. This is due to the wholesale draining of swamps, much of it harmful and unnecessary. And now many of the remaining ones are threatened by a new danger, viz. their draining, or at least oiling, on the plea that such radical procedure is necessary to control mosquitoes. Firing with cannon at mosquitoes. Placing minnows, notably top minnows, *Gambusia* sp., would do the work.

Increase in Numbers, Extension of Breeding Range or Migration Route

While there is no doubt that white man's agriculture has been helpful to a few species, such as the Meadowlark, *Sturnella m. magna*, the Blue-bird (until recently), one has to look long before being able to discover any species that are on the increase. The only one decidedly so is that lately introduced pest, the Starling, *Sturnus v. vulgaris*. The Flicker, *Colaptes auratus luteus*, seems to be doing a little better than holding its own.

Of late the Western Meadowlark, *S. m. neglecta*, has steadily extended its breeding range eastward into our region, after having established itself here at Rockford for years back. Harris's Sparrow, *Zonotrichia querula*, which formerly migrated north and south only west of the Mississippi, is of late years seen in increasing numbers east of it, in our area, and as far east as Ohio.

Last fall, for the first time in many years, enormous flocks of the Lesser Snow Goose, *Chen h. hyperborea*, and the equally rare Blue Goose, *Chen caerulescens*, were to be seen, also small parties of the Whistling Swan, *Cygnus columbianus*.

What is at the bottom of all these striking variations, fluctuations, or cycles?