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## CONSERVATION

A WEEKLY COLUMN OF PRACTICAL OPINIONS ON THE VITAL ISSUES AFFECTING THE USES AND ABUSES OF NATURAL RESOURCES BY MR. LUDLOW JENKINS, MARSHFIELD.

### MAN'S FRIEND: THE CROW

In a newly sown field dead crows dangling from poles may often be seen—a warning to their brethren not to trespass. In another, perhaps an adjoining field of land being prepared for planting, a flock of crows is following the plow, unmolested. The farmer does not drive them away, because he knows they are aiding him by devouring cutworms, wireworms, white grubs, and other pests that might later ravage his crop. Thus, side by side, are presented two very different pictures; crows protected because they are beneficial, and crows slain to save a few grains of seed corn. These contrasted pictures well exemplify the absurdity of our treatment of natural allies. Dead crows cannot eat cutworms; pests it is economically impracticable for the farmer to combat; "scarecrows" cannot come to life, and consume the grasshoppers that may strip the fields in summer. For every crow he gibbets in seedtime, the farmer may pay dearly through the year in crops damaged by insects that living crows would devour in quantity.

72 wireworms, 85 May beetles (or June bugs), the adults of white grubs, 123 grasshoppers, or 484 caterpillars (Farmers' Bul. 1102, U. S. Dept. of Agriculture, 1920) are meals that scientific stomach analysis has proved crows to eat. By what other agency can farms be rid so cheaply of these pests? Bluntly, the answer is, by none. Crows destroy insects in every month; they have voracious appetites; they feed from early morning to late afternoon; they search the whole farm for insects; they find and attack infestations before the farmer is aware of the danger; and they do it all for a modest fee in grain, chiefly corn, the worth of which is reckoned in often disappointingly few cents a bushel. Services must always be paid for, and there is certainly no domestic animal that serve the farmer at so low a cost as the insect-devouring birds, especially crows. (For the fiscal year 1935 Congress made a special appropriation of \$2,354,893 for a grasshopper control campaign in co-operation with affected states. In the same states anti-crow campaigns are carried on by "sportsmen" and "conservation" departments. R.E., ed.)

The Biological Survey has made two exhaustive studies of the crow, separated by a long enough interval to have revealed any decided change in economic tendencies, if such had occurred. The verdicts from these investigations are much the same. In 1895 (Bul. 6, Division of Ornithology and Mammalogy) the conclusion was: "In summing up the benefits and losses resulting from the food habits of this bird, it is clear that the good exceeds the bad, and that the crow is a friend rather than an enemy of the farmer." Twenty-three years later, in 1918, we are informed (Bul. 621, U. S. Dept. of Agriculture) that, "The attitude of the individual farmer toward the crow should be one of toleration when no serious losses are suffered, rather than an uncompromising antagonism, resulting in the unwarranted destruction of these birds which at times are most valuable aids to man."

Here again, it is noted, destruction of the birds is not the course advised. The most evident misdemeanors of crows on the farm are pulling of seed corn, devouring the eggs and young of poultry, and pilfering corn in the milk. The first of these offences

can be controlled by the application of deterrents to the seed, and the second by rearing poultry in enclosed runs, a system desirable on various other grounds as well. Damage to standing corn occurs with the crow population, swollen by accessions of young, is at its peak of abundance, and some reduction may then be justifiable. A little aggressive action gives a great deal of protection; for crows are proverbially wary and avoid areas where companions have come to grief. Considering the availability and the superiority of methods that prevent damage, farmers in most cases have little excuse for resorting to protective measures that involve the killing of crows.

If systematic destruction of crows is unnecessary and undesirable so far as the farmer's interests are concerned, then the sportsman's plea of aiding the farmer by killing crows falls flat. It is specious anyway, for it is plain to see that every claim of the sportsman making common cause with the farmer has relation only to some game species. On all other occasions, a vast majority, the farmer is forgotten. If there is the slightest suspicion of crop damage by a game species, the sportsman wants to help the farmer by doing the shooting for him; if the farmer harbors any creature that ever preys upon a game species, the sportsman wants to kill it, regardless of any value it may have to the farmer.

Crows are condemned and called by all of the opprobrious names their revilers can recall, black rascals, pirates, gangsters, and murderers, because they sometimes eat the eggs and young of game birds. The fact that this results in no diminution of game bird populations under natural conditions, and the fact that the depletion of game now apparent has undoubtedly been caused by wholesale killing by hunters are ignored. Evidence against the crow has been exaggerated, perverted, and invented. A photograph widely reproduced to show the enormity of egg destruction by crows not only was "faked" by the piling up under a tree, containing a single crow nest, of eggs from a large area, but the eggs were mostly those of the clapper rail or marsh hen that had been washed out of the nests by an unusually high tide, and of which there were literally windrows about the edges of the marsh and of openings therein, available to any creature inclined to eat them. These eggs were wholly waste, and consumption of them by crows or any other scavengers was, if anything, beneficial.

Admittedly, crows eat the eggs and young of other birds, but there is nothing to be gained by distorting the evidence either for or against. This form of predation by crows takes place mostly during their own nesting season when there are clamorous young crow mouths to fill, and food in worth while sizes and in abundance is in great demand. Crows nest early, and their depredations come at the beginning of the nesting season of other birds, giving time, if the first clutch of eggs is consumed, for the laying and the successful incubation of another. Egg-eating by crows at other seasons is sporadic, even accidental; for immediately after their breeding seasons, crows band in flocks, seek open country where grasshoppers are easily obtainable, and in general change their mode of life and feeding habits.

The taking of an early-season toll of eggs is not prejudicial to the welfare of the birds concerned. This is proved by man's applying the same process to certain wild birds, the stock of which he desires to maintain, and does maintain unimpaired. In northwestern Europe the first clutches of lapwings eggs are taken, and in Iceland those of the eider duck. Both of these species are game birds, so the case is exactly comparable to the egg consumption by crows that is so loudly condemned. Yet the practice of using the eggs of the lapwing and eider has gone on since the memory of man runneth not to

contrary, with no decrease in the breeding stock. The example of birds propagated on game farms is even more convincing. Egg production is forced until it is from five to ten-fold the normal, and a very high proportion of the eggs are shipped away; yet the small number retained suffices for maintenance of the foundation stock. The reduction of the breeding stock by a hunter's killing one pair of adult birds can do more harm than the taking by crows of almost any number of first clutches of eggs. Killing adults, which hunters always do, can quickly reduce reproductive capacity, taking toll of the eggs may not affect it at all.

If prairie chickens, sage hens, and other upland game birds now scarce, suffered no more than the occasional loss to a crow of a setting of eggs; if wild ducks had no more serious handicap than crow-pilfering of one out of three, or more of their first clutches, there would be no problem of the restoration of these birds. Their populations would never have been depleted to an extent forbidding extinction. No, the basic reason for game bird disappearance are man, his works, and his deeds. He has taken the upland game birds' range for his own use, he had drained wild fowl homes, some parts of which he had been able to use, others not; and above all he killed and killed, without mercy and without sense.

Having slaughtered game species almost to the point of disappearance, he then kills natural enemies of those species, thinking to have a few more head of game for himself. If all the natural enemies were gone, he would again deplete any and all kinds of game; there would be no permanent gain. It is high time for friends of wildlife to resist with all their might the devastating advance of the killers. The hunters gain nothing but a fleeting and fictitious pleasure, while public at large loses valuable and interesting creatures that all of us can enjoy.

What the hunter wants is to kill, in season if he must, but at all times if he can. The popularity of the anti-crow crusade is due to the opportunity it gives for killing at any time. Crow-killing has been accompanied by unspeakable cruelties in the use of live but crippled crows used for decoys, sometimes young birds prodded or kicked into squawking to attract their parents and other crows to the slaughter area. From such shooting, war upon crows has progressed to mass murder by cannonading and dynamiting roosts of sleeping birds. Rather than deeds of intelligent and reasoning human beings, these acts are a form of madness, an irresponsibility and ruthless fury comparable to the lynching of human beings. And why such warfare? Because crows devour some eggs and young of game birds; that is, crows trespass on the killing privileges that the hunters wish reserved for themselves alone. It is killing to insure further killing, a disgusting exhibition of one of the unworthiest acts of man—killing for pleasure. If man would give up the slaughter of game, a pastime without any acceptable excuse in a civilized country, his whole rea-

son for crow-killing would be gone. Under natural conditions, the crow is no menace to the existence of any bird, game or otherwise. The crow kills to meet the necessities of itself and young; man under conditions of civilization has no actual need for the flesh of game, but kills wantonly. If man would end a practice that exists only to his problem, no "vermin" problem at all. By so simple and commendable a step could peace be largely restored to the world of nature, and our brethren of the wild receive their just due in a sympathetic appreciation and protection.

The National Association of Audubon Societies still defends the right of the sportsman, so-called, to push toward extinction vanishing birds and animals of game species. The Association's rich endowment and large income should make it fearless; but in ideals of game protection it lags behind the best opinions of its time. The President of the N.A.A.S., Mr. Kermit Roosevelt, has deeply offended many members by his recent trip to Alaska in May, 1937, to hunt the usually inoffensive and harmless Alaska Brown Bear. No one questions Mr. Roosevelt's right as a citizen to hunt the Alaska Bear; but his lack of sportsmanship and lack of good taste in hunting, while president of the Association, including members of the Board of Directors, are striving to preserve, has brought great embarrassment to the Association of which Mr. Roosevelt is President. R. E., ed.

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