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"WEATHER OR NOT" INDEED !

The intense sunsets seen during January (BIRD OBSERVER, Vol. 3, No. 1, p. 27) were not the result of abnormal meteorological conditions. Rather, they were caused by sunlight that was scattered by a three-mile-thick dust layer some 12 miles above the earth's surface. The dust had been injected into the atmosphere in October 1974 by Fuego, a volcano in Guatemala. Similar vivid sunsets followed the eruptions of Krakatoa (1883), Pellé (1902), and Agung (1963).

Atmospheric circulation patterns that would affect the dust could have no effect on bird migration or wanderings, which take place some 30 times closer to the earth's surface. Furthermore, since Northern Hemisphere weather fronts normally move from west to east, there was no anomaly in the January weather patterns described by Don Kent.

Leif J. Robinson, Wellesley

PAN-AMERICAN SOCIETY FOR THE PROTECTION OF BIRDS

by David Stirling, Victoria, B.C.

How about a little bird quiz this month? Well then, where would you go to find the following birds, and what do they have in common?

Bean Goose, Garganey, Mongolian Plover, Rufous-necked Sandpiper, Long-toed Stint, Temminck's Stint, Polynesian Tattler, Common Sandpiper, Terek Sandpiper, Black-headed Gull, Common Cuckoo, Skylark, Yellow Wagtail, Red-throated Pipit, Brambling, Little Ringed Plover, Dotterel, Ruff, White-throated Needle-tailed Swift, House Martin, Indian Tree Pipit.

Puzzled? Well, to give you a clue, you could have had all of them on your year's list for 1974 from a single American state---Alaska. And what do they have in common? Each and every one of them, according to the regional reports in American Birds in 1974, was sought out and shot dead in order to document its occurrence in North America.

But what is a mere twenty-one birds? As I write, I have on my desk before me reports of 41 Savannah (Ipswich) Sparrows (an officially endangered subspecies) shot on their breeding ground in two days of the 1974 nesting season; 70 shorebirds shot on Vancouver Island in August of this year; 200 American Golden Plovers shot in Hawaii; 1000 Cattle Egrets shot in four weeks in Florida in 1969 (Auk, 48: 538-546); and, according to the Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife (now the Fish and Wildlife Service), 196,000 migratory birds collected under federal scientific permit in the U.S. in 1971.

Of course, many worthwhile ornithological studies can be pursued only by careful examination of laboratory material, and our knowledge of birds and of how to protect them would be infinitely the poorer if no one ever handled a specimen.

There are growing numbers of people, however, who have come to believe that on this continent the great majority of birds that are killed ostensibly for "scientific" purposes are killed altogether unnecessarily, and that effective legal controls over bird collecting compared with those in many European countries are negligible. Many people find the killing of extralimital vagrants (the "rarities" of the amateur birder) particularly offensive, and have noted that the custom of shooting such birds to "substantiate" the record contrasts strongly and unfavorably with the custom, for example, in the United Kingdom. There, such birds are zealously protected by amateur birdwatcher and museum ornithologist alike, and there are severe penalties for attempting to molest such a bird.

The Pan-American Society for the Protection of Birds was formed specifically to try to tighten up regulations concerned with bird-collecting. Without in any way wishing to hamper the needs of serious and purposeful biological study, the Society nevertheless has set itself the task of securing far stricter controls over the issuing of collecting permits than exist at present.

A major aim of the Society will be to secure improved regulations or legislation requiring anyone who wishes to kill birds to state in advance the nature of the research he is conducting and how many individuals of each species he wishes to kill, and to make it mandatory for a permit to state the species and number for which it is valid and the purpose for which the dead birds are required.

It may be that some members will oppose all killing for scientific and educational purposes. Although many have sympathy with this viewpoint, the Society itself does not actively oppose (nor does it necessarily condone) the killing of a bird in the course of a planned program of research for which examination of the dead bird is essential, provided that no unnecessary cruelty to the bird is involved.

The Society will, however, oppose the use of wild birds in scientific experiments where extreme cruelty is involved, such as, for example, the current vogue for experiments involving water deprivation to death, surgical deafening, and tethering to free-flying balloons.

The Society recognizes that, in many cases, the killing of birds for collections has a negligible effect on populations compared with such other causes as hard-weather mortality, oil pollution or collision with TV towers. This is not invariably the case, however, for there are instances where scientific collectors have seriously depleted bird populations. Examples are the offering of large sums of money to Tristan da Cunjans for specimens of the Big-billed Bunting, whose population is estimated as 60, and the killing by collectors of about 50% of the known Peruvian population of the Imperial Snipe. Although these are exceptional cases, they are not uncommon. The main reasons why the Society opposes the unnecessary killing of even common species are not primarily because the Society fears that species will be exterminated. Rather, the matter is one of ethics and aesthetics, the recognition that birds are living, sentient creatures, with a greater value alive and singing, to be enjoyed by the great majority of decent people, than as dead specimens, to be examined by a few.

Membership in the Society is not large, for it is a working society with every member either playing an active role or, if time does not permit, offering needed financial support. New members who are committed to the aims of the Society and who are offended by the "collecting" of birds for trivial purposes are welcomed. Birds give us a lot of pleasure. What can we do for them in return?

For those interested, further details can be obtained from

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