

THE FINAL WORD ON STARLINGS!

If we publish much more material concerning the Starling, readers are likely to think that EBBA NEWS should be subtitled, 'a journal devoted to the dissemination of information about the Starling', but the following from John V. Dennis, Route 1, Box 376, Leesburg, Virginia, written to Rev. Garrett S. Detwiler, a copy of which also was sent for use in EBBA NEWS, should prove of considerable interest:

"Congratulations on your excellent defense of the Starling in the last issue of Ebba News. I am sure that the vast majority of bird-banders will go along with you.

"Here, in northeastern Virginia, where pastureland and hay crops are all-important, natural aid in keeping down grasshoppers, crickets, weevils, and leaf-hoppers is like water in the desert. And, interestingly enough, the greatest assistance we get is not from the highly praised native song birds but from the less esteemed Starling, English Sparrow, and native Brown-headed Cowbird. And, incidentally, around the house and barn, there are no better destroyers of pasture pests than the lowly domestic fowl - guineas, chickens, and domesticated Muscovy Ducks.

"Insects, particularly in drought years, are so numerous that the random pickings of our native birds hardly make a dent. The only effective control comes when large flocks of birds descend upon the fields and give them a good going over. Time and time again I have found Starlings, Cowbirds, and English Sparrows to be the only birds to appear in numbers in my infested fields. Of these three, the Starling does the greatest service. Stomach contents of occasional Starlings I have collected confirm the value of their foraging activities. One collected on October 9, 1954, had eaten three large grasshoppers and ground beetles (Carabidae). One collected on October 17, 1954, had similarly feasted upon grasshoppers and beetles and also hairy caterpillars.

"A Cowbird I collected on July 14, 1950, had been eating adult Japanese beetles, but four collected during the Summer and Fall of 1954 had been eating vegetable food, chiefly corn, barley, and grass seed.

Biological Survey data show that grasshoppers make up the main animal food item. Dr. Friedman calls yellow foxtail grass 'literally and figuratively the staff of life of the Cowbird'. It is my feeling that the Cowbird does its greatest service when it follows cattle during the early Summer. This is the season when most other birds are restricted in their foraging activities due to nesting duties.

"The English Sparrow in Summer seems equally interested in a grain or insect diet. Four adults I collected in August 1954 had little else but barley stuffed in their stomachs, but eight nearly fledged young collected during the same month had been fed equally upon grasshoppers and barley. Previously, in July, 1950, two English Sparrows were found to have been eating adult Japanese beetles.

"Incidentally, in speaking of the Japanese beetle, we were in the throes of an awful plague back in 1950. Now, as with you, the beetles are all but gone. When they were so numerous, a great variety of birds joined in attacking them. I have specific records of adult beetles being taken by the Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Cardinal, Mockingbird, and Brown Thrasher; these are in addition to the instances already cited. And, I might add that in the rose garden, chickens, guineas, and domestic ducks did a great service in picking beetles from the bushes.

"Because of its smaller stomach capacity and year-round fondness for grain, I would hardly put the English Sparrow in the same favorable class of insect-destroyers as the Starling. Needless to say, it makes itself objectionable when it comes to attracting other birds with food or bird houses, but there is evidence that the English Sparrow is reasonably valuable in keeping down insect pests, although this value, of course, varies seasonally and from one locality to another. Also, I can find little to support the charges of extreme aggressiveness to be found in the literature. Either the English Sparrow has quieted down, or past accounts were exaggerated.

"Returning to the Starling, I might say that an excellent account of its food habits is to be found in Bent's Life Histories (Bulletin No. 197, U. S. National Museum). The work of Kalmbach and Gabrielson is nicely summarized and other accounts are treated. Under-scored is the following statement: 'the starling is the most effective bird enemy of the clover weevil in America'. And to repeat the conclusion reached by

Kalmbach and Gabrielson, I'll repeat the following: 'Most of the Starling's food habits have been demonstrated to be either beneficial to man or of a neutral character. Furthermore, it has been found that the time the bird spends in destroying crops or in molesting other birds is extremely short compared with the endless hours it spends searching for insects or feeding on wild fruits.'

"I might say, finally, that nothing is more important than an open mind in properly judging the economic value of any species. While I find a number of questionable species highly valuable on my farm, I would not go so far as to recommend these birds as beneficial universally. There are undoubtedly other areas devoted to other agricultural practices where these birds are not so welcome, and urbanites, of course, are faced with different problems and have their own point of view.

"But I will say this, I think there is a mass of evidence to support the view that earlier ornithologists, as a whole, falsely interpreted the economic status of most of our birds. On the one hand, perhaps in their zeal to build up sentiment for bird protection, they exaggerated the usefulness of many song birds; on the other, they made the mistake of classifying certain species as harmful when actually no species is harmful at all seasons of the year or in all parts of its range. Some of the birds which were painted the blackest - the Great Horned Owl and the Accipiter hawks - we are now learning, serve a very useful function and are among the birds we should be most zealous in protecting.

"Today, we do not have to look for economic reasons to protect our songbirds. We can more than justify their existence upon aesthetic grounds. But for those few, especially the introduced species, whose character and appearance do not inspire affection, we must judge them by their economic record. While we would have to search diligently to find much convincing evidence in support of the English Sparrow or Rock Dove, we can hardly escape recognizing the impressive economic record of the Starling; few birds can compete with it so far as utility to our agriculture is concerned."

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DeWITT P. BROKAW DEAD

Mr. DeWitt P. Brokaw, 176 Rockview Avenue, Plainfield, New Jersey, died on August 29, 1954.

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