

THE DECREASE OF CERTAIN BIRDS IN NEW
ENGLAND.

BY EDWARD HOWE FORBUSH.

IN THE course of an inquiry made in 1903 to determine the effects exerted on bird-life by an unusual season, some unsought evidence was received regarding a general and progressive decrease in the number of birds in certain sections. This suggested the propriety of further investigation to determine what species were known to be actually diminishing in numbers. This paper is intended as a sequel to the results of the first inquiry and a preliminary statement of some facts gleaned from the mass of material acquired in pursuing the second.

In summing up the evidence regarding the destruction of nests, eggs, young and adult birds by the severe weather of the summer of 1903 and the winter of 1903-04 the following statement was made regarding the bird probabilities for Massachusetts in 1904.

"If we assume . . . that the evidence submitted approximates the facts, we may be justified in believing that the Bob-white has been reduced generally at least ninety-five per cent, that Grouse will be scarce this spring, and that Purple Martins will be generally absent, although a few individuals or colonies probably will appear locally in Massachusetts. There probably will be also an unusual local scarcity of many of the species mentioned [in the list of birds destroyed] . . . and possibly of more not mentioned."¹

The inquiry made in 1904 seems to give to this statement the force of a prediction fulfilled. Of thirty-eight correspondents who speak particularly of the Bob-white, six now regard these birds as exterminated, thirty-one as nearly exterminated or rare, while only one finds them common. The diminution of the Bob-white is now a matter of common knowledge. However, many of these birds have been introduced from other States and liberated, during the season, by sportsmen's organizations, with the expectation that they will breed and restock the covers.

¹The Destruction of Birds by the Elements in 1903-04. By Edward Howe Forbush. Annual Report Mass. Board of Agriculture, 1903. p. 498.

The Ruffed Grouse also received a severe check; but the birds bred fairly well in 1904, and in many localities are now increasing. Purple Martins seem to have been rather rare in the spring migrations, except in northern New Hampshire, Vermont, and in Maine and Nova Scotia where they were fairly common.

A few birds came to Massachusetts about April 19, but, apparently, they all disappeared. An inkling of their fate was obtained in Concord, Massachusetts, where after a few cold days with five inches of snow which followed the 19th three out of the four adult birds observed were found dead in a bird house.

Forty-three observers in Massachusetts report as follows:—Martins gone or extinct, 26 reports; nearly extinct, 3; rare, 5; rare and decreasing, 8; as usual, 1. But the most significant fact regarding the disappearance of these birds is that thus far, with the exception of Springfield, where four colonies still persist, evidence has been secured of only three pairs breeding in 1904 in the entire State of Massachusetts, although it seems probable from what has been learned that many are breeding locally in parts of Vermont, New Hampshire, and Connecticut.¹ In Maine they suffered little except in the southwestern portion of the State and appear to be increasing in numbers rather than diminishing.

Chimney Swifts seem generally much reduced in numbers, and in some localities are rare; but in a few towns they seem as common as ever. In large sections of Massachusetts Barn Swallows and Tree Swallows are much reduced, evidently as a result of the storms of June, 1903; but in other sections no such reduction is noted.

Red-winged Blackbirds, Orioles, and Marsh Wrens appear to be scarce, locally, from the effect of the storms and floods of June, 1903; while Meadowlarks and Flickers are rare in sections of southeastern Massachusetts as a probable result of the severe winter following. These birds, however, appear to hold their own in other sections.

Reports from many parts of Massachusetts indicate that com-

¹ Since the above was written it has been learned by correspondence that a few birds bred in two other localities.

paratively few of those Warblers which breed in northern New England and northward were observed here in the migrations, and there was evidently an unusual local scarcity of such breeding birds as Chestnut-sided Warblers, Redstarts, and some Vireos. Still there seems to be no reason why most of these birds cannot speedily recover their usual numbers. The Purple Martin, however, has little foothold now in Massachusetts and a large part of southern New England. Everywhere empty Martin boxes are taken by the English Sparrows and the Martins, which have been decreasing for years, may never again be able to regain their former status here. The June storms of 1903 will long be marked and remembered by the passing of these beautiful, useful and familiar birds.

Turning now to the inquiry of 1904, our attention is at once arrested by the apparent marked and alarming decrease of game birds, and particularly that of certain wild fowl and shore birds.

Loons and Grebes seem to be decreasing rapidly on the inland waters of eastern Massachusetts. The Loon, which twenty or thirty years ago bred in the more remote northern ponds of the State, seems to have disappeared as a breeder. Along the coast both Loons and Grebes are still very common in migrations. The Surf Ducks, Eider Ducks and Shelldrakes apparently hold their own very well, but the pond and river ducks have fallen off tremendously within fifty or sixty years. The Ruddy Duck, formerly a common migrant, is now fast growing rare, and the Scaup Ducks seem to be slowly disappearing. Black Ducks appear now to be the most numerous ducks in the interior. Green-Winged Teal are very rare, and Blue-wings are not common and are seen only occasionally in small flocks. The Wood Duck seems generally verging towards extinction. Ten observers who speak particularly of this bird report as follows:— Extinct, 2; nearly extinct, 5; decreasing, 2; decreasing until last two years, 1.

The falling off among the shore birds seems to have been most remarkable. It is variously estimated as generally from fifty to seventy-five per cent within fifty or sixty years, while certain species are estimated to have decreased ninety-five per cent within ten or twenty years.

It is apparent that more protection is needed to save from

extinction the Bartramian Sandpiper or Upland Plover and some of its congeners, as well as the Golden Plover and the Curlews.¹

These birds once thronged our coasts, marshes or hillsides in immense flocks during migrations. Only a scattered remnant of this vast host now remains. The Long-billed Curlew appears to be nearly extinct in New England. Only thirty years ago the Upland Plover was a common breeding bird in the uplands of central Massachusetts. They bred then at Worcester within the city limits. Now they have nearly disappeared from the State as breeders, although a few are still found in some remote towns. They are also growing scarce in Vermont and New Hampshire.

Twenty-four observers report especially on Woodcock in their sections as follows:— Extinct, 1; nearing extinction, 8; rare or decreasing, 14; decreasing until the last two years, 1. Others believe that there has been a slight increase in the past two years owing to a law prohibiting market shooting of these birds.

Fourteen observers report Herons as diminishing in numbers, and only one reports an increase. Old gunners notice particularly the scarcity of Great Blue Herons, which they say were very common fifty to seventy years ago along the coasts and rivers. These herons have not been known to breed in Massachusetts for years.

The Passenger Pigeon, as is well known, has been practically extinct in New England for at least twenty years. They are occasionally reported as seen, but probably not one has been positively identified of late.

Mourning Doves appear to be generally rare and growing less. They are reported as follows: Extinct by 8 observers; nearing

¹ Certain Sandpipers and Curlews which are now rarely seen on the Massachusetts coast are still abundant in their seasons on the coast of South Carolina. The fact that flights of these birds are occasionally seen on the Massachusetts coast may indicate that they now ordinarily pass over the New England coast in their migrations to the south from their northern breeding grounds, and that they stop here only during stress of weather. The increasing occupation of the shores of Massachusetts and Connecticut in summer and fall by cottagers and gunners may even cause the birds to change their routes of migration. The Golden Plover is still common in the West. Whether the birds have been killed or driven away, New England is the loser.

extinction, 1; decreasing and rare, 11; holding their own, 1; increasing slightly, 3.

Birds of Prey seem to be generally decreasing along the Atlantic seaboard. Eagles are regarded as very rare and decreasing by 22 observers located near the cities or in the interior. Along the shore more are seen, but never in such numbers as in earlier years.

Twenty-two observers report Hawks and Owls in general as decreasing. Other reports follow:—Hawks and Owls increasing, 2; in usual numbers, 4; Hawks disappearing or scarce, 5; Hawks as usual, 2; Hawks as plenty as ever, 3; Hawks increasing, 4; Owls scarce, 4.

Screech Owls, many of which were killed by the last winter, are, in most cases, reported as uncommon, and in a few localities as rare or wanting this season. Saw-whet Owls, many of which were picked up dead last winter, are not reported this year by any observer.

The locations of the correspondents indicate that hawks in general are decreasing in the more thickly settled eastern parts of Massachusetts and holding their own or even increasing locally in the western part of the State. In northern New England they seem generally common. The Great Horned Owl seems to be growing rarer in all well-populated regions. The Red-tailed Hawk is apparently disappearing from many regions, and there is some evidence that the Red-shouldered Hawk is increasing and slowly taking the place of the other species.

The Pileated Woodpecker, which has been nearing extinction for many years, now appears to hold its own in northern Worcester County, Massachusetts.

Nighthawks seem to be decreasing over large areas. Reports follow:—Extinct, 2; almost extinct, 3; decreasing or rare, 18; plenty, 2; as usual, 1. How much the June weather of 1903 may have had to do with their scarcity we can only conjecture. But the Nighthawk has been gradually decreasing in much of eastern Massachusetts, and in some sections of the western part of the State, for many years. There is also evidence of a decrease in parts of northern New England.

Six observers report Whippoorwills as decreasing or gone.

The mass of material regarding the smaller birds that is contained in the nearly 200 reports on hand must be digested further before any positive statement can be made regarding these States.

There can be no doubt, however, that the House Wren is now either very local or absent in a large part of New England.

Twenty-nine representative Massachusetts reports on this bird may be summed up as follows: — Extinct, 11; nearing extinction, 2; rare, 10; decreasing, 4; holding their own, 1; plenty, 1. This sprightly little bird, which was evidently common within thirty or forty years over much of this region, seems on the whole to be slowly losing its slight foothold. In most cases where birds are said to be extinct, reference is had to breeding birds rather than to migrants, but House Wrens seem to have disappeared entirely in some cases.

Apparently, Barn, Cliff, and Bank Swallows, though increasing locally from time to time, have been diminishing generally in Massachusetts for at least forty years. Cliff and Bank Swallows are not found at all now in some sections where formerly they were abundant.

The decrease of Barn Swallows has been more gradual but nevertheless quite general over a considerable part of the State. This has been well known to ornithologists for years, and this inquiry furnishes additional and corroborative evidence.

Bobolinks are decreasing over considerable areas, but are apparently increasing in some localities in western Massachusetts. There are other instances of this kind.

The Wood Thrush is reported as decreasing rapidly in some sections and increasing in others.

There seems to be trustworthy evidence of a remarkable reduction of birds in general in some localities and an equally notable increase of the smaller species in others.

The Robin is reported to be increasing in nearly all sections. There is also considerable evidence to support the belief that the Scarlet Tanager and Rose-breasted Grosbeak have increased. The rise of the Bluebirds in recent years is well known.

To members of the American Ornithologists' Union most of the above will not be new, but it is written in the hope that it will again call attention to the imminent danger of extirpation which menaces certain species.

It is not practicable here to discuss the causes of these fluctuations or to recommend measures for the protection of declining species. This must be left for the final report.¹ It ought to be possible for this association to make its influence felt toward securing such uniform legislation in different States as may be used to check the slaughter of waterfowl and shore birds, which otherwise must result in the extirpation of several species.

WILLIAM SWAINSON TO JOHN JAMES AUDUBON.

(*A hitherto unpublished letter.*)

BY RUTHVEN DEANE.

IN Dr. Elliott Coues's memorable address delivered at the Fifteenth Congress of the American Ornithologists' Union, entitled 'Auduboniana and other Matters of Present Interest,'² he called attention to the fact that the man whom Audubon finally selected to write the technical part of his 'Ornithological Biography' and 'Synopsis' was William MacGillivray. He also stated how fortunate it was that he had not fallen into the clutches of William Swainson as a collaborator in that great work, for in 1830 there were negotiations to that end. In 'The Auk' for 1898 Dr. Coues published a letter of Swainson to Audubon³ dated 2nd Oct. 1830, showing conclusively that further attempts to engage in a co-editorship were terminated.

I have before me another letter of Swainson to Audubon, and while it bears no date, there is a memorandum at the end, in Audo-

¹ The Decrease of Certain Birds and its Causes, with Suggestions for Bird Protection. Annual Report of Mass. State Board of Agriculture for 1904. In preparation.

² Bird Lore, Vol. III, 1901, p. 9.

³ William Swainson to John James Audubon (a hitherto unpublished letter). Auk, Vol. XV, 1898, pp. 11-13.