

LOSING THE BIRD SONGS.¹

BY WILLIAM E. SAUNDERS.

A FEW years ago a book was published, with the title "When Life loses its Zest." What a title! Bird-lovers know nothing of any such period, and it is quite unnecessary to say that the author was not talking about ornithologists, but of the general public who do not take 'The Auk,' and do not belong to the A. O. U. The trouble with our members is the same as with an old friend of mine in London who is now over eighty, and who has been interested in nature all his life, and who states cheerfully that he has so much work ahead that he knows he can never catch up with it. His life surely has zest, yours has zest, and so has mine. We fortunate ones who take joy in the study of nature may well be the most envied of all men, and we should thank our stars that we have been led into such pleasant paths.

The annual meetings of the A. O. U. so neatly characterized by Mrs. Hoyes Lloyd as "Reunions," afford an opportunity of looking back, and among the many interesting things to consider, is the gradual failing of our hearing as it affects our ability as ornithologists. As age increases, people realize that they can not hear as well as formerly, and the present paper has to do with the failure of ability to perceive the songs of birds. If I may generalize from my own limited experience, I would say that loss of hearing may be measured by ornithological events with an accuracy that is almost uncanny, and as most of the members of the Union are likely to pass over the very trail that I am now treading, if they are not already on it, it is hoped that my experience will be at least informative.

It was at the age of sixty that I first noted my own inferiority to the younger men with whom I go a-birding, and the first notes that I missed were the tiny lisps of the Golden-crowned Kinglet and the Brown Creeper; which I lost at almost exactly the same time. I was commenting on this to my friend Henry Oldys at the Cambridge meeting, in 1923, and his prompt reaction was "Can you

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hear the Grasshopper Sparrow?" That question still stands as the only hint I have received from others as to what notes were soon to be lost. Henry Oldys had lost that Sparrow.

Those buzzy songs, apparently so much alike, have very different carrying powers, and that of the Grasshopper Sparrow is the very poorest of all. In character it appears to be closely comparable with those of the Golden-winged Warbler, Clay-colored and Savannah Sparrows, but, speaking solely from my own experience, the Grasshopper seems to have by far the least carrying power and in June 1933, at almost 72 years, I was unable to hear one at twenty yards, though I was watching him with the glass as he sang. While the tones of the Golden-winged Warbler impress me as being very similar, yet they carry to my ear very much better, and in 1933 I was able to hear one at nearly forty yards. Very similar is the song of the Clay-colored Sparrow, except in rhythm, but in 1932 I heard one at sixty yards, when I was compelled to be the finder, as my companion did not know the song. The last of these buzzers is the Savannah Sparrow and his song strikes my ear with good force at sixty yards, and I hear him very plainly as the car passes the fence post from which he is singing.

Turning to the lisping songs, even the most strident of the tones of the Golden-crown passed my ability entirely at the age of sixty-five, five years after I lost their tiny lisp. At that time I lost also the Cedar Waxwing, whose note is to most people a mere sibilant hiss. Very clearly comes to my memory a morning at Point Pelee one winter when both waxwings were present, and I diagnosed a note as that the Bohemian Waxwing, by its power and a vibrant tremolo which I thought I could detect, and the late James S. Wallace was quite complimentary over my success; but the Bohemian is so rare that I have hardly heard it since, and now it is of course, gone forever.

Turning to the Warblers, the Black and White has the poorest carrying power, or should I say, has the highest pitch, and it was lost at about sixty-seven, although in earlier years I had often commented to myself on the great distance at which I could hear this apparently trivial song. This year I had an ear test, and while I was found to have a competency of about 90% on the lower vibrations, when the tones went up into the thousands, my ability to hear them dropped towards zero very fast indeed.

In 1930, at sixty-eight years, I lost the songs of the Bay-breasted, Blackburnian and Cape May Warblers, and the lisp of the Tree Sparrow, and while the Blackpoll, Tennessee and Nashville Warblers remain with me, they are of course much fainter and audible at a much shorter distance. At that time, 1930, I watched a Cape May sing at about thirty feet directly over my head, and when he opened his bill and sang, I was unable to hear a single note. After the meeting of the mammalogists in Cambridge, in 1933, my brother F. A. Saunders, a member of the Nuttall Club, took me to Duxbury to see the Least Tern. On the way we heard several Black-throated Green Warblers, and my comparative inability to hear them was very evident. However, when the car stopped very near one, perhaps twenty-five yards, I remarked that I could hear that one all right, but what was the matter that he omitted the "daw" at the end of his song which has been rendered "See-saw-marg'ry-daw." But my brother said, "He does not omit it," and right there I realized the strange fact that although the second and last notes were apparently identical in pitch, there was an absence of power (shall we call it voltage?) which was so important that while I could hear the "saw" perfectly well, I was utterly unable to detect the "daw." It was difficult to believe one's ears, especially with such unreliable ones as mine, but it showed that poor ears have been able to detect nuances that had never been noted, or at least never recorded, by better ones.

The hard, stony call notes, probably on a lower pitch than those of the Warblers, I can still hear, and now, twelve years after I lost the Golden-crowned Kinglet's song, I am sometimes the first of a group to catch the "tick" of the Purple Finch, a note which I have always been inclined to regard as rather difficult to hear. This call-note bears some resemblance to those of the Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Myrtle Warbler, Indigobird, and Cardinal, but I can now state that they have, for me, very different powers. I have mentioned them in the order of their strength, and while I hear the Finch very well, the Myrtle and Ruby-crown less, the Indigo is quite soft and the Cardinal is audible at not more than ten or fifteen feet.

A host of songs remain with me, and though not with their primitive force they can still be well heard at good ranges, such as

the Song, Vesper and Fox Sparrows, and the Maryland Yellowthroat, all of which I can hear at 100 yards or more, the Brown Thrasher and Meadowlark at 150 to 200 yards, and just recently my companion was surprised when I heard the note of a Blue Jay at 50 yards, which she thought was quite soft, but the pitch was probably low. The little tinkling songs which the Tree Sparrow uses to entertain us while visiting here, are still available, though they certainly seem to be of little volume. It would be interesting if some one would evaluate accurately those tiny little notes, such as those of the Golden-crowned Kinglet, which sound like mere sibilant whispers, and which are the first to vanish from human ears.

The average human does not discriminate much between the various notes above the top of the piano, and when I received a demonstration of the *d*, *e*, and *f*, above *c* in alt., I found that they expressed nothing to me except a sibilant hiss, and the aurist who gave me the demonstration told me that I had an ear above the average, so perhaps it may be found that the pitch of a bird's note may be roughly judged by the period at which we lose it. It is quite unlikely that the data I have given will correspond exactly with the experiences of others, but it is hoped that they will at least give some idea of how soon certain bird songs may be lost to those who treasure them.

London, Ontario.