

REPORT OF THE COMMITTEE ON BIRD PROTECTION, 1938

THE preparation of a report by the Committee on Bird Protection imposes on that committee the responsibility of (1) surveying bird-protection needs; (2) a brief statement as to the way those needs have, or have not, been met; and (3), in a committee that, with one exception, comprises a new personnel, a statement of its collective attitude toward, and conception of its responsibilities.

Bird-protection needs cannot be stated until it is known what birds need protection. These would seem to fall into two categories: (1) species actually threatened, in North America, with extermination; (2) those that, for one reason or another, may not be in danger of actual extermination, but are reduced in numbers and threatened with further reduction.

The following species might be placed on the list of those whose survival, at least in the United States, is doubtful: the California Condor (less than fifty birds surviving); Ivory-billed Woodpecker (less than thirty birds known); Eskimo Curlew (population—if any—unknown); Trumpeter Swan (less than 600 known); Whooping Crane (less than 300 known); Great White Heron (about 500 surviving); Masked Bob-white (recently reintroduced into the United States); Everglade Kite and Limpkin (whose populations are unknown); and probably half a dozen additional species. Those reduced in numbers and threatened with further reduction, though not in so perilous a condition as the species listed above, include most ducks and geese, the hawks, the Reddish Egret, the Roseate Spoonbill in Florida, and some of the fish-eating birds.

Of these birds, the most dangerously situated are unquestionably the Condor, Eskimo Curlew, and Ivory-billed Woodpecker. They have been reduced to the point where numbers may be so low as to interfere with reproduction. Probably no bird has ever reached such a low population-density and survived. That the causes of the diminution and means of increasing the birds are only partially understood, is indicated by the fact that the National Association of Audubon Societies has established research fellowships for the study of the Condor and the Ivory-bill, and for the devising of methods for restorative management. A large tract of the National Forest about the Condor's breeding range has been set aside by the Forest Service as inviolate, in an effort to protect the birds against wanton shooting, thought to be the most important cause of decrease.

The Ivory-billed Woodpecker, unlike the Pileated, apparently cannot adapt itself to the destruction of the forests in which it lives and unless large tracts of such areas can be protected against the lumberman's axe, and other threats such as the construction of hydro-electric projects, there seems

to be little hope of saving the bird. Needless to say, even if they appear hopeless, efforts looking toward protection should be adopted, and conservation agencies should be supported in their work of studying and guarding the species.

It is possible that the Eskimo Curlew may be extinct, but the few reports of its existence during the past decade lead one to hope that it has been merely overlooked by competent observers. Since it breeds in the far North and is not likely to be shot in migration through the United States, the chief danger to the bird would seem to lie in Central and South America and, more specifically, Argentina. In that country bird protection is still in an embryological state and there could scarcely be a nation in which the International Committee for Bird Protection could more advantageously function.

It is fortunate that the Trumpeter Swan breeds, in the United States, under the protection of the National Park Service and U. S. Biological Survey. While a decrease is reported this year (1938), in numbers of young of these birds south of the International Boundary, it is unlikely that anything can be done for the birds that is not already being done. The Canadian Government is properly silent about the Trumpeters under its care and we can only hope that the high standards of conservation that characterize so many Canadian activities are being applied to the swans.

The Whooping Crane presents an especially difficult problem since it is conspicuous and migrates over an immense area. A small number of the birds rest and winter on U. S. Biological Survey refuges, and Federal wardens have been specifically instructed to protect this species on migration and during the winter. However, it seems that adequate information relative to their needs is still unavailable and increased attention to this species is highly desirable.

The Great White Heron is probably as safe from molestation by man as possible, but while its numbers are so low, it can scarcely be removed from the danger list. Much of the range of the bird has recently been placed under Federal jurisdiction and protection, and its prospects are bright indeed.

The present numerical status of the Everglade Kite is not known, and there are hundreds, if not thousands, of Limpkins in Florida, but both these birds, with their highly specialized diet of *Pomacea* snails, are threatened because of destruction of environment. An expansion of drainage activities in Florida seems highly probable, though efforts will unquestionably be made by the Audubon Society and others to block it, and it is dubious whether these birds can survive an extensive drainage program. It is to be hoped that substantial areas will be set aside in Florida for wildlife protection.

The Masked Bob-white has been reintroduced into the United States,

and it is said a limited number survive south of the Mexican border. The fact that it exists mainly beyond our national boundaries should not excuse American bird-protective organizations from their responsibility to save it if possible.

More attention has been given waterfowl by conservationists and the general public, during the past five years, than any other family of American birds. The U. S. Biological Survey has done yeoman's work in extending its refuge program, and it has imposed constructive restrictions on methods of kill, seasons, and bag limits. That these activities, helped by increased rainfall in the prairie States and Canadian provinces, have resulted in an increase of waterfowl, is generally agreed. Many people who desire the restoration of waterfowl numbers to something approaching the carrying capacities of their breeding and wintering ranges were shocked when, this year, Federal authorities increased the hunting season by fifty per cent, restored to a limited open list the Redhead, Canvas-back, Ruddy Duck and Buffle-head, and doubled the possession limit. It seems possible a substantial part of the gains in duck numbers of the past two years may be wiped out in one hunting season. It is highly desirable that every member of the American Ornithologists' Union closely watch the waterfowl situation, and play an active part in improving it. Unless those of us who are interested enough in birds to join such a body as this are willing to take steps to conserve birds, there is little hope of saving them.

The hawks continue to be shot in a wanton and stupid manner, despite the fact that the consensus of ecologists is that such shooting is without justification. Work in their behalf is carried on principally by the U. S. Biological Survey, National Association of Audubon Societies and the Emergency Conservation Committee and, with the exception of the Everglade Kite and Condor, no species seems actually in danger. There is evident, throughout much of the country, a more tolerant and understanding attitude toward diurnal predators, as is evidenced by policies adopted by sportsmen's clubs, game commissions, and rod-and-gun columnists.

The Reddish Egret, in Texas, seems to be holding its own. The status of the bird south of the border of the United States is unknown and should be investigated. It may be that Mexican birds supply a surplus to United States colonies and that protection in the States is not so important as it might otherwise seem.

While the Roseate Spoonbill is reported to be increasing in Texas, this is not true in Florida, and only a program of research can reveal the reason. Since conservation funds—invariably insufficient for the many needs—are being spent in behalf of the Spoonbill, it would seem economical to find out how best to utilize them.

Many fish-eating birds continue to be shot in many localities as unrea-

sonably as do the hawks and it seems likely that a vigorous campaign on their behalf may be needed in the near future. Kingfishers, especially, are slaughtered by the thousand every year, and this killing is often fostered by professional fish culturists. That such a campaign of killing is not based on scientific research in no way lessens its intensity. It would clearly seem that the burden of proof lies with the bird-killers. The Federal government could do much to check the destruction by refusing control permits to all fish hatcheries unless these have first been screened as effectively as possible.

This, then, seems to your committee to represent the current status of the American birds most in need of protection. Birds are affected, indirectly, by many human activities, and we shall now present a brief review of some of the outstanding events, since the last annual meeting, affecting bird protection. During the past year there has been a rapid expansion of oil-drilling activities on the Texas coast. Exploration for salt domes makes it seem almost inevitable that intensive drilling is about to begin—despite the currently depressed state of an already over-supplied oil market—and this will have two unfortunate results. First of all, it will bring into relatively undisturbed areas large numbers of workmen, and there seems little hope of protecting the birds if these workmen feel impelled, as they well may, to shoot them. There is, further, the very serious threat of out-of-control gushers that may spew oil for miles along the Texas coast and play havoc with Spoonbills, Reddish Egrets, and other birds of the region, as well as with other outdoor resources. This possibility is denied by engineers but wild wells have already polluted thousands of acres in Louisiana. In a social organization dominated by economic determinism, it is difficult to see what can be done for the birds.

The persistent rumors that Carolina Paroquets still survive in southern swamps have been investigated with some care by the National Association of Audubon Societies and others, with negative results. There seems to be no cogent reason for removing this species from the grim roll of birds that are no more.

The Cooper-Santee River diversion project has been revived, and one of the finest primeval areas in the United States, a possible home of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker, is to be devastated in order to create power for which, at the present time, there is little market. The Florida Everglades, during the past few months, have been ravaged by holocausts that burned for days as the result of prolonged drought and drainage activities.

On the credit side of the ledger are items that, directly or indirectly, benefit American birds. The Department of the Interior set aside, in Indian reservations, twelve roadless and four wild areas, from which all vehicles—and therefore most men—are to be excluded. Wildlife Restoration Week, proclaimed by President Roosevelt, undoubtedly resulted in more favorable

publicity for wildlife conservation than had ever before been published in a comparable period, and, as an annual affair, should serve to remind many uninterested Americans that wildlife is a national resource of vast recreational and economic importance.

At the North American Wildlife Conference, held in Baltimore by the National Wildlife Federation, the passage of the Pittmann-Robertson act was announced. This will make available for wildlife restoration and research a considerable portion of the funds collected by the Federal government as a tax on arms and ammunition and, wisely administered, should prove productive of great benefits. This same meeting discussed many phases of wildlife restoration and brought into the open, for a thorough airing, the criticisms of conservationists, levelled against Federal mosquito-control activities. Wide publicity was given the criticisms and this undoubtedly helped to restrict governmental drainage, as will be mentioned below. This same meeting, with many papers devoted to wildlife conservation, was conspicuous by reason of its neglect of non-game forms. The uninformed visitor might have thought that all wildlife, save that killed for sport or for furs, needed no attention. This neglect is a matter of grave concern since the Conferences endeavor to include all groups interested in conservation, and not simply sportsmen and trappers. This is not a criticism of the organization sponsoring the Conference, since no stipulations were made as to the subject of papers. During the past year there was a marked improvement in Federal enforcement of game laws and the U. S. Biological Survey has demonstrated, over and over again, that it is no longer safe to disregard statutes designed to protect our wildlife.

The defeat of a bill to permit diversion of water from Yellowstone National Park—the bill was opposed by your committee—must be considered a victory for conservation forces since its passage would have tended further to debase National Park standards. A bill, supported by your committee, to implement the establishment of areas of biological interest, such as the range of the Great White Heron, under the same terms as national monuments, was not voted on in the last session of Congress but should be supported if it is introduced.

The publication of Dr. Logan Bennett's book, 'The Blue-winged Teal,' must also be regarded as having considerable conservation significance. Efforts to conserve wildlife are checked, year after year, by lack of exact knowledge, and it is a source of great gratification that at last there has been published a volume on the ecology and management of a species of American waterfowl.

The American Wildlife Institute has sponsored an important series of weekly conservation broadcasts that are especially significant because they concern themselves quite as much with non-game as with game species. The

Institute has also contributed heavily to the support of the ten Cooperative Wildlife Research Stations, maintained jointly by the U. S. Biological Survey, State Conservation departments and land-grant colleges.

The refuge program of the U. S. Biological Survey has been vigorously prosecuted, and at the present time 248 refuges include more than 11,500,000 acres. A number of these refuges have been founded, or extended, primarily for protection of non-game species (including Florida Cormorant, American Oyster-catcher, White Pelican, Whooping and Sandhill Cranes, Sage Hens, Glossy Ibis, Limpkin, etc.); inevitably, also, the waterfowl-refuge program is greatly beneficial to many non-game species, especially that most harassed group—the marshbirds.

Two more events of the year, originally hailed as conservation achievements, may prove to be mere mirages. The first of these was the revision, by the National Resources Committee, of its policy on drainage. This revision represented a considerable reversal of policy and seemed both to safeguard remaining marshes and swamps from unjustified destruction, and to pave the way for further restoration of marsh and swamp areas in bankrupt drainage districts. Subsequent events, however, indicate that conservationists took far too seriously the recommendations of the National Resources Committee. In the very area whose drainage was decried, in Florida, U. S. Army Engineers are now engaged in creating sugar-cane growing areas, despite the fact that the sugar industry is one of the most depressed in the world and can exist at all in the United States only by imposing a general tax in the form of so-called protective tariffs; and newspaper accounts foreshadow a grandiose drainage scheme in Louisiana, where the requirements of the National Resources Committee can scarcely be met. Further, the WPA, after altering its drainage policy to protect wildlife, and giving a virtual power of veto to the U. S. Biological Survey, has continued to install some highly dubious drainage work that fails, by far, to meet its own requirements. Unless this fountainhead of make-work-money can be controlled, along with PWA, the future is indeed black for marshbirds in many parts of the United States.

This brief survey of the status of threatened birds in North America, and of some of the destructive and constructive forces operative during the past year, brings squarely before us the question: What can—and should—your committee do about it? There was a period, some four decades ago, when the A. O. U. was probably the most effective bird-protection organization in the United States. It originated the U. S. Biological Survey and, having largely sired bird protection in the United States, it seems to have adopted the motto: 'Let George do it.' Without addressing a questionnaire to the entire membership it would be impossible to know how many members take an active interest in conservation, but it is certain that the numerical pro-

portion is very small. As a conservation force the A. O. U. has largely ceased to exist. As we look back over the list of threatened birds—Condor, Ivory-bill, Eskimo Curlew, Trumpeter Swan, Whooping Crane, Great White Heron, Everglade Kite, Limpkin, Masked Bob-white, waterfowl, hawks, etc.—it is apparent that what these birds require is, primarily, a favorable environment; second, freedom from disturbance by man.

The agencies, in the United States and Canada, responsible for avian conservation, are first of all those of the U. S. Government; the Dominion Department of Mines and Resources, and the Provincial Departments, in Canada; U. S. Biological Survey; U. S. National Park Service; U. S. Forest Service; and State fish and game commissions. The major non-governmental agencies charged with the same responsibility are: the National Association of Audubon Societies; the American Nature Association; the Izaak Walton League of America; the Wildlife Institute; the National Wildlife Federation; the Emergency Conservation Committee; and numbers of small, though cooperative, groups of sportsmen, bird lovers, etc. The larger organizations, both official and unofficial, have large budgets and numbers of paid employees who devote their entire time to the work. It would seem that, if any of the birds on the danger list is not receiving adequate protection—or as adequate protection as the current state of knowledge permits—these great organizations are falling down on their job. If the U. S. Biological Survey, or the National Association of Audubon Societies, for example, could not, and would not, make an effort to preserve the remnants of the Whooping Crane, who would? Would the American Ornithologists' Union, with its small budget and total lack of paid employees? Why, in a sense, should it do what is clearly the responsibility of the larger organizations? They will say, with considerable justice, that the demands on them always exceed their financial and human resources, yet this will not explain why they do not—if they do not—concentrate on the species whose need is greatest. Surely the species whose very survival is dubious have a greater claim to protection than species whose welfare is promoted merely so that a few hundred thousand men with guns may have something to shoot at.

The membership at large, of the A. O. U., can have a considerable impact on the conservation movement in their home States and counties, and to some extent in the national field, by the vigorous expression of informed opinion. They should, certainly, without exception, become members of some organization that is attempting to preserve bird life. They can, further, give expression to their knowledge and desires, through the Bird Protection Committee of the organization. Yet what can this committee accomplish, in comparison with the other conservation organizations? It can join with other pressure groups, but this effort is likely to be duplica-

tion. It can seek information on which to base a policy of bird protection—but this again can be better done by the major conservation organizations, unless they are falling down on their jobs.

One important function, at the present time sadly neglected, can be exercised by the A. O. U. Committee, and that is the function of the critic. The various conservation organizations must frequently cooperate and they are, for this reason, reluctant to criticize one another. The individual organizations are, understandably, desirous of putting their best foot forward, and they are consequently proponents of Dr. Pangloss's belief that all is for the best in this, the best of all possible worlds. An informed A. O. U. Committee that would annually take stock of requirements and accomplishments in the bird-protection field would serve both to illuminate the path of well-intentioned organizations, and to spur the somnolent. Furthermore, in order that A. O. U. members may be kept in touch with conservation developments and needs, we recommend that more space in 'The Auk' be devoted to conservation than heretofore. This material should include brief statements of general needs and situations as well as setting forth current problems on which A. O. U. members should be informed. Finally, it would be helpful if information concerning national conservation organizations might be printed to guide members in choosing groups with which to affiliate. It is our hope that every A. O. U. member will associate himself or herself with at least one active conservation group.

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