

A LITTLE LESSON ON VERMIN

By W. L. McATEE, in charge Food Habits Research,

Biological Survey, Washington, D. C.

Reprinted from *Bird-Lore*, by permission

The word "vermin" derives its present significance in wild-life parlance from the usage of British game-keepers. With them it was a term of contempt, or even of hatred, and embraced not only the natural enemies of creatures regarded as game, but all competitors of every degree. "What isn't game must be vermin" was a common saying. The extreme to which this attitude may be carried is indicated by the action of an English game-keeper on a New York game-farm who crushed under foot the eggs of a Vesper Sparrow found in a Pheasant-rearing field, with the remark that it would save food for the young Pheasants. In some parts of our own country, shamefully though it be to confess it, even our noblest birds, the Eagles, are treated as vermin, and in some places arbitrary efforts are made to put on the vermin list such birds as Herons, which are protected by the treaty between the United States and Canada for the protection of migratory birds.

It is evident that the decision as to what is vermin and as to what should be done with it cannot be left to those who see only the game side of the problem. Some of the most interesting forms of wild life are thought of only as vermin by the prejudiced, and when their existence is threatened by anti-vermin campaigns it is time to say stop.

For instance, the Road-runner is persecuted almost throughout its range (the southwestern states) as an alleged destroyer of Quail eggs, and State bounties even are paid for its destruction. Yet the Road-runner never has been shown to be a special enemy of Quail, and it cannot eat their eggs except during a brief season. The Road-runner is as nearly omnivorous as any of our birds, eating anything in its habitat that is readily available and swallowable. No doubt it will eat Quail eggs, but it is certain that not one meal in a thousand of all the birds at all times consists of Quail eggs.

The Road-runner actually lives up to its repute of killing rattlesnakes; without doubt, it eats more scorpions, centipedes, and tarantulas, those poisonous nuisances of the arid Southwest, than it does Quail eggs, and it is a voracious consumer of grasshoppers. It is a unique bird, not only in our fauna but in that of the world, has extremely interesting habits, and in its choice of food in the long run undoubtedly does more good than harm. Its persecution is all but baseless and is thoroughly unjustified.

Within the year 1931 of an era supposed to be civilized, murderous raids, according to press reports, have been made on Water-Turkeys or Anhingas, at Moon Lake, Mississippi, and on White Pelicans at Lake Bowdoin, Montana. The birds were "condemned to slaughter," we are informed, "by reason of their voracious habits of devouring fish." In the

conduct of human affairs, we strongly censure combining the functions of sheriff, judge, jury, and executioner; the practice should be equally condemned in our dealings with wild life. Inspired by ignorance and carried on in savagery, such assaults on splendid wild creatures by a small element of the population who please to take matters into their own hands should not be tolerated.

There must be enough true conservationists in the country, if they will but wake to the desperate need that many forms of wild life have for genuine protection, to register against all such vandalism a protest so mighty that it will send the perpetrators scurrying to cover. Will this sentiment sleep on until too late?

Sentiment has been aroused and action taken to preserve objects of outstanding natural interest other than birds. Among the national monuments, for instance, Muir Woods was established to save a noted redwood grove, and the Papago Saguara to preserve characteristic desert flora, primarily the giant cactus, while among National Parks, the Sequoia is intended to insure the perpetuation of the big tree. We have national monuments even to protect petrified trees and fossil dinosaurs. Then let us do as much for threatened forms of wild life lest they join the fossil world.

The Sequoia and the redwood are wonderful native plants, the survivors of an evolutionary series known to have great antiquity. Their continued existence hangs by a slender thread, and we have done well to strengthen it. We may equally as well insure the preservation of such interesting birds as the Road-runner, the Anhinga, and the Pelican. The Road-runner is confined to the southwestern United States and northern Mexico and is absolutely unique; if we allow its extermination, it will be gone forever, like the Great Auk and the Passenger Pigeon. The Anhinga, Snake-bird, or Water-Turkey, is one of a very distinct family of birds of which there are only three or four species in the world; our bird is restricted chiefly to cypress swamps, and the number of breeding-places available to it is constantly decreasing. There are only about six species of Pelicans in all, of which two occur in the United States, and they are restricted in the breeding season to widely separated colonies, in most of which they have been terribly persecuted.

All of these stand alone among our birds, and their loss, whether from the standpoint of science or of popular natural history, would be irreparable. Birds of wonderful structure, the last remnants of their lines, and not only of national but of international interest and value, they are subjected to wanton raiding by small minorities for petty reasons. Classing them as vermin could be termed a childish, if it were not a monstrous absurdity. Rather than being dealt with so shamefully, they are just as much entitled to preservation as some of the objects that have national monuments devoted to them. Living Pelicans or Anhingas certainly equal, if they do not surpass, in interest, fossil dinosaurs, and Road-runners are

just as characteristic and precious an element of desert life as the giant cactus. If we should carry out the logic of our own previous actions or should follow the enlightened example of Japan, we would in outstanding cases, establish the birds themselves as national monuments. This step would all the more be warranted in the case of migratory birds, like Pelicans, as protecting the breeding colonies alone is only of seasonal effectiveness.

The Road-runner, the Anhinga, and the Pelican, these are but examples. The tendency is growing among our people for groups to demand the repression of this, that, or the other form of wild life which in their opinion may be prejudicial to some other species, or some other thing that they may especially value. If this tendency is not checked, there will scarcely be any living creatures that at some place or time may not be subjected to persecution. The minorities responsible for this condition should be made to realize in every case that the interests of the general public are paramount.

In no instance is this more true than with respect to the natural enemies of land game and game fishes so ineptly termed "vermin." Those primarily interested in game are not the whole population or even a preponderant class. The entire country is not a game-preserve, nor will it ever be. The particular places (game-farms, fish-hatcheries, and the like) where vermin-control can be legitimately carried on are relatively few, and in total area insignificant compared with that of the country as a whole.

Conservationists may the more emphatically insist on cessation of the general application of vermin-control because of the non-essential character of the interest alleged to be damaged. Trout-fishing is not essential, Quail-shooting is not necessary, and so on down the line. No longer does the argument apply that taking game is necessary to supply food. A standing trouble of the world in general is an excess of food. Moreover, game as a source of food is insignificant; if all of it could be made available, it would not suffice our population for a single day. Further, there is certainly no reason that sport should be so nursed and subsidized as to yield the very utmost in game brought to bag. There is, to state it simply, no necessity or urgency about the matter at all. Sport is a luxury and cannot be considered for one moment as giving to its devotees any right of harrying any and all forms of wild life considered inimical.

To resume, suppose the Pelicans on Yellowstone Lake do consume trout or harbor parasites of the trout. The birds, active and conspicuous, bizarre in appearance on land or water, and marvelous in flight, are of recreational value to far more persons than are the submerged trout. The same principal holds in practically every case of so-called vermin-control; there are far more people interested in the total animal association, or even in the non-game species, than there are in game, and their rights and interests must be respected. Control activities should be undertaken only

where abnormal abundance of the predators on game calls for repression, action to be taken primarily for the purpose of bringing their numbers back to normal, and not for revenge, punishment, or anything suggesting extermination. Even this view is a generous one toward sport, for, as noted, it is after all non-essential. It is merely recreation and no more important than the recreation of those who enjoy but do not kill wild life.

The so-called sentimentalists, or lovers of wild life, derive pleasure from seeing, hearing, and enjoying all animate creation, which, except as necessitated by important economic considerations, they would protect in its entirety. Sportsmen desire to hunt and bring to bag a small number of species and to insure their success by repressing a much larger number, which they class as vermin. Which object is superior? Certainly not the latter, yet it is the view that dominates present-day policies relating to wild life. It is high time for lovers of nature as a whole to demand recognition of their rights and to so assert them that wild-life protection will be real, not nominal, and that treating as vermin some of the most interesting and precious members of our native fauna shall become impossible.



Emergency Conservation Committee

Mrs. C. N. Edge, *Secretary*

113 East 72nd Street, New York

Attention is called to the following publications which will be sent free while the supply lasts on application to the Secretary:

Shotgun Conservation
 Unsportsmanlike Sportsmen
 The U. S. Biological Survey
 Poison for Our Wild Life
 Doomed Yosemite Forests

A Crisis in Conservation
 Compromised Conservation, Can the
 Audubon Society Explain?
 "Framing" the Birds of Prey
 The Bald Eagle, Our National Emblem

**The time to protect a species is while it is still common.
The way to prevent the extinction of a species is never to let it become rare.**

THE EMERGENCY CONSERVATION COMMITTEE in distributing "A Little Lesson On Vermin" (through the courtesy of the Massachusetts Audubon Society) **thanks Mr. McAtee** for his courage in frankly stating the reasons for the wanton killing of so many of our useful and harmless wild creatures.

The "Sportsmen" of the U. S. have presumed to think and to act as though our bird and animal fauna belonged exclusively to them, instead of being the property and concern of the whole people. With the power of wealth, leisure and position behind them, these men have formed lobbies, published magazines and influenced the press in the interest of their selfish sport.

An Example of Unsportsmanlike Killing was given last autumn in New York State when, according to press reports, a party of eight people shot 500 ducks in one day, though the lawful bag-limit is only 15 ducks per day per person. Mr. Trubee Davison, Assistant Secretary of War, was a member of this party. Mr. Davison, asked by the Associate Editor of *OUTDOOR LIFE* to tell the facts, refused, saying that he considered the matter "neither unusual nor important." The very fact that such killing is not "unusual" makes it of vital importance to all conservationists. (See *Outdoor Life*, March, 1932, page 28.)

The Game Birds, thus relentlessly killed, are fast disappearing and so now the birds of prey, the eagles, hawks, owls; the water birds, such as pelicans, herons, anhingas, kingfishers; the rails and coots; and even our most beautiful and interesting cuckoo, the Road Runner, must be shot for the gratification of the sportsman's pleasure.

WARNING has been given in no uncertain terms by such experts as Dr. W. T. Hornaday, Dr. W. G. Van Name, Dr. T. De Witt Miller, Mr. Irving Brant, Commissioner C. C. Woodward, Mr. Harry McGuire, Dr. Wm. A. Bruette, and others, but the thousands of nature lovers, lacking leadership, have not been able to force action to protect the wild life which is fast disappearing in every state. *BIRD LORE*, the official organ of the National Association of Audubon Societies, has, up to now, borne no part in the fight for conservation. It is, therefore, a matter of peculiar satisfaction to this Committee that *BIRD LORE* now reverses its policy and publishes such fine conservation material as this article by Mr. McAtee. May we not hope that "A Little Lesson on Vermin" is but the first step of the Audubon Association in an active, aggressive campaign for true conservation?—R. E.

Distributed by The Emergency Conservation Committee

MRS. C. N. EDGE, *Secretary*
113 East 72nd Street, New York