THE CHRISTMAS BIRD CENSUS: BY T. GILBERT PEARSON

The waves of joy and sorrow which constantly surge about the feet of the average American reach flood tide on Christmas day. On that momentous occasion, the family reunion, the exchange of gifts and the general festivities cause the heart to beat high. To my mind, this is just the day when one should take a walk in the woods and fields to see which of one's bird friends are to be found. All through the autumn, when the leaves are turning, a great change is taking place in the bird population. The summer visitors are rapidly leaving for the south. Some departed early before the leaves began to color, and others tarry until frost appears. A few of these annual travelers even stay on until winter has settled in earnest over the land. By Christmas day only the permanent population of winter is to be found in the brown fields, in the briar tangles, or among the bare, gray branches of the forest trees. Few places are now left where a bird can hide, and that fact in itself renders a bird tramp at this season particularly rich in results.

For a number of years, there has been developing among bird lovers the custom of going out Christmas day and making a bird census. In a notebook each observer jots down a list of the birds he sees and actually identifies. If he finds more than one of the same variety, he notes the total number seen. I wonder if it is generally realized how many birds can be seen in a few hours at Christmas time, even in our northern latitudes?

Here is the experience of a New Jersey observer last Christmas. The gentleman to whom I refer is Mr. Charles H. Rodgers of Crosswicks. This flourishing village is situated near the imaginary line which divides the counties of Mercer and Burlington. Mr. Rodgers says that his travels that day led him "up the creek and vicinity." It was at nine fifteen A. M. that he started and he was gone exactly three hours and twenty-five minutes. When he returned at twenty minutes before one o'clock he had not only acquired an enviable appetite but he had been within saluting distance of twenty-three species of wild birds.

So far as we are aware, Crosswicks does not possess any topographical features which would cause it to be more resorted to by the birds than any other of many thousands of villages. It is safe to assert that an observer in any other eastern village who exercised the same amount of caution in his movements and kept his eyes as sharply open as did the alert Mr. Rodgers, would in all probability have acquired an equal number of birds' names in his notebook. Among his interesting discoveries were, one red-tailed hawk, two
sparrow hawks, one hairy woodpecker, five downy woodpeckers, one yellow-bellied sapsucker, two flickers, sixteen blue jays and twelve crows.

Many people have a notion that birds sing only in the spring, but read what Mr. Rodgers declares some of these birds did for him on last Christmas day. He says several meadowlarks sang, as did also three white-throated sparrows, which our Canadian friends call the “Peabody birds.” Furthermore, he boldly announces that a tufted titmouse sang joyously although ten inches of snow lay on the ground and the mercury was hovering around twenty degrees. He noted the appearance of thirty-four song sparrows, one of which sang twice. He also saw a purple finch, thirty-one tree sparrows, five field sparrows, one hundred and twenty-seven juncos, three brown creepers, five nuthatches, two chickadees, five bluebirds and eleven robins. Writing of this later in “Bird-Lore,” he computes the total number of individual birds found during that morning walk as two hundred and twenty-five and adds that in the afternoon still another, a winter wren, flew into the house.

Practically all the birds seen at Crosswicks last Christmas can be found at almost any place in the latitude of New York on Christmas day, nineteen hundred and thirteen, by any one who may choose to journey over grounds of similar character and look for them. To find any one of the four winter species of woodpeckers it will be necessary to go where there are trees. The flicker, it is true, often feeds on the ground in open fields, but if snow covers the earth one is very likely to find it perched on the sunny side of some large tree or industriously engaged in extracting dormant insects from the decaying wood of a dead limb.

You must look sharp for the sapsucker. Its black and white spotted back and wings blend so perfectly with the bark of the spruce or pine on which it is often found that discovery is frequently rendered difficult almost beyond belief.

If you chance upon an old apple orchard, by all means go through it carefully, for here the downy woodpecker may have taken up his winter abode, and the hole where he spends the long, cold nights you will discover on the under side of some dead limb. And the briar thickets, the weed patches and the unsightly brush heaps—do not pass them by, for they hold some of the choicest denizens of the Christmas woods. Here you will surely discover the junco, that active little slate-colored snowbird with a whitish bill, that has come down from the north, or from the higher mountains, to spend the cold months with us. Here, too, the song sparrow lurks.
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Out in the open field the horned lark, field sparrow and the meadowlark are feeding upon the weed seeds, which are held above the snow by their thin, dead stalks. The bluebird you will readily see perched on a fence post, telephone wire, or the protruding limb of a tree. Perhaps the first you know of its appearance will be the sound of its cheerful lisping notes.

In fact, wherever you may go, there is always the possibility of seeing some bird. The chickadee, the titmouse and the jay are pretty sure to announce their presence before you see them, for these are birds who do not know what it is to be silent very long at a time.

One walk of a few hours out of doors, taken with the serious intention of getting acquainted with one’s feathered neighbors, is often enough to arouse sufficient interest to cause the observer to be a bird student forever afterwards.

The first questions that arise in your mind after meeting a man who pleases you are “where does he live” and “what does he do.” In exactly the same way interest is aroused concerning the activities of a bird when once you see it and learn its name. A little watching and listening among the trees, a little reading from the bird book at home, and the student discovers suddenly that a whole new world of wonder has opened before him. Wherever he may travel, he will constantly be finding new birds to excite his interest and encourage his study.

One of the birds Mr. Rodgers saw last Christmas was a flicker. If, when he returned home, he read such printed matter on the subject as is available to almost any one and continued his observations on subsequent trips afield, he must have become impressed with the great interest which may be attached to the study of a single bird. Suppose, with him, we pursue its life history and see if this holds anything worth finding out.

One of the first birds with which the student in most States is likely to become acquainted is this same flicker, although it may not always be known by that name. In the Ohio Valley it is sometimes called the high-holder and many people in New England know it as the golden-winged woodpecker. At Cape Hatteras the only name it is ever called is the wilerissen, and in Florida I have heard boys refer to it as the yocker bird. More people probably know it as the yellowhammer, however, than by any other of its seventy or more local names.

It is the largest of our common woodpeckers and is of more marked individuality than any of them. It does the most unconventional, unheard of things which no other woodpecker would think of doing.
The Curlew breeds north of the United States and winters along our southern coasts.

Canada Geese which breed in the Northwestern states and Canada, and are seen on the eastern coast only in winter.
SHOWING TAMENESS OF WILD DUCKS AT PALM BEACH, FLORIDA, WHERE AUDUBON LAW HAS MADE IT ILLEGAL TO KILL THEM.

GAME WARDEN SMITH, COUNTING HUNTER’S KILL, LOWER MISSISSIPPI, WHERE GAME IS NOT PROTECTED.
SCHOOLCHILDREN PUTTING "CHRISTMAS GIFTS" FOR THE BIRDS IN BRANCHES OF EVERGREEN TREES.
WHITE-WINGED CROSSBILLS SEEN IN WINTER ABOUT NEW YORK.

BOB-WHITE "QUAIL:" FOUND IN THE EAST FROM CONNECTICUT SOUTHWARD; DOES NOT MIGRATE.
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It seems to be possessed with a strong curiosity and is forever longing to look into places where you would never suppose it had any real business. Frequently it will go into barns or more especially deserted houses and fly about exploring every nook and cranny, but what it is hunting for on such occasions I have never been able to determine.

Some years ago, while in a rural community which had the distinction of possessing a haunted house, I went to the abandoned farm where stood this building of such local interest. We climbed in through a front window and cautiously tiptoed to the kitchen. Apparently there was no doubt that a ghost was even then in the loft above for we could hear strange noises through the thin ceiling. I stationed my companion on the outside where he could watch the open window and, going to the loft, opened a small door leading into the room over the kitchen. On a joist stood a large male flicker, apparently much astonished at my intrusion. A moment later he sprang through the open window and went bounding down the hill to a dead chestnut, from a limb of which he shouted for several minutes before flying on to the woods.

On Roanoke Island, North Carolina, there is a church with four large, hollow wooden pillars supporting the veranda. Should you go there, you would find these to contain not less than twenty holes big enough for the entrance of a flicker’s body. The people who take care of the building have sometimes nailed pieces of tin over these holes the flickers have dug, but when this is done the birds immediately proceed to make new ones. They have also cut holes through the weather-boarding under the eaves and have been known to enter the church and fly about among the rafters when services were being held.

Woodpeckers as a family secure their living in large part by examining the bark of trees or picking into decayed wood, but the flicker has its own way of doing things, seldom looking in such places for food. When it is hungry, you will generally find it on the ground hopping along in the grass or disturbing the fallen leaves in the woods. It eats beetles, moths, butterflies and a variety of other insects. Now and then it takes a little fruit as dessert, most of which comes from trees not cultivated for human food.

Of all the list of things which nature has provided so abundantly for the food of wild birds, there is nothing the flicker likes to eat as much as ants. These he gets by tearing up their hills with his bill. This operation, of course, excites the ants very much, and when he begins his work of destroying their little circular funnel-shaped fortifications, the word is quickly carried down through the intricate tunnels beneath the surface that something terrible is
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happening. Out rush the ants to see what is the disturbance, and there stands the flicker ready to seize them with his long tongue, which is shooting out continually for the purpose.

I recall a pair of these birds that for three years in succession made their nest in a dead upright limb of a locust tree which stood beside a path, along which two or three hundred people passed daily. Flickers come into the towns and dig their holes in telephone poles. They have also been known to cut through the weather-boarding of ice houses and lay their eggs in a cavity in the sawdust beyond. Almost any summer day you can find them in the larger parks of New York City. Give them a place where they can find food and rear their young in comparative safety and there you are pretty sure to find these fine birds. Some people have even succeeded in getting them to come and live on their estates by erecting artificial nesting sites.

The eggs are pure white. Some years ago a naturalist found a flicker’s nest containing three freshly laid eggs, two of which he took away. Going back the next day, he found the bird had laid another egg; he took this also and continued to do this day after day and the bird went right on laying, the same as a domestic hen does when its eggs are removed. In thirty-three days that flicker had laid thirty-one eggs. There is another record of a bird which deposited seventy-one eggs in a period of seventy-three days.

One of the most unprepossessing objects in the world is a young flicker from the moment it is hatched until the feathers begin to appear many days later. Most young creatures are very attractive. A baby rabbit makes a wonderfully strong appeal to the appreciative mind—so does a little chicken or a duckling. At sight of a young quail, with its soft, downy coat, the impulse is to pick it up and caress it. But who could love a baby flicker? It is absolutely naked, the skin is slick and wrinkled and its body has no semblance of the beautiful proportions it will later assume. And yet, the flicker parents love their offspring and are very attentive.

Down in the pine barrens skirting the Everglades of south Florida, the writer recently came to a place where five or six pine trees had for some reason been killed, possibly by a heavy thunderbolt. Two years ago a pair of flickers dug a nest in the side of one of these trees. Liking the locality, they made last year another excavation in which they doubtless reared their young. This summer they were occupying their third hole which contained young large enough to look out of the entrance and receive food which their parents brought. One of these abandoned holes had been appropriated this spring by a Florida grackle, and climbing up the dead tree, I saw her young in the
nest. Into the other unused hole, purple martins were carrying
nesting material. There was still another pair of martins anxious
to nest in the neighborhood of their friends. With fragments of
grass and leaves in her bill, the female would fly up to the flicker’s
occupied nest, evidently with a view of taking it in. At the moment
she would alight, a young flicker would thrust its bill out in her face
and beg for food. For some time I watched the discomfort of these
birds, and am still wondering what was the final outcome. Now
let us take a glimpse at the public and private life of one other bird.

Almost every one living in the neighborhood of the coast or
near the Great Lakes, or who has journeyed thither in winter,
has noted at least casually the great gray or white gulls feeding
on the water or flying about overhead.

While sitting one December day on the veranda of a little hotel
at Beaufort, North Carolina, idly watching a herring gull slowly
beating about the harbor, I was surprised to see it suddenly fly down
on a mud flat, which had been exposed by the falling tide, grasp a
clam in its bill and, rising aloft about forty feet, let its burden fall.
The bird quickly descended again, seized its victim, and dropped it as
before. This performance was repeated sixteen times, when the gull
after a final look at the clam, flew away, evidently discouraged. The
gull was trying to break the clam’s shell, but the soft mud did not
offer sufficient resistance for this purpose, so the bird went elsewhere
for its dinner. A few days later, I found gulls practicing this habit
with great frequency a hundred miles farther up the coast, and at
one place, near Cape Hatteras, the hard-packed sands were literally
strewn with the fragments of freshly-broken clam shells.

In its general feeding habits this bird is, however, mainly a
scavenger. Fish, squids, porpoises and other forms of marine life that
die and are cast up by the waves are not allowed long to infest the
beaches. The quick eye of the gull soon discovers them, and, like
vultures, the birds gather to the feast. Some years ago it was the
custom in New York to take the refuse of the city on scows out to the
open sea and to dump it overboard. In those days it was a common
sight to see thousands of herring gulls following these garbage-laden
vessels. If you go down off Sandy Hook today, when fishing vessels
are lying at anchor, you will find hundreds of gulls hovering about to
get the pieces of bait that are thrown away, or the waste fragments
of fish cast overboard by the anglers.

Should you take a boat and go up the Hudson River to Spuyten
Duyvil, then through the Harlem River and down the East River
back to the harbor again you will never be out of sight of these birds.
They also soar at times over all parts of the city and now and then gather to rest by thousands on the fresh waters of the Croton Reservoir in Central Park.

Is it not worth while to know these and other facts about the wild creatures that fly through the air above our heads and in many ways are of such economic importance to mankind? There are some of us who think that it is and that Christmas day is a good time to begin to study the birds.

The National Association of Audubon Societies wishes to encourage sound, healthy bird study, and will make this offer to all readers of The Craftsman:

Take a bird walk on Christmas day and send a list of the birds you see and can name to the office of the Association at nineteen seventy-four Broadway, New York City. There will be sent to you in return not less than one dozen colored pictures of birds, suitable for framing. As far as possible, an attempt will be made to send pictures of the birds you see. Reports should be mailed not later than New Year’s day. Join the Christmas day bird class!

DOORYARD ROSES

I HAVE come the selfsame path
    To the selfsame door;
Years have left the roses there
    Burning as before.

While I watch them in the wind
    Quick the hot tears start—
Strange so frail a flame outlasts
    Fire in the heart.

Sara Teasdale.