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DEATH ON THE HIGHWAYS FOR BIRDS AND MAMMALS

by

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Photographs by the Author

Returning home to Oregon one spring, we were rolling along over the high sage wastes of Idaho. It was four o'clock in the morning, that hushed hour before the dawn. A pale, eerie light spread over the expanses and a pungent odor filled the air. It was an empty region, the world just going by mile by mile, hour by hour. But the road wasn't empty.

It seemed to be the busy time for the little denizens of the desert. The magpies were perambulating pigeon-toed in the middle of the road, feasting on the midnight victims of passing cars. Sometimes there was competition for the best tidbit. One black and white fellow threw up his head in a mawkish manner as if arguing his priority. Mashed jack-rabbit furnished the most meat, but there was also an abundance of cottontail and small squirrels.

Once I saw a black raven waver down to the highway, and looking closer I made out that his prey was an iridescent pheasant, the shimmering colors of its plumage blending with that of red blood, a fresh kill and a fine breakfast. As we swished closer, the black bird lifted his big wings and swung in a circle over us, settling down again to his meal. The little bob-tails began to scurry out from the brush, those sandy little squirrels with luminous eyes and twitching noses. I watched one, and of all things, he scrambled up to a shadowy, gray form and began to nibble with gusto. He was eating one of his own kind. We didn't know he was a cannibal.

Cotton-tails were still abroad, now and then dashing across the road, sometimes becoming rattled and twisting back almost under the wheels. Once the car stopped with a jerk, but it was too late. There was a thud. A furry form bounced high in the air and disappeared behind us. We got

out to see what had happened to him. There he was, lying like a little soft ball behind the car, blood running over his face. When we looked at the front fender of the car, there was a round dent in one of them. Who would have thought that so small and soft a creature could even make a mark on heavy metal.

Paved roads and modern traffic take an enormous toll each year from the population of wild birds and mammals. Many birds meet death, especially during the summer when the young are learning to fly. Later in the season when birds are flocking and feeding on weed seeds at the edge of the highway, the mortality is even greater. At the rapid approach of a car, birds on one side fly away. Members of the flock on the other side of the road attempt to join their companions and miscalculating the speed, several of them may be smacked by the car.

Coming up from California a month ago, we ambled along examining the casualties of the road. In the region of the rice fields opposite the Sacramento Bird Refuge, there were so many dead birds on the road and just off the edge that we crawled along between stops. This is a great bird region, including many ducks, geese, white egrets, coots, and smaller water birds, not to mention the great flocks of red-winged and yellow-headed blackbirds, marsh wrens and others that nest in the tules close to the highway.

Our intention was to pick up a selected bunch of the best looking ones as we went along and photograph them as examples of highway deaths. But our eagerness subsided a little after we had leaned over a few. We became wiser and more cautious and learned to appraise the prospects before getting out of the car. Don't make the mistake of grabbing up a rare specimen, rolling it up in a paper and laying it on top of your luggage in the car before you have made a coroner's examination. Somewhere near the Oregon border we had five bearable specimens, a coot, an owl, a pheasant, a hawk, and a rabbit.

In their travels, Stanley and Edna Jewett have gathered in a good

many highway birds and Stanley has a mounting collection from that source. Necessarily these had to be fresh birds, warm and limp. In one trip from Sacramento to Portland, six screech owls, all freshly killed, were picked up. His list of highway owls contains screech owl, pigmy, barn, spotted, and long-eared from many localities. From Laramie, Wyoming, a horned lark; from Los Banos, California, coots; from Prunagut, Nevada, a snowy plover; from Burns, Oregon, a poor will; from Yreka, California, a meadow-lark. Others in his list of birds picked up on the highways are sora rail, Virginia rail, ruddy duck, pied-billed grebe, Hungarian partridge, ruffed grouse, sooty grouse, California quail, bobwhite quail, russet-backed thrush, flicker, goldfinch, Savannah sparrow, western lark sparrow, California woodpecker, robin, red-winged blackbird, California shrike, night-hawk, lutescent warbler, white-crowned sparrow, Oregon junco, and others.

Of the mammals found on the highways, he lists skunks, weasels, deer, coyotes, all kinds of rabbits, mountain beaver, porcupines, pine squirrels, chipmunks, wood-rats, woodchucks, kangaroo rats, white-faced ^{holed mice} mice, opossum, muskrats, little brown bat, snakes, toads, etc - not to mention cats, dogs, chickens.

All of these little fellows, especially the wild ones, skirmish the roads in the darkness and by the afternoon of the following day, the routes are all cleared for other rows of tragedies. Many of them have been pulled to pieces and picked so clean that there is nothing left but a leg bone here, a bare skull there, or a tuft of fur. In a month's time, a mile of pavement may be the death stretch of from twenty to fifty wild birds and mammals.

It almost seems that as wild folks get less afraid of us, partake of our offerings of food, shelter, and safety in refuges, they become less wary and take more chances. The automobile has ceased to be an ogre to wild birds and animals. Ride along in a car reveling your eyes on ducks, geese, and other usually keen birds, and if you do not stop they go on about their business almost under your window. Many photographs are taken from cars today

that would be hard to get otherwise. And many game birds might be easily shot from cars, but fortunately the law is strict and quick in this kind of double-crossing of the birds. Certainly there is no sport in it.