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DO BIRDS ACT LIKE PEOPLE?

by

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Our feathered friends seem to act like human beings when they decide to build their homes. Some people prefer to live in the city, while others want a home in the country where they think it is safer and happier, and they can raise their own fruit and vegetables. Some birds like to live in crowded colonies or bird cities where they walk over each others' doorsteps and trample their young. Many other birds prefer to make their homes out on the farm lands and meadows, or in the forests and high mountains. The sputtering English sparrow and the panhandling pigeon still live in rookeries under the eaves of city skyscrapers and depend upon begging their bounties from the throngs on the streets.

If one looks back thirty or forty years, he can't help but notice that there has been a big change in the area on the east side of the Willamette River between Portland and Oregon City. It has become so built up with business houses and residences that it is a city in itself clear to the Columbia River and stretching southward to the mill town at the Willamette Falls. Old Ladd's Pond, once a peaceful home for wild birds, has faded out of the picture and become Manicured Laurelhurst Park, harboring both human and bird picknickers that savor of the mobs of the street.

For many years we have lived ten miles south of the big city - now a war industrial center - and the changes in bird life are noticeable even this far out. In earlier days the mountain quail and the ruffed grouse nested on our forested river bank. They have been gone for many years and we never hear their voices any more. Two foreign game birds were introduced in this region some years ago, the Chinese pheasant and the Hungarian partridge. The latter was short-lived and disappeared entirely. However, it has flourished in regions of eastern Oregon, especially big ranches and grain regions.

The imported pheasant is the only one that still thrives here. It is exactly like the emigrant Jap, who some years ago got a foothold along

the Pacific Coast, including Oregon. It was a thorn-in-the-flesh to see these industrious foreigners raise more food than American citizens. To prevent them from increasing and getting possession of more land, a law was passed preventing the orientals from buying farm lands.

The pheasant has increased all over the state far more than any other of our game birds. It is admitted that this big, tasty bird is perhaps our best wild game in the field for food and furnishes keen sport for hunters in the fall. It has flourished in the face of crowded communities, even being bold enough to feed with chickens in the farm yard. In the big corn fields of such regions as Ontario, it is a real damage to crops. Almost any gunner can get permission to hunt in these corn fields, especially if he uses an honor system respecting the owner's property. In the case of the pheasant, it looks as if the bird had overdone his sagacity. Enough is too much. Whether the prolificness and aggressiveness of this bird are responsible for the diminishing numbers of our native birds like the quail and grouse is not known, but it seems evident that little effort has been made to protect and preserve these once plentiful dwellers in our state.

We have always had a goodly number of bird houses around our home. In the early days different birds always nested in these. We could always count on the bluebirds, the house wrens, and the violet-green swallows. The bluebirds even staid with us during the winter. We have seen as many as eight of these crowd into a bird house for the night. Once in a very cold spell, we found a number of them jammed into a little box on the side of the house - all dead. It looked as if they had smothered instead of frozen to death. Whether it was the climate or the changing food conditions in this region we do not know, but we haven't had a bluebird on the place for years.

It is a real loss to have no bluebirds around your yard. We remember little instances of the family life of this bird. In one of our bird houses there was a family of six young bluebirds. After they were grown, it seemed as if the youngsters would never leave home. Young bluebirds are naturally timid. They couldn't be thrown out bodily from the paternal roof, but the

parents had a method of their own to boost them out. They finally refused to furnish meals for the kids until they got so hungry that they lunged out and lit on the roof of our house. They were rewarded with fat worms. This family of eight birds were together for days about the orchard, and the old ones kept feeding the youngsters until they learned to hunt for themselves.

A little later in the summer, we saw the mother bluebird carrying in straws to remodel her old nest. The interesting story came when the mother and father were feeding their second family of three young birds. The older children were still following them about. Then we saw one of the grown first brood carry in food and poke it in the mouth of an infant brother of the second brood. It looked like a girl bluebird that took to carrying food for the little ones. She might have learned by copying her mother.

The hummingbirds have also passed us up in the last few years. At one time it was little trouble finding a hummer's nest in a dogwood tree or even in a blackberry bush, which was a prickly syronghold for this midget. The green leaves and white blossoms also were a fine camouflage for the tiny lichened cup in their midst. Although we have had more flowers and fruit about the place, the sound of buzzing hummer wings has been absent.

Probably the most noticeable change has been the ^{Western House} ~~Parkman's~~ wren. In early days the wrens and the violet-green swallows vied with each other for the best bird houses. The spunky little wrens usually won out and got their choice. There has never been a let-up of swallow wings flashing and spiraling about our yard in early spring, catching feathers on the fly that were tossed out to them. But for six or eight years the fidgety wrens deserted us. Then last season a pair appeared out of a blue sky and took possession of a bird house on a maple tree about fifteen feet from the study door. Again the yard was full of wren chattering. Then all at once there was a silence around the little home. Even the noisy little father wasn't shouting about anything. We investigated and found the eggs gone and the house deserted. We soon found the cause. A pair of chipmunks had had the nerve to move into a bird house just a little way from the wrens' house. And lo and behold we caught one of them coming out of the wrens' abode. This year no wrens came back to live in our yard.

Othe r common bird residents on our place seem to be diminishing in numbers. The russet-backed thrush, the vireo, and the junco are not nearly so plentiful as they were a few years ago. Last year the robin made up for the short numbers of all the rest. We found the nests of seven robins, and six pairs raised second broods. This year the robins also were under their big record. There were only five pairs nesting here, and only two raised a second brood.