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BIRDS THAT KNOW HOW TO FISH

by

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"The poor fish have enemies enough," says Isaac Walton; "the cormorant, the bittern, the osprey, the sea-gull, the heron, the kingfisher, the gorara, the puet, the swan, the goose, duck and the crabber, which some call water-rat; against all which any honest man may make a just quarrel -- but I will not; I will leave them to be quarreled with and killed by others; for I am not of a cruel nature; I love to kill nothing but fish."

The fish must realize they have many enemies because many men get their living by fishing, and it is the pastime of many more. So also we find among the birds that a goodly number of species are expert fishers. Among various ways of catching fish from rivers, lakes, and the ocean, methods employed by birds are almost^{as} ingenious as those used by men.

Penguins, murrets, grebes, loons, and cormorants pursue the fish under water. By using both feet and wings, these birds literally fly about under the surface and capture their prey. The pelican goes fishing with a net, as it were, for he scoops into a school of fish, then straining out the water swallows his catch. The kingfisher watches patiently from some branch over-hanging the water from which he dives and catches the fish in his bill. The osprey sails up and down the river or along the lake, stalking his prey. He drops like a plummet, but instead of head-first like the kingfisher, he goes feet first, seizing his game in his talons. Cormorants surround a school of fish in a half circle and drive them shoreward into shallow water where they catch them with ease. Gulls generally catch their fish second-hand by stealing them from pelicans or when the murrets bring food to their young. The heron is a "still-fisher," for he stands in the shallow water as silent and motionless as an old stick, his eye watching the water below and his spear-like bill poised for a strike.

The kingfisher, in keeping with his name, is well equipped. Nature seems to have built him for this purpose and nothing else. Everything is forfeited to furnish him a big head, a spear-pointed bill, and a pair of strong wings to give

this arrow-shaped bird a good start when he dives. Although he is a professional fisherman, he is not supplied with any swimming tools.

Many sportsmen advocate shooting the kingfisher, claiming that he destroys too many young trout, but he catches comparatively few of these. In many places he lives largely on the kind of fish that are of little or no value to man. He hunts for different kinds of insects and shellfish. Along some streams, he hunts for frogs, lizards, and beetles. In the ddry, southern states where streams are few and fade out in summer, this bird takes to a fare of grasshoppers and mice. Along the Willamette he feasts on crayfish.

Although heavy and clumsy in shape, the brown pelican is an expert as the kingfisher at diving. He has a large skinny bag that hangs from the lower part of his bill, and this is capable of holding several quarts of water when it is distended. When not in use, this pouch is contracted under the bill.

The white pelican swims along and up-ends in a school of fish, using his big pouch like a dip-net. It was formerly thought that this big sac served to convey live fish swimming in the water to the young pelicans. But as Audubon remarked long ago, it is doubtful whether a pelican could fly at all with his burden so out of trim. He swallows the fish and later the young poke their heads down his throat and feed by regurgitation.

From a hright of thirty or forty feet, the brown pelican drops into a school of small fish and rises to the surface with pouch filled with fish and water. As the diver stretches his neck straight up, the water runs out and the fish are left. The head is thrown back and the whole catch is swallowed at one gulp. We saw a brown pelican flapping along with a pair of gulls a few feet behind. A moment later, the big bird spied a fish and with a back stroke of his wing, he turned to dive. He gathered speed as he went and with wings partly closed and rigid, he hit the water with a resounding splash. He came to the surface with as much water as the weight of his body. He was in a helpless condition until the water drained out, and at this moment he was pounced upon by a swift-moving gull, who snatched the fish and was away before the slow pelican could retaliate.