

CRITICAL ASPECTS OF BIRD CONSERVATION OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA

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In the constitution of the South Australian Ornithological Association it is laid down that the objects of the Association shall, among other things, be the encouragement of the study and protection of birds. Each activity is dependent to some extent upon the other. Effective protection of our native bird life can be achieved only with a good knowledge of the habits and ecology of the birds, and if we are to have all our native species available for further study in the future then we must conserve sufficiently strong populations of them now.

McGilp (1926) has stated: "After carefully reviewing the position, I am sure that if all our energies are expended upon sanctuaries, we will reap the best results." "There is a far better prospect of saving the birds if we see to it that in all new country opened

up there is an extensive area set apart as a sanctuary for birds."

This is a fairly sound conservation policy, but there is still a great deal of apathy in regard to habitat preservation in the form of sanctuaries. Even protective legislation cannot save birds if their essential environment is destroyed in the process of developing the scrub-lands, forests and swamps for the purposes of our civilisation. Serenty (1940) rightly emphasised that "The essence of bird conservation should be, therefore, habitat preservation first and foremost." "In the past naturalists have been altogether too complacent in regard to the thoughtless destruction of natural cover which has been allowed to go on for so long under the name of progress."

We need many more sanctuaries for our

scrub-haunting birds, but we also need sanctuaries for the water-fowl. This is particularly urgent in view of the clearing of scrub and forest and the reclamation of swamps which is going on now and must continue because of the ever-growing human population.

The situation in regard to water-fowl calls for attention both as regards the creation of adequate reserves of swamp-land and the adjustment of the protective legislation to the needs of the species involved. As pointed out by Roberts (1930), "Game laws are in some respects selfish, for they are sometimes the result of the desire to have a set of conditions which will ensure a supply of material for sport and food. They are not concerned with where the birds breed or their habits . . ." It is incontrovertible that we have been improvidently exploiting our game birds over a period of many years. This is especially true in relation to some of our rarer species of ducks, and research on the ecological factors affecting them is a matter of urgency for the purpose of devising more effective conservation schemes for them.

Among the species requiring special attention from conservationists here are the Tree-Ducks (*Dendrocygna* spp.) and the Freckled Duck (*Stictonetta naevosa*). Southern breeding populations of these Ducks could almost certainly be established with effective protection because in the early days of the State they were in larger numbers. When there is little or no breeding of the rarer Ducks in the south we shall be faced with a situation analogous with that existing in regard to the Australian Bustard (*Eupodotis australis*). There will be no south-bred birds to return regularly to their home territories in the south of the State. More attention should therefore be paid to the species constitution of duck populations in the southern districts each season in order to keep a check on what is taking place.

In the case of rare species of Parrots and other birds that may be adversely affected directly by any of several human activities, there is need for surveys of the present geographic range and population status of the birds. Where the habitats are situated in remote areas, the species may require only protection from bird-catchers. Trafficking in wild-caught birds of very rare species,

especially in connection with the export trade, should be stopped at once. On the other hand, local aviculture can render a distinct service to the conservation of rare species of seed-eating birds by the establishment of sound aviary-bred stocks.

More effective protection should be given to the birds of prey. It is certain that several protected species of Hawks are frequently shot in country districts on account of the popular prejudice against all Hawks. Even the Wedge-tailed Eagle (*Uroaetus audax*) has become a rare breeding bird in most southern areas, and now probably needs full legal protection in those localities.

The economic aspects of all harmful species of birds that are at present legally unprotected deserve investigation, and this is particularly true of Cormorants (*Phalacrocorax* spp.) and Crows (*Corvus* spp.). It may be found that these birds are not so harmful as has been thought to be the case, in some places. In the case of some other harmful species it may be practicable to achieve sufficient control over them by permitting only the destruction of a specific number of individuals, rather than to withhold legal protection altogether.

There should be a tightening up of the procedure in regard to the issue of scientific collecting permits to private persons. Egg-collectors, for example, have operated under permits in this State for many years, but there has been little oological research done and few contributions have been made by them to scientific literature. It is an inescapable conclusion that scientific collecting permits have been used simply for the purpose of amassing egg-collections as a hobby and not for scientific purposes as required under the permits.

In order to obtain the maximum efficiency and benefit from the protective legislation and the sanctuaries, more honorary inspectors of game are needed to assist the police force in detecting offences against the law. Sanctuaries for game birds in all parts of the State need regular patrolling, and there must be enough inspectors for this purpose as well.

There is an extensive and fertile field of inquiry awaiting attention in connection with ecological factors affecting bird life.

"Artificial disturbance by man often brings about an interesting succession of

floras and faunas which presents opportunities for making ecological observations," as has been pointed out by Roberts (1938).

Some very interesting observations have already been made along these lines by Pawsey (1951) in the Pine forests of the South-East of the State, and Boehm (1952) has studied ecological successions in the region of the North-West Bend of the Murray River. Much light could be thrown on the nature of any environmental changes not immediately recognisable and their influence on bird populations, together with the possible implications of the facts for the purpose of conservation work.

A great deal of investigation of this kind could, of course, be done by competent amateur research workers applying sound systematic methods and the necessary patience and enthusiasm. We should therefore encourage a scientific approach to field ornithology in our younger bird-watchers, and, for the same reason, should frown on the careless attitude represented by the dilettante or the list-crazy tripper because the results of their activities may be useless, or even a nuisance, when incorporated in ornithological literature.

Finally, we should endeavor to increase the effectiveness of the total conservation effort by the co-ordination of policy and

work. Our strength and influence will grow with unity of purpose born of common convictions and common ideals. The message and the spirit of conservation need to be spread widely and effectively among the general public. There is a real urgency about the work to be done. Let us, therefore, unite to secure a new and better deal for our birds.

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