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The Passenger Pigeon

The Monthly Bulletin of the Wisconsin Society of Ornithology

Vol. I.

December, 1939

No. 12

AN UNUSUAL FEEDING PERFORMANCE OF THE GREAT BLUE HERON

By Alvin L. Throne

Milwaukee State Teachers College

Bent and others have already recorded the peculiar feeding habit of the Great Blue Heron (Ardea herodias herodias, Linnaeus) which is reported in this article, but the rarity of the performance and the variations of it that I observed, which are not mentioned by Bent, make it seem advisable to record these Wisconsin observations.

I was able to observe this habit to best advantage on the eastern lake of Twin Lakes, Ashland county, on three successive days, June 17 to 19 inclusive, 1938. As I was watching a Great Blue Heron flying about fifty feet above the water of the lake, it suddenly stopped in flight and dropped with outspread wings and legs stretched downward, striking feet first and hitting the water sharply with its body. The bird picked up something out of the water with its bill. During this action, a period of about a half minute, the heron held its wings spread out from the body but not touching the water. After catching its prey, the bird flapped its wings, striking the water with their tips and rose into the air.

During my stay at the lake I observed this performance about a dozen times. In all cases the drop occurred in deep water where the bird was unable to reach bottom with its feet. In the majority of cases, the bird kept its wings spread out while sitting on the water and staying but a few seconds. Twice, however, the heron remained sitting on the water at least a minute with its wings held close to the body. At no time did it have any difficulty in rising from the water. Once while watching with eight power binoculars at a distance of not over one hundred yards, I distinctly saw it pick up a fish, about five inches long, and fly off with it held crosswise in its bill. When about thirty feet in the air it turned the fish around, head towards the bird's

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Treasurer: Karl W. Kahmann, Hayward, Wisconsin

Editor: W. E. Scott, Wisconsin Conservation Dept. Annex, 20 N. Carroll St., Madison, Wisconsin

body, and apparently swallowed it; at least the fish disappeared in the bird's mouth. I could not determine whether the fish was alive or dead when picked up.

There were at least three of these birds at the lake for I observed that number at one time, but whether all of them were securing food in this way or whether but one had developed the habit, I do not know.

On August 1, 1939, I again observed a Great Blue Heron securing food by the same performance on Stormy Lake, Vilas county.

The first time I observed a Great Blue Heron obtain food in this manner was on August 15, 1933, in a deep, wide area of the Peshtigo River, Marinette county, above an obstruction in the river which is locally known as the Mason Dam. This time the method of fishing was essentially the same as on the other occasions mentioned, but with this added variation. The bird would fly over the water at a height of about fifty feet, then stop in mid air and remain almost stationary for as much as a half minute at a time by hovering, and then drop feet first into the water. This performance was repeated several times during the afternoon of observation.

Irven C. Buss and Arthur S. Hawkins, students of game management under Aldo Leopold's supervision, had an article printed in the December 1939 Wilson Bulletin, entitled "The Upland Plover at Faville Grove, Wisconsin." Reprints will be made available to members of the Society.

The editor expects to send out an index to THE PASSENGER PIGEON with the January, 1940 issue. Those who intend to bind Vol. I. may prefer to wait for this index.

BIRD BANDER'S DEPARTMENT

Harold C. Wilson, Editor
Ephraim, Wisconsin

Vernon C. Rossman reports: "Waukesha banding struck a new high in 1939. With the addition of two or three new traps, my total number of birds was 2,340 of 89 species. White-throated Sparrows led with 587. Slate-colored Juncos came next in line with 277. 211 Robins completed the high trio. Interesting catches were a Short-eared Owl, Northern Parula Warbler, Indigo Bunting, 5 Broad-winged Hawks, 2 Black-billed Cuckoos, Winter Wren, Connecticut Warbler, Gambel and Harris Sparrows. In six and one half years of banding I have tagged 8,724 birds of 119 species. A Goshawks banded in 1934 in Vilas county proved to be the first to wear a Survey tag.

Every bird bander thrills at the 'recovery' at some foreign port of birds banded by himself. To date I have received 26 reports from out of the state. Illinois leads the parade with 4 reports; Louisiana, Texas, Mississippi, Arkansas, Oklahoma, Minnesota, Tennessee, South Carolina, Alabama, Kentucky and Ontario, Canada, all reported my birds. Thirteen state communities were also visited by my banded birds. More than 125 birds have come back from one to four years later, to the same traps in which they were banded.

Margarette E. Morse, Viroqua, writes that a male Cardinal banded August 7, 1933, was still a star boarder at her feeding shelf during 1939.

Walter J. Mueller of Milwaukee sent in an unusual return: A White-throated Sparrow banded by him May 9, 1938 was captured May 9, 1939 at Carbon Hill, Alabama; certainly out of the breeding range.

A Mourning Dove banded May 29, 1939 was shot Sept. 9 at Spartanburg, South Carolina.

Mr. Mueller also banded 3 Sanderlings and a Knot, neither of which species was reported by the Biological Survey as having been banded in 1939.

Mrs. Melva Maxson of Milton, observed that her birds are extremely fond of ginger cookies. Although she finds it hard to keep water out during the cold months, she fills the bird baths often. One cold day when she put out a pan of hot water, a Blue Jay took seven baths before the water cooled. She concludes, "I guess he thought it would be his last chance for a hot bath."

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Theo. Sperry had the unusual opportunity of banding a Northern Shrike, caught in his trap, Nov. 3. About Dec. 11, he caught his second. Another bird of interest banded Nov. 6, was the Purple Finch.

Mrs. Fred L. Hook, South Milwaukee, banded 134 birds during her first season. The 84 White-throated Sparrows banded, led the list of 17 species.

SOME WINTER BIRDS COLLECTED IN WISCONSIN

The following collection records will be of interest to ornithologists afield this month. Special attention is called to the Horned Larks, which have been the object of study by Schorger and Main.

Prairie Horned Lark

Feb. 22, 1933 at Madison by Schorger

Mar. 22, 1933 at Kenosha by Walter A. Weber

Feb. 18, 1934 in Dane county by Schorger

Hoyt's Horned Lark

Feb. 2, 1930 in Dane county by Main and Schorger

Feb. 10, 18 & 25, 1934 in Dane county by Schorger

Northern Horned Larks

Jan. 28, 1930 in Dane county by Main

Feb. 1, 1930 at Madison by Schorger

Feb. 2, 1930 at Madison by Schorger

Feb. 7 & 25, 1935 in Dane county by Schorger

White-winged Crossbill

Dec. 17, 1929 in Vilas county by I. J. Perkins

Hudsonian Chickadee

Dec. 1934, in Iron county by Leonard W. Wing

King Eider Duck

March 21, 1936 at Milwaukee by I. J. Perkins

Greater Scaup

Feb. 21 & Mar. 21, 1936 at Milwaukee by Gromme and Perkins

AMERICAN EGRETS BREED IN WISCONSIN

GABRIELSON

Three American Egrets (*Casmerodius albus egretta*) came to my attention on June 6, 1939, while I was visiting the Trempealeau bottoms in Wisconsin, in company with Ray C. Steele, Superintendent of the Upper Mississippi Wildlife and Fish Refuge. Steele said that these birds had been noted flying about a nesting colony of Great Blue and Black-crowned Night Herons and Double-crested Cormorants and gave every indication that they might also be breeding.

We looked the colony over, but did not see the egrets go to any nest. Steele reported, however, that three nests had been definitely located and later found that all three pairs of birds were successful in rearing young. The files of the Biological Survey indicate that this is the first known nesting of this species in Wisconsin since those reported near Jefferson in July, 1863, and Two Rivers in June, 1880, (Kumlien and Hollister, "Birds of Wisconsin," Bull. Wis. Nat. Hist. Soc., 3, 1903).

The American Egrets, which have been gradually recovering in numbers in recent years and slowly extending their range, now are familiar sights in localities from which they had long been absent. Steele has reported stragglers in increasing numbers in recent years, and in view of my interest in the birds at the time of my visit, suggested that I publish the record. I cannot do better than to quote from his summarized record of their appearances in this general vicinity prior to this successful breeding attempt:

"On May 20, 1936, near Marshland, Buffalo county, Wisconsin, a pair of adult egrets were observed, this being the first sight record in this locality. The writer did not again observe the birds during the season of 1936, nor were they sighted by other personnel employed on the Upper Mississippi Refuge. No observation of them was recorded during 1937.

On July 29, 1938, five adult American Egrets were observed near Brownsville, Houston county, Minnesota, and a report was recorded of 'white geese' having been observed in this locality on July 9. Undoubtedly the birds observed were egrets. On July 25, 1938, near the village of Potosi, Grant county, Wisconsin, eight American Egrets were observed, and as the season advanced it was not uncommon to see flocks of as many as 25 birds throughout the 284-mile length of the Upper Mississippi River Wildlife and Fish Refuge. They continued in evidence as far north as Buffalo county, Wisconsin, until October 8, the last date of observation recorded during 1938.

On April 26, 1938, a pair of American Egrets were observed

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at the Trempealeau Migratory Waterfowl Refuge in Trempealeau county, Wisconsin. On May 10, 1939, 15 birds were observed feeding in a marsh at the Trempealeau Migratory Waterfowl Refuge near a known nesting colony of Double-crested Cormorants and Great Blue and Black-crowned Night Herons. Observation disclosed that the egrets were traveling from the feeding grounds and alighting in trees among the other nesting herons and cormorants. On June 8, 1938, three egret nests were located in the heron and cormorant rookery. The nests were situated about 35 feet from the water in birch trees, the bases of which were inundated, but the trees had not yet been killed. On June 30 both still and motion pictures were made of the nesting egrets, one of the three nests containing five young birds, one containing four, and the third containing four birds and one unincubated egg. On July 16 a blind was constructed from which a more complete and better series of still and motion pictures were made. On July 31 the young birds had left the nest and were observed feeding on the nearby marshes.

The young birds evidenced little disturbance while being photographed without a blind; however, the adult birds would not come to the nest to feed the young while I was in a nearby tree but after the blind was constructed within 20 feet of the nearest nest the adult birds made frequent visits to the nests and fed the young. The slightest disturbance or noise in the blind would frighten the adults away. Several hours were spent in the blind photographing and observing these birds."

(The above article by Ira N. Gabrielson, U. S. Biological Survey, Washington, D. C., appeared in the December, 1939 WILSON BULLETIN and was considered interesting enough to deserve repetition here. We have the kind permission of Mr. J. Van Tyne, editor of the WILSON BULLETIN.)

Mr. F. C. Scheer of Hayward bagged two female White-winged Scoters on Lost Land lake about 20 miles east of Hayward in Sawyer county during the duck season. He states that in the past 15 years he has killed about 12 of these birds, mainly on Teal lake which is near Lost Land.

SECOND ANNUAL MEETING OF THE W. S. O. AT MILWAUKEE, MAR. 30

NOVEMBER FIELD NOTES

SOUTHEASTERN AREA--Mrs. Walter E. Rogers reports for Appleton, Bluebirds on Nov. 4, and 5, a Tufted Titmouse on the 20, and Brown Creepers in numbers on the 22. She also reports 200 Whistling Swans at Appleton on Oct. 26 and 31.

Owen Gromme reports that on Nov. 7, Mr. J. P. Rugee of Milwaukee shot a fine specimen of Northern Raven, while hunting ducks on the Lake Michigan shore about one mile east of Cedar Grove in Sheboygan County, Wisconsin. The bird weighed 3 pounds, 2 ounces in the flesh. Mr. Rugee kindly donated the bird to the Milwaukee Public Museum.

Strelitzer reports for the Milwaukee Region that ducks were the main attraction in November. The Milwaukee Bay still harbored several thousand Scaups with a few Ring-necked Ducks and Golden-eyes added to the rafts. A few female Old-squaws were seen on Nov. 5 by Deusing, Schoeffer, Kinzel, Steib and Strelitzer; in addition to Mallards, Blacks, Baldpates, Shovellers and two Pintails. Coots were seen through the 19th. Schoeffer observed the Prairie Horned Lark, a few Snow Buntings, many Lapland Longspurs and an American Pipit during the month south of Juneau Park.

Black, of Lake Mills, states that on the 19th, Mr. Sam Kisow saw 4 Prairie Chickens on Crawfish Prairie in Jefferson county. For the same county at Rock lake, he reports the following observation: "The last Yellowlegs was present on November 8 and the last Pectoral Sandpiper, Nov. 6. A flock of 8 Red-backed Sandpipers was present from Nov. 1 to Nov. 6. At least 9 Horned Grebes and 5 Loons were present on Nov. 9. Hooded Mergansers, Scaup, Golden-eyes, and Coots have been present throughout the month, with American Mergansers, Ring-necked Ducks, and Buffleheads being noted at infrequent intervals."

On Nov. 11, at Mud lake, west of Watertown, Dodge county, he found a solitary Wilson's Phalarope in winter plumage and watched it for 15 minutes at close range. In flight it did not seem to be injured in any way. This bird, which should have moved south about 2 months earlier, could not have been mistaken as all possibilities were carefully checked. Black also reports that a Saw-whet Owl was shot near Lake Mills on the 26th by a hunter.

Scott observed 4 Pectoral Sandpipers on the Evansville pond, Rock county, on Nov. 3.

Strehlow reports for the Brown county Bird Club that 47 species were reported during the month, including: Nov. 3, Vesper Sparrow; Nov. 19, Common Redpoll, Robin, Snow Bunting,

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and Evening Grosbeak; Nov. 20, a Red-winged Blackbird by Kendall and White-throated Sparrow by Garrett; Nov. 23, Northern Shrike; Nov. 26, flock of 25 Prairie Chicken by Kendall. Members of the bird club report that there are fewer Starlings here than a year ago.

Prins reports for the Racine area as follows: "The Franklins' Gull was seen on Nov. 3 and 18 about the Racine harbor by George and Ed. Prins. Nov. 5 a Gray-cheeked Thrush with an injured wing was found by the Hoy Nature Club. A Brown Thrasher and two Red-headed Woodpeckers were found in the city during the latter part of the month. Hans Zell reports the latest date for the Pectoral Sandpiper, Nov. 9 and a Horned Grebe in a water-filled quarry. On the 12th he saw a Red-bellied Woodpecker. Three Red-throated (?-Ed.) Loons were seen on Lake Michigan by George and Ed. Prins on Nov. 11 as well as the last migrating White-winged Scoters.

"While watching the Franklin's and Bonaparte's Gulls, it was noticed that both species had a definite path while feeding up the river mouth. Flying low over the water, they returned to the starting point, and changed the procedure only when the distance was shortened."

November, in the Madison area, was characterized by a number of late stragglers. Killdeer and Rusty Blackbirds were numerous Nov. 14 (Mrs. Koehler); a flock of about 50 Brewer's Blackbirds was seen by Schorger, Nov. 12 and again on Nov. 19 at a mile from the first location; and Woodcock were found at the end of the first week in November by Feeney. Ducks were unusually abundant--all species. Mrs. Koehler recorded 5 Pipits and a few Pectoral Sandpipers, Nov. 14. Redpolls visited the Arboretum in numbers Nov. 11 (Sperry) and were found the last week in October--one individual (Feeney).

SOUTHWESTERN AREA--No reports.

CENTRAL SAND AREA--F. R. Zimmerman and Conservation Warden Field report 25 Sharp-tailed Grouse, 4 Ruffed Grouse and a Wilson's Snipe on Nov. 18, in the towns of N. Millston, S. Millston and N. Knapp, Jackson county.

Mr. Lyle B. Vogel of Sparta, Monroe county, captured an albino sparrow on Dec. 4 (probably the English).

TRANSITION AREA--Strehlow reports: Nov. 8, Snow Bunting in Kewaunee county; Kittiwake (?-Ed.), Bald Eagle and Great Blue Heron in Door county; Nov. 13, Solitary Sandpiper (with

NOVEMBER FIELD NOTES

one leg) and Northern Horned Larks in Kewaukee county by Kendall.

An Arctic Three-toed Woodpecker, White-winged Scoters and about 100 Old Squaws were seen in Door county, Nov. 2, by Arnold Jackson, Jr.

Leonard Brauer reports the following for the Door county Junior Bird Club: Nov. 26, White-breasted Nuthatch by Leonard, and 100 Tree Sparrows by Sister Martha; 7th, small flock of Canada Geese by Dorothy Bocek; 9th, Woodcock at Whitefish Bay by Eugene Schmidt; 11th, Golden-eye; 20th, Robert thought he saw a Richardson's Owl near his home. Billy Miller reported seeing many ducks on Parks lake as late as Nov. 13, and believed the Old Squaw was among them.

NORTHERN FOREST BELT AREA--Fairfield reports the White-winged Crossbill on Nov. 21 at Post lake, Oneida county and also states that there were large numbers of Sharp-tailed Grouse in Oneida county on November 16 in groups of as many as 40 birds.

Carl Richter of Oconto sends the following: "While deer-hunting in Forest county, just northeast of Cavour, Nov. 26, I saw the first Evening Grosbeak of the season, a male; from then on I saw individuals (singles) always males. I think perhaps I observed the same birds on several occasions. Saw and heard a number of Purple Finches, as I did during the grouse season in October.

"What I consider my best record was that of an Arctic Three-toed Woodpecker on Nov. 28 about one-half mile from the location where I noted the first Grosbeak. I have never seen many of these woodpeckers and get quite a kick out of 'spotting one, more so than when I find the Pileated. This latter woodpecker appears less common than before and I suspect that a number fall as 'targets' for deer hunters' guns. In fact I saw (from a distance) a fellow on a 'drive' shoot at one of these fine birds with one of those heavy rifles. I was glad that he missed. Have had them brought to me in former years by a hunter."

J. H. Evans made a northern trip finding the following at Three Lakes, Oneida and Forest counties: Bald Eagle, 6 Am. Ravens, Great Horned Owl, 3 Canada Jays, and flocks of gulls. Mr. E. J. Abrahamson, who has spent many summers and other times up there, found them practically absent in that vicinity.

SECOND ANNUAL MEETING IN MILWAUKEE, MARCH 30

Alvin Throne announces that the Second Annual Meeting of the Wisconsin Society of Ornithology will be held in Milwaukee on Saturday, March 30. Sessions will begin early in the afternoon, taking up business matters first. Papers will be presented both before and after dinner. As announced before the meeting will close before midnight, instead of carrying over until Sunday. The meeting place and exact hour will be announced in sufficient time.

Throne, who is chairman of the program committee, also states that Murl Deusing and Owen Gronme will assist him on that committee, while Clarence Jung is chairman of the arrangements committee, assisted by Roy Corwin and Walter Mueller.

All members who have papers which they would like to present are requested to fill out the blank enclosed with this issue and forward directly to Mr. Murl Deusing, Milwaukee Public Museum, Milwaukee, by February 1. If you have none, kindly mention parties whom you would like to see on the program of lectures, papers, or addresses.

A space is also furnished for suggestions to assist the nominating committee. The society, being an agency for mutual benefit, by this action gives all members a voice in all its affairs. If you would like to see some changes in the list of officers, kindly take this opportunity. It will afford the committee time to question suggested parties as to whether they wish to run for office. Most of the present board would welcome the opportunity to give their places to others, in order to get a better state-wide representation.

Mr. R. E. Young of Milwaukee, was at his deer camp near Secs. 19 and 30, T42N, R8E, Vilas county, Nov. 24, when he sent for a walk with Herman Kuelling and F. S. McIlrath. The story of what he saw is quoted from a letter of Dec. 29: "As we approached this opening through the thick brush we could hear a terrific screaming, and fluttering. As we broke through the brush we could see Bald Eagles in all directions. Six of them were perched on one big dead maple and many were in other trees and in the air. Several were on the ground not far from us and flew away as we approached. They were at least six feet from tip to tip. We estimated that there were at least 20 birds in and around this opening. We found where a deer had been killed before season and those on the ground had been feeding on the entrails. Ravens were also in the vicinity."