

Sac Prairie Summer

By AUGUST DERLETH

21 June: I observed this evening that nighthawks appear to make sorties, as it were, flying up crying to sky-coast several times for an hour to half an hour before sundown, and then returning to their nests or perches to fly up again for longer periods well into darkness at or after sundown. I had noticed this now and then previously, without paying much attention to the birds, but in tonight's period of watching the pattern seemed inescapable.

22 June: On the hills across from Sac Prairie this afternoon I saw that the cows in pasture there seemed to realize that the cowbirds were beneficent, and were extraordinarily patient with them in their moving around; nor were the birds themselves at all disturbed by the movements of the cows, managing only to keep out of their way, by short hops or flights, and little more. The cowbirds were clustered thickly around and among the cows, walking with them wherever they walked.

4 July: While walking out to Witwen today, I paused to watch birds moving along a fence before me—two meadow-larks and a kingbird, anticipating my approach by flying a little ahead from time to time, and then ultimately describing a wide arc around me to return to their original perches; and, while I was thus engaged, I had opportunity to see the kingbird feeding, making a sudden darting flight on two occasions from his perch low into an adjoining clover-field and snatching once a butterfly, and a second time another, larger insect, which I took to be a dragon-fly, and returning to the fence to devour them. All three birds were silent, making no sound whatsoever beyond the peculiar and muted snap of the kingbird's bill in seizing its prey.

7 July: While at work in the studio tonight I heard a todo of birds outside, and, coming to the window to look out, I saw a pair of saw-whet owls in the cedar immediately beyond the east windows of the studio, clearly visible something like ten feet from where I stood. Since the hour was not long after sundown, the birds were unmistakable, and their early venturing forth had aroused robins, blue jays, sparrows, pewees, and wrens, all of which were screaming at the owls. But these birds dispersed with the invading darkness, and one of the owls then flew over to the other side of the cedar. But the other fixed his gaze on me and gave a querulous note, not quite a hoot, nor yet quite a clack. I imitated it, whereat he turned his tuftless head this way and that and snapped his black bill. Thereupon ensued a colloquy which lasted until I tired of it, though he did not, despite several attempts on the part of his mate to engage his attention from the other side of the tree; he made answer each time I imitated his peculiar cry, and if I remained silent for any time, himself cried out. He seemed indeed to be very tame, and was not in the least frightened.

19 July: A clamor of grackles in the lindens and coniferous trees north of the house this morning, their constant, rusty cries rising for two hours or more, with a kind of pleasant mellowness. And in Sac Prairie the purple martins congregated along the telephone and light wires beside the Wisconsin, and on the telegraph wires strung over the

railroad bridge—the first evidence of the approaching season of migration. However, here and there in the village, robins still foraged for young, and the wrens were busy at teaching their offspring to fly.

26 July: I was awakened early this morning, circa two o'clock, by an eerie, steady whistling emanating from the arbor vitae beyond the east windows. I got up and listened to it, but I could not determine its origin; it sounded almost mechanical, but obviously it was not. It was steady, prolonged, unbroken, and once it ceased sounding, it did not sound again. But though it was soft, there was no mellowness in it, nor yet was it harsh.

27 July: The screech owls keened around the house tonight, just off the south balcony and close to the french doors, making a sad, melancholy wailing, very welcome to the ears, not having been heard for some time.

31 July: At the hour of sundown tonight the marshes southeast of Sac Prairie still rang with sound, though birdsong generally was not heavy, the midsummer hush having descended. Yet I heard calls and songs—primarily calls—of catbirds, pewees, song sparrows, kingfishers, goldfinches, nighthawks (sky-coasting over the low hills along the Mazomanie road across the Upper Meadow), yellow warblers, indigo buntings, blue herons, yellow-billed cuckoos, great crested flycatchers, chinks, chimney swifts, and bank swallows.

6 August: At the Ferry Bluff late tonight a wood duck called constantly from the mouth of the Honey Creek, making its ~~cre-ee-ee~~ at regular intervals from that well of darkness; while upriver a short distance, a pair of swamp owls cooed softly; and, across the water to eastward, a barred owl and a solitary killdeer cried. The blue herons fished in the moonlight on the bars, their harsh cries coming out of the darkness from time to time.

9 August: I observed a flock of killdeer, perhaps half a dozen or more, autumn-like along the Wisconsin's shore near the wing dam this afternoon; they flew up and swept away, crying at my approach in their sad voices; but they did not go far, only circling around to land again and run along the river's edge, crying as if in mourning for the lost Spring.

19 August: Grackles haunted the cornfields this morning; I saw them on both sides of the road leading north to the Upper Lane, and again in the corn along that Lane—great flocks of cawing birds, making their not unwelcome todo in the early morning sun, and clearly raiding the ears. They flew up at my approach, circling a little, as if undecided on which way to fly, but eventually solved the problem of their reluctance to leave their food, by circling back into the cornrows somewhat away from the road and the lane. There were perhaps as many as six hundred of the birds in all.

20 August: Lying under the elm on the Big Hill this afternoon, I watched the purple martins and the bank swallows soaring and flying among the clouds—not really in the clouds, which were high cumuli, with beautiful thunderheads white and grey against the striking blue, but appearing to be of them, certainly of the windy air, a west wind blowing steadily and coolly. The birds flew all around the striking blue, occasionally coming down to it, up and away and around with almost ceaseless energy, twittering and crying, perhaps twenty of them in that one

place around the hill, weaving in and out from behind the foliage above, dark on the sky and the wind-driven clouds, and very beautiful to see—as if the poems I had been at reading had somehow come to life there.

26 August: Pewees and meadow-larks sang this morning in the fields along the Upper Lane, but there were few other bird voices. The pewee seems constant at this season; not even the mourning dove sings as faithfully, though in the bottoms the song sparrow approaches that constancy.

5 September: Early this evening at the Ferry Bluff I heard a whip-poorwill call for the first time in approximately six weeks—the longest quiet period within memory. The song was all the more pleasant to hear for this long period of silence. The initial bird was soon joined by others, and for approximately fifteen minutes they called out of the darkening hills, and then were still.

10 September: Warblers passed through this morning in great numbers. One flock which invaded the lilacs west of the house contained masked warblers (the warbler so unimaginatively called the Northern yellowthroat), Kirtland's, Magnolia, and Tennessee warblers.

15 September: This evening in the marshes, I observed that not a purple martin, not a swallow, not a chimney swift was in evidence. The martins have been missing for some days, but only a day or so ago a few swifts and swallows flew about. But tonight, none; the telegraph wires and the poles were bare of birds; so I knew all had gone south. I paused for a few moments to watch the restless foraging of a solitary sandpiper along the river's edge down the west shore of Bergen's Island, and noticed, while I stood there, the great numbers of warblers, predominantly myrtle warblers and redstarts. Of evening sounds, there were comparatively few: killdeers—a conclave of them along the east channel of the Wisconsin, well south of the bridge; blue jays (in numbers), goldfinches (likewise in numbers), yellow warblers, catbirds, and a lone pheasant cock, which I watched, for, having caught sight of me, he crouched well down into the grass of the Lower Meadow, and walked to do a stealthily, hidden there, and then looked up after I had passed to do a little scrutinizing on his own account. The birds had the sound and look of autumn.

UNIVERSITY BIRD BANDING PROGRAM REORGANIZED

A considerable number of graduate and undergraduate students at the University have been banding birds in connection with short-term research projects or long-term investigations of the University. Many of these students apply for Federal and State permits, use them for the few years that they are resident in Madison, and then drop their banding activities. The Washington office, where all records are filed, finds many loose ends, and the whole system has resulted in a rather deplorable lack of coordination in the banding programs of the University.

Acting on suggestions from the Fish and Wildlife Service, representatives of the Zoology and Wildlife Management Departments of the University and the State Conservation Department met and formulated a coordinated program designed to eliminate these difficulties. A plan and a set of regulations for all bird-banders at the University were drawn up and mimeographed for distribution. The new system should

simplify and expedite the work, prevent duplications and coordinate the program.

John W. Aldrich, now with the Fish and Wildlife Service has written the plan.

"I was very much interested in the plan at the University of Wisconsin, and I have tried on by students and in the direction of yourself and Dr. Emlen. It is exactly the sort of conservation program I am hoping for, and which we feel is needed in the bird banding office less than in any other expansion of the program.

"I hope that other universities will be induced to follow your example in their banding work. The plan will receive the widest possible publicity in its entirety in our next issue of the journal to have ready soon. I would like to see a leading ornithological journal quote directly from the report.

The workings of the program are as follows:

Permits: All banding work will operate under a single, master permit issued by H. R. Wolfe of the Zoology Department, who bands birds must carry the permit, showing his or her signature. For application, apply at Professor Wolfe's office. Permits signed by a qualified sponsor are valid for own government permits and for game bird banding stations and for game bird banding.

Bands: All banding work (including utilizing State bands) shall be done under H. R. Wolfe under his master permit. Bands may be obtained directly from the University of all sizes on hand. A banding program of bands and will be responsible for the completion of a project.

Reports: A complete report on all banding forms (supplied with each permit) must be sent to Professor Wolfe on or before the date specified by a permittee's sponsor. Reports must be submitted by the end of each semester. Reports must include an accounting of all unused permits.

Records: One copy of all banding records under the bander's name must be kept in Emlen's office in the Zoology Department. Access to these files on request will be granted.

Return notices received by the University and promptly forwarded to the bander.