

Historic, archived document

Do not assume content reflects current scientific knowledge, policies, or practices.

HOUSEKEEPERS' CHAT

Saturday, February 5, 1938

(FOR BROADCAST USE ONLY)

Subject: "NEWS NOTES FROM WASHINGTON." Information from the Bureau of Biological Survey, United States Department of Agriculture.

--ooOoo--

Our Saturday news letter from Washington, D. C., has just arrived. Writes our correspondent:

"Toy balloons were floating from all corners of the great new Archives Building on Pennsylvania and Constitution Avenues last week -- toy balloons, and, believe it or not, they were up for a scare not a celebration. They were put up in the hope that they might drive away several hundred visitors who had been making this building their winter headquarters. But the visitors didn't take the hint. They have stayed on in spite of the balloons.

"For more than 15 years these same visitors have been coming down from the North to spend the winter season here. And they have made themselves very unpopular for several reasons. They are noisy and untidy. And they have always chosen public buildings as places to gather for the night -- public buildings or churches or downtown stores or theatres. To oust them, officials have tried everything from shot guns and poison gas to blank cartridges, Roman candles and toy balloons. One winter they gathered at the Capitol where they annoyed Senators and Representatives to say nothing of janitors whose job was keeping the building clean. Another year they spent their nights at the Gayety Theatre or the First Presbyterian Church. The old post office on Pennsylvania Avenue was still another favorite haunt.

"Perhaps you've guessed by this time that these unwelcome visitors are starlings. Unpopular though it is, the starling is a bird with an interesting history and perhaps a still more interesting future, a bird well worth anyone's attention.

"The starling, like the English sparrow, is not a native American bird but an emigrant from Europe. And like many another emigrant, the starling has prospered and multiplied in this new country. In Europe both starlings and sparrows have been helpful birds because of the number of insects they eat. So the Cincinnati Nature Lovers and the American Acclimatization Society and the other groups who brought these birds across the ocean had only the country's welfare in mind. They thought the imported birds would solve our insect pest problems. They had no idea that in a new land away from their natural enemies the birds might increase so rapidly as to become pests themselves.

"Today we have a Federal law that prevents bringing foreign birds to this country without the consent of the Secretary of Agriculture. But the starlings came back in the last century. They were brought in several times, in fact, before they became permanent settlers. The great armies of starlings around

2/5/38

today -- those here in Washington roosting on our various buildings, for example, all descended from the 35 pairs set free in Central Park, New York, in 1890. For a few years these alien birds stayed in or around New York. Then they began to multiply and spread.

"They arrived here in Washington for the first time in the fall of 1914 -- came, as they do today, for the winter season. Few people noticed these first newcomers who used trees near the Bureau of Fisheries for their fall rendezvous and in the winter moved in town to the protected eaves and window ledges of buildings. But by 1923 they were already a nuisance. And before long their roosts numbered many thousand each night. About that time Biological Survey men began their investigation to find out whether the starling was a beneficial or harmful bird and also to learn how to control the starling whenever it became a pest.

"As a result of this investigation Survey men believe that, whatever its faults or virtues, the starling is here to stay. It may be controlled somewhat but it can never be exterminated. And probably it will always be a local problem. It is already the most abundant bird in northeast North America -- Canada included. It is hardy and resourceful and still increasing rapidly and spreading to new districts. Probably the time will come when it will reach what the scientists call 'a state of equilibrium' when for various reasons its population will remain static. But at present it is moving west. Until 1916 no starlings had crossed the Alleghany Mountains. Today they are already in Nebraska and Iowa. The Survey men think, however, that the high altitudes of the Rockies will prevent their reaching the Great Basin and California for some time.

"Which is probably fortunate for the orchards and vineyards of the Pacific Coast. A few scattered starlings wouldn't do much damage in an orchard. Actually a robin feeds on cultivated fruit about twice as much as a starling and eats a greater proportion of cherries in cherry season. But starlings don't come in a scattered few. They always flock together in great numbers. And the damage or good they do is by 'mass action.' A flock can settle into a cherry tree and strip it clean in a few minutes. On the other hand, starlings can do the same sort of job on a field of grasshoppers.

"The Survey men have examined the contents of thousands of starling stomachs so they know what the bird eats at all seasons of the year. They say that more than half of the yearly food of an adult starling is animal matter, much of it harmful insects. The starling has an appetite for some of the very worst pests of the garden and field. And it feeds its nestling on an enormous number of harmful insects during May, June and July, just when growing crops need protection from these insects.

"So you see that the starling is a mixed bane and blessing to the farmer. But I doubt if it ever is a popular bird with the city dweller."

That concludes this week's Washington letter except for a postscript. "P.S.," adds our correspondent. "On reading this letter over, I find that I have left out so many important and interesting facts about the starling that I'd like to send you a bulletin about it. Anyone is welcome to Farmers' Bulletin No. 1571 called 'The European Starling in the United States.' You can get a copy just by writing to the Department of Agriculture in Washington. And that bulletin will tell you all about the starling's habits, food, effect on other birds as well as about successful methods of control."

