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HOUSEKEEPERS' CHAT

Wednesday, May 19, 1937

(FOR BROADCAST USE ONLY)

Subject: "NEWS NOTES ON BIRD DIETS." Information from the Bureau of Biological Survey, United States Department of Agriculture.

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Did you ever think of diet as a test of friendship--that is, distinguishing between your friends and foes by what they eat? This may sound to you like a very odd idea, but men of the Department of Agriculture's Biological Survey suggest it as the way to judge your feathered friends at least. Of course, you can find plenty of aesthetic reasons for liking birds--song, color and so on. But whether a bird is actually a helper or a hindrance to human beings depends on how it selects its daily menu.

Biological Survey men say that many of the wild birds save this country millions of dollars each year in farm crops because of their appetite for insect pests. Other birds are of great value because of the weed seeds they eat. Still others are what you might call half-and-half friends. They help by destroying insects or weed seeds yet they may also feast in the fruit trees or the grain field or cause losses to the poultry flock.

You might suppose that after all these years that men and birds have been close neighbors, often living on the same land together--you might suppose that farm people at least would know the food habits of different birds and appreciate those that help save the crops. But so many false rumors about birds come to the Department of Agriculture that Biological Survey men years ago began a systematic investigation of the contents of bird-stomachs in order to have the facts about the food habits of different species at each month of the year.

You can read some of their findings in a bulletin called "Some Common Birds Useful to the Farmer." This is Farmers' Bulletin No. 630, and anyone is welcome to a copy who writes for it to the Department of Agriculture here in Washington, D. C. In the pages of this bulletin you can learn what 50 of our common birds eat and why they are helpful. Then, the next time somebody starts grumbling about the robins' taking only the finest cherries on the trees, or the oriole's appetite for green garden peas, or the kingbird's damage to honeybees--the next time anybody accuses any bird, you can just bring out the bulletin and give him ALL of the facts.

I am sure you will be pleased to know that 2 of our most beautiful birds--the bluebird and the oriole--are also among our most valuable birds. The Eastern bluebird, familiar in all parts of the country east of the Rockies, is a great favorite hailed as a harbinger of spring because it migrates north so early in the season. Though the bluebird lives in orchards and gardens, and nests in

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trees near the house, in farm buildings or in bird-houses, it does not eat cultivated fruit or garden crops. Its diet is largely insects--beetles, grasshoppers, caterpillars, spiders or whatever is most abundant. It also eats a small amount of wild berries. The mountain bluebird and western bluebird of the West have even more helpful habits. The Survey men suggest that you can encourage any of these lovely and useful bluebirds to your premises by planting the ornamental shrubs which have the berries they enjoy. (By the way, the Department of Agriculture also has information on planting to attract birds.)

Other beautiful and useful birds are the brilliantly-colored Baltimore oriole of the East and its cousin, the Bullock oriole of the West. Most of the food of orioles is insects, and these birds are especially valuable for eating harmful small insects like plant and bark lice or black olive scale that other birds pass by unnoticed. Their menu includes also caterpillars, beetles, ants, grasshoppers, wasps and spiders. Though orioles do eat some fruit in midsummer, it is a very small amount and small return for the protection against insects which they give to the fruit trees.

The findings of the Survey men should make the bobwhite's call or the song of the phoebe have a more cheerful sound than ever. These 2 familiar birds Survey men recommend attracting to your farm by every possible means. The bobwhite is a year-round neighbor which eats weed seeds chiefly but also eats a great number of most destructive insect pests. During the winter, to be sure, Survey men found that bobwhites ate some grain but this was only waste grain which should be gleaned from the field. As for the phoebe, its diet is almost entirely of insects and, happily, it has a special fondness for the most harmful sorts. The phoebe eats the largest number of insects during the month of May and these include click beetles, May beetles and weevils. Because a pair of phoebes raise 2 broods a year and each numbers from 4 to 6 young, the phoebe population on any property can make away with a tremendous number of insects. Survey men say that you can often encourage phoebes as neighbors by providing them with shelves to support their nests under eaves or in open sheds which are protected from cats or other enemies.

The Survey men report that many other birds help man in their own particular ways: the titmice, for example, tiny birds that make up in number what they lack in size and do great service by eating small insects and eggs which larger birds do not notice; and the meadowlark which prefers grassy plains so eats such harmful ground insects as crickets and grasshoppers, cotton-boll weevils and cutworms; those expert fliers, the nighthawks and swallows, which catch insects on the wing; the sparrows which consume the seeds of our worst weeds the year around; the kingbirds, valuable because of the insects they eat and also helpful to the poultry yard because they drive off hawks and crows; the wrens--but there. I can't hope to tell you about all the birds. I will just have to say again that you can find further facts about your bird neighbors from that bulletin I mentioned.

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