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THE CROW A MENACE TO POULTRY RAISING.

LEON J. COLE.

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THE CROW AS A MENACE TO POULTRY RAISING.

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That the common crow (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*) is a not infrequent despoiler of the nests of other birds has long been known, while his attacks upon poultry and eggs were among the grievances held against him by the early settlers. It is perhaps, not generally appreciated that the crow is distinctly omnivorous, and that under natural conditions a large proportion of its food consists of animal matter. According to Barrows and Schwarz,* roughly speaking, one-third of the food of crows consists of animal matter; during certain months, especially April and May, the proportion of animal food consumed is nearly double, while in the fall and winter it is correspondingly less.

The crow's depredations upon poultry consist almost entirely in the destruction of eggs and the killing of the young. Adult fowls are probably seldom attacked unless sick and weakened. The eggs of the turkey, which is commonly allowed to roam and select its nesting site far removed from the house or poultry yard, are especially liable to destruction by crows. They do frequently, however, attack chicks, young turkeys and even goslings. Interesting accounts of the methods employed by the crows to evade the vigilant care of the parents, are given in the bulletin of which mention has just been made (see section on "Destruction of eggs and young of poultry," pp. 37-40.) It is reported that crows sometimes attack even such large animals as sheep and swine.

Serious depredations of crows upon poultry and eggs appear to

* Barrows, Walter B., and E. A. Schwarz. "The common crow of the United States." U. S. Dept. Agric., Div. Ornith. and Mam., Bull. No. 6, 98 pp. Washington, 1895.

occur only in certain localities, while in other places, though the crow may have an unsavory reputation, as he generally does in farming communities, he is at least free of this opprobrium. The reasons for this are probably twofold, depending, first, upon the abundance of other food, and, in the second place, upon the accessibility of poultry. As poultry raising is now generally conducted, when any special attention is given to it, the eggs are no longer exposed to the danger from crows, since the hens lay in regularly appointed houses. Furthermore, the young chicks are, as a rule, much better protected, being confined in yards and runs near the house instead of being allowed to roam at large with their mothers. Nevertheless, as will be illustrated below, the crows may become very daring in their attacks when other food is scarce. The necessity of an abundant supply of food is especially great during the months of April and May, when the crows are rearing their young. Certain experiments on feeding young crows in captivity, which are reported by Forbush* (pp. 45-50), indicate that the young crows require a large proportion of animal food, and that, when fledged, they "absolutely require a daily amount of food equal to about one-half their own weight; and it is evident that they will consume much more than this to their own advantage if they can get it." Since young chicks are usually raised at about the same time it is evident why they often furnish a very acceptable addition to the crow's larder.

Judging from the fact that comparatively few complaints have been received, it would appear that the poultry raisers of this State have not been greatly troubled by the crow. During the past season, however, two cases have been reported from different sections of the State, in which the depredations by the crows have been so persistent as to cause serious losses. The first of these was reported by Dr. V. L. Leighton, who has an extensive poultry plant not more

* Forbush, Edward Howe. "Useful birds and their protection." Published under direction of the Massachusetts State Board of Agriculture, second edition, 1907, x x + 437 pp., 56 plates, colored frontispiece and many figures.

than a half-mile from the Experiment Station in Kingston. Dr. Leighton's plant is not a great way from a large piece of woodland in which crows are abundant. His experience this year was as follows:

He was troubled most seriously from about April 1 to July 10. This is just the season during which the crows are raising their young and the young are learning to forage for themselves. Dr. Leighton estimates that during this period he lost, from the depredations of the crows alone, in the neighborhood of 100 chickens, which was about 25 per cent of those hatched and not lost from other causes. All sizes were taken, from the time they were just hatched until they were a pound in weight. The larger chicks the crows killed and ate where they caught them, but the smaller ones they carried away in their beaks. Various efforts were made to keep the crows away, most of which were ineffectual. The first was a scarecrow, but this had little or no effect. In the second place corn soaked in strychnin solution was scattered on a field of planted corn at a little distance from the chicken yard. This may have killed some crows, but no dead ones were found. No corn was pulled, but there was no appreciable decrease in the number of chickens taken. Third, a steel trap was set on a pole near the chicken yard, but without success. Fourth, white twine was run on stakes around and across the chicken yard; this kept the crows from the yard, but the small chicks would get out, and would then still fall a prey to the crows. Finally, a crow was shot and hung on a pole near the chicken yard, after which there was no further trouble. It is Dr. Leighton's opinion that stealing chickens is a common habit of crows in this State. He has been troubled before, but never so seriously.

The other instance of serious losses this season, to which reference has already been made, occurred near Cumberland Hill, in the northern part of the State. This was on the farm of Mr. E. E. Church, who was attempting to raise ducks on a suitable pond not a great distance from his house. The first lot hatched consisted of

135 ducklings; later in the season there remained of these but fourteen. In a later lot he had 70 ducklings, and saved only thirteen of them. The loss of nearly 87 per cent he attributes almost wholly to crows. Mr. Church thought the crows carried the ducklings away in their claws, but in this he was probably mistaken. Mr. Church also found a scarecrow ineffectual in keeping the crows away.

The question of whether the crow is on the whole beneficial to agricultural interests, or whether he does more harm than good, is one that will probably have to receive a different answer in accordance with different conditions. That he does a great deal of good at times by the destruction of noxious insects cannot be denied, though it would probably be difficult to convince the average farmer that he is anything but a thief and a rascal. The problem is in reality an extremely complex one, depending upon a great many variable factors, especially the absolute and relative abundance of various kinds of food. When other food is scarce the crow turns to poultry, but when certain insects, (such, for example, as the beetles commonly known as "June bugs") are abundant, the crow feeds largely upon them. Forbush, in the work mentioned above, devotes several pages (pp. 8-11) to a discussion of the possible inter-relations of the crow and certain other birds, on the one hand to injurious insects, and on the other to insects and birds which are useful to agriculture. But whatever may be the crow's good points in particular cases, it is not likely that the poultry man who is suffering serious losses by his depredations will be inclined to look upon him with favor. For this reason it is probably well that the State does not offer the crow protection; but that it is wise to give a bounty on all crows killed is not so certain. The matter is one which would probably be more or less locally self-adjusting without the bounty, for in those localities where crows are proving harmful this should in itself act as an incentive for lessening their numbers, while if they are doing no harm or are perhaps of benefit in other places, a bounty will work against its own ultimate ends, namely, the interests

of the agriculturist. It happens, however, that the crow is a bird fully capable of looking out for himself under all ordinary conditions, and as Forbush says (*loc. cit.*, p. 406): "Our laws which deny protection to the crow are wise, for it is one of those species which, though at times most useful, may become a pest if not held severely in check."

It should perhaps be mentioned that it is the opinion of many observers that the egg and poultry stealing habit is not common to all of the crows of even a single locality, but that the habit is acquired by certain individuals only, and that if these can be shot the trouble will be stopped.

GAYLORD BROS.
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