

THE LAST OF THE HEATH HENS*

By P. A. TAVERNER



IT IS A SAD THOUGHT to consider the passing and extinction of a race. In the history of the world this has occurred again and again. In fact the history of life on this earth has been of a constant succession of the rising, flourishing, declining and final disappearance of line after line of living creatures, each making room for the next and vanishing into oblivion, leaving as record of their passing only occasional enigmatic fossil fragments, a tradition in some tribal memory, a line in an old book of travel or a few treasured specimens in our museums. Usually in the hurly-burly of vital competition unique forms have dropped away unnoted and unmourned. In each case there must have been some single survivor of its race that struggled along for a while and then passed silently from the picture. Can anything be imagined as sadly lonely as the last surviving member of a once dominant species? In one case at least the event has been sympathetically watched to the bitter end. The final tragedy was foreseen and every effort of science and prescience was made to avert it, but without success. Before me lies the report of Dr. Alfred O. Gross of Bowdoin College, on *The Last of the Heath Hen*, probably the final report, for while the single old bird still existed in life at the time of writing (May, 1932), the final catastrophe can not be long deferred and may already have taken place.

The Heath Hen is a subspecies of the Pinnated Grouse or Prairie Chicken of the western plains that within early historical times inhabited the States of Massachusetts and New Hampshire to New Jersey and probably Maryland. So common were they originally that papers of indenture specified that apprentices were not to be served with Heath Hen oftener than a limited number of times a week, yet in recent years the bird was to be found only in diminishing numbers on the island of Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts. Strenuous efforts were made to preserve this last fragment of a race, and all the powers of the State, supported by conservation organizations and local feeling, were invoked in its protection and assistance. For a time success seemed achieved. In 1916, the number of Heath Hens on Martha's Vineyard was estimated at 800, or even more by some wardens, but by 1920 the

number had dropped to 314. From then to 1924 when the last new brood was noted, numbers sank to 75, 28 and 17. The spring of 1927 saw 13 birds, but the autumn only 7, all males. In 1928 the numbers dropped from 3 in the spring to 1 in the autumn and that one is still surviving and has been noted annually since, including this spring of 1932. The solitary bird must be at least nine years old now and the end is not far in the future.

The factor that has rendered it thus possible to observe a single bird year after year is its specific habit of coming to traditional dancing grounds for its spring mating ritual. These dancing grounds are constant year after year, generation after generation. They may be ploughed over, or even a road made across them, altered out of all semblance to the conditions under which they were first established, but still the birds that once did their mating there return spring after spring at the urge of the procreative instinct, as long as they survive. It is on such a ground and on such a futile errand that the last of the Heath Hens is seen in mating time and where it has even been trapped, banded and released without breaking its continuity of habit.

The cause of the steady decline of the Martha's Vineyard Heath Hens in spite of all that man could do to the contrary, is obscure, but amply demonstrates how helpless we are to preserve any wild species when once the complicated environmental factors become antagonistic to its continuance. Numerous explanations have been advanced,—poaching, predators, especially the domestic cat, grass fires and ecological and climatic changes. Probably all these had their weight in the scale, but it is difficult to believe that any or all of them, in the face of the sincere efforts at their control, could have carried the species to extinction. It is a growing belief of many investigators today that disease, especially introduced poultry affections to which native New World species have not achieved tolerance through generations of experience, are at the bottom of much of the troubles of American upland game. We know how white man's diseases are deadly to many natives, how soon the white man succumbs in tropics where aboriginals flourish contentedly and we can well realize the probability that American grouse cannot survive contact with Old World poultry.

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A contributory factor must be considered but one that was probably of secondary and not of primary importance, as it would not have developed until the numbers had been reduced by other causes,—that is a progressive sterility of the birds from in-breeding. A number of males accidentally killed in 1925 were found with more or less atrophied sexual organs. Almost undoubtedly the last of the Heath Hens is similarly sterile.

Various suggestions have been made to supply the last male with a mate, a female of the closely related Prairie Chicken of the west, or even to introduce that species on the island. However, after due consideration the proposal was rejected. Whatever interest lies in the Heath Hen, it is purely sentimental, and no mongrel breed or allied strain would retain the traditional associa-

tions for which the race is most valued. If sportsmen wish to introduce a practical object of pursuit, it is another question. Let them do it as they can, but not to degrade the last days of the historic Heath Hen. The success of such transplanting is more than doubtful; judging from past experience it would be doomed to certain failure. The Prairie Chicken does not take kindly to new environment. Similar attempts have been made to introduce the species in other parts of New England and even to introduce the Heath Hen on its original habitat on Long Island, but never with success. On the whole it seems the course of both good sense and good sentiment to bow to the inevitable and allow the last of the Heath Hens to make its exit with dignity and with an undiminished halo of tradition.

CHRISTMAS BIRD CENSUS

The Bird Census Committee wishes to remind any interested readers to take a Christmas Bird Census on some day between December 20 and 28, and send a report of it to the Editor as promptly as possible. For the kind of report desired, see published reports of previous years.

NOTES AND OBSERVATIONS

DEAR MR. EDITOR,—Mr. J. A. Munro has advised me that there is a typographical error in the paper on the economic status of the American Merganser, by Dr. Clemens and Mr. Munro, which appeared in the October number of *The Canadian Field-Naturalist*. This error appears on page 167. The sentence—"The Red-breasted Merganser, on the other hand, occurs as is relatively small migrant on the interior lakes and rivers" should read—"The Red-breasted Merganser, on the other hand, occurs as a relatively scarce migrant on the interior lakes and rivers."
—J. B. HARKIN, Commissioner, per Hoyes Lloyd.

KILLDEER AT OAKVILLE, ONTARIO.—On the morning of Feb. 14th, 1932, I noted a single Killdeer (*Oryzochus vociferus*) on the lake shore at the eastern limits of the town. The weather was cloudy with a strong westerly wind and the temperature about 26°F. The ground was clear of snow. At a distance of about 40 feet I had an excellent view with field glasses and am sure of the identification. This is the first time I have noted the bird in winter at Oakville and I cannot find any similar record in the literature I have on hand.—R. C. BROOMAN.

WILLOW PTARMIGAN, *Lagopus lagopus*, IN CENTRAL ALBERTA IN MAY.—On Saturday, May 16th, 1931, Mr. Robert Campbell, a prominent farmer, who lives eight miles south of Camrose, and less than two miles from the Battle River bridge, telephoned me that a bird, resembling a partridge in build and size, but whose plumage was mostly white, had been in his garden since early morning. I suggested that his description answered that of a Ptarmigan, but as this bird was unknown, even in winter, in this part of Alberta, it was more likely to be an albino grouse of some kind. I asked him to keep a close watch on the bird and I would go down and investigate immediately. Picking up two enthusiastic bird students, Messrs. Marshall and Burpee, who were attending the Camrose Normal School, we set out for the Campbell farm, and arrived there in less than an hour from the time I got the call. The strange bird had flown down the road a distance of about 40 rods, and picking up Mr. Campbell and his son, George, we cautiously approached the thicket in which the bird had alighted. Through the willows I could easily see that it was a Ptarmigan and I collected



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