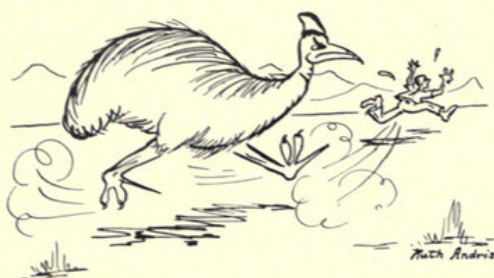


DANGEROUS BIRDS

By AUSTIN L. RAND
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FANS of our feathered friends wouldn't like it, but the fact remains: Some birds can be dangerous to human beings—they have caused damage and even death through physical violence. I don't want to be an alarmist, and I want to state emphatically that most birds are harmless.

One day when a woman called me about birds that were nesting on a branch over her back door and I diagnosed them as robins, she wanted more information. These birds swept down at her children, she said. Was there a chance they would do the children harm? Of course I told her no. The possibility is so remote that one can almost



completely disregard it. The same is true of most of our garden birds. A pair of grackles caused some alarm among our non-ornithological Museum workers by "dive-bombing" anyone who walked a certain path near the Museum. But as soon as everyone realized that the birds were defending their nearby nest and were not demented, the apprehension ceased.

The screech owl is a little different. It makes its nest in a hole in a tree, and with a spacious suburban or rural garden you can hope to attract a pair by putting up a nest box. The owls may catch a few songbirds as well as insects and mice, but to me the mellow whistled trill or whining of the screech owl and the sight of these birds sitting upright or swooping from branch to branch is ample recompense for the other songsters they eat.

MASKS FOR SAFETY

If its larger cousin, the great-horned owl, is sometimes called the tiger of the woods, A. C. Bent, well-known ornithologist, says the screech owl, scarcely larger than a robin, should be called the wildcat, for it unhesitatingly attacks birds larger than itself. Ordinarily inoffensive at the nest, there are records of its actively resenting intrusion. One of the most extreme cases was recorded by William Brewster, famous bird authority, as happening in Concord. The owls raised their brood near a house, and when people passed the owls' nesting place in the evening, the owls swooped down. Repeatedly people were struck on head and face, and the owls drew blood. This happened so often that

people wore hoods or baseball masks when they went out in the evening.

The great-horned owl is a magnificent creature, about two feet long, with long sharp talons. The tiger of the woodland feeds not only on rabbits and the like but also on such unsavory characters as skunks and such tough customers as alley cats that have run wild.

When a person climbs to the owls' nest, which may be in an old crow's nest or on a ledge, the parent owls may sensibly flee and content themselves with hooting in the distance or clicking their mandibles together in anger. But now and then one finds a bolder pair, birds that won't give up without a struggle. Bent himself, climbing to a nest, had a great-horned owl give him a stunning blow behind the ear that knocked his hat a hundred feet away and gave him two ugly scalp-wounds. Deciding he wanted neither to be scalped nor knocked senseless to the ground, he retreated, leaving the owls the masters of the situation.

SWANS BEAT INTRUDERS

Many a farm lad has been run off by a gander. The swans that sail about so stately in the ponds in our parks and eat the bread thrown them can vent their displeasure at intrusions into their family life by beating the intruder with their wings. And this they can do vigorously enough to be dangerous to children.

The whooping crane is perhaps best known for being almost extinct, as the dodo is best known for being completely extinct. When the swamp and prairies of the West and Midwest were turned into wheatfields and pastures, there was no room left for this tall, shy bird. Ernest Thompson Seton, the naturalist-artist, tells a story much discussed in his early days in Manitoba when there were still whooping cranes to be hunted. A young Indian near Portage la Prairie went gunning for wild fowl in the spring. He crippled a white crane, and when he went up to the crane it struck its long, strong bill through the Indian's eye into his brain, killing him. Of course there were no witnesses, but searchers found the corpses of both man and bird and read the story from them.

The celebrated English nature photographer, Eric Hoskins, is minus the sight of one eye from an encounter at a nest of a tawny owl, a relative of our barred owl, which he was photographing in Wales. While Hoskins was reaching up to move a piece of his blind, the tawny owl swooped and hooked a talon into his eye. Despite his companion driving him at once to a hospital, some two hundred miles away, Hoskins lost the sight of his eye.

The cassowary of New Guinea is an ostrich-like bird that may weigh up to 90 pounds. Its inner toe is equipped with a stout, straight claw about three inches

long, a claw that is such an effective weapon that when some people kill a cassowary they save these claws to use in tipping their arrows. When I shot my first cassowary my native guide told me to approach it with care, as a kick from a crippled bird could be dangerous. They also told me that New Guinea villagers sometimes raised these birds, which became ill-tempered with age, and that the kick of these tame birds could be serious.

MAN KILLED BY CASSOWARY

Tom Gilliard, of the American Museum of Natural History, wrote of actually seeing in northeast New Guinea a tame cassowary which had killed one old man and injured two other people, make an attack on a fourth. Having been released from its pen to be photographed, the bird suddenly turned, ran, jumped a fence, and, coming upon a native woman carrying a bag of sweet potatoes, struck her twice and then continued running. One blow had driven a claw an inch into her abdomen; the other had cut her right upper arm to the bone.

When I was in North New Guinea I had a chance to see how a cassowary attacks. In a stockade I had a freshly caught young cassowary about eighteen inches high and a newly taken cuscus, or opossum. They were going round and round the stockade in opposite directions. Naturally, on each circle they met twice. And for a long time every encounter was the same: the cuscus went right ahead and the cassowary jumped up, striking with both feet, and fell over on its side. I formed a poor opinion of the cassowary's mentality from seeing how long the bird took to learn that this method of handling a cuscus was not very satisfactory.

Don't think that these are everyday occurrences. They're not. They're exceptions. But keep in mind that birds with equipment to protect themselves may use it. However, don't drive the screech owl from your garden just because they might scratch you if you disturb their nest, any more than you would get rid of the family tabby just because it might scratch you if you pulled its tail. And don't bother a cassowary any more than you would molest a "tame" bear.

Dictionaries with three-dimensional illustrations in the form of actual specimens—that's what, in effect, the systematic exhibits of mammals in Hall 15 and of birds in Boardman Conover Hall (Hall 21) provide. Study of these exhibits is an easy way to become familiar with animal characteristics.

How much do you know about the food you eat? A survey of the food plants of the world and their products is presented by the exhibits in Hall 25.



Rand, Austin Loomer. 1956. "Dangerous Birds." *Bulletin* 27(1), 4-4.

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