

# A Century of Minnesota Wild Life

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THE FIRST INSTALLMENT of this paper, in which the writer surveys the record of Minnesota's mammals since 1849, appears in the June, 1949, issue of this magazine (p. 123-134). In the present and concluding section, Dr. Breckenridge outlines the story of bird life in the state. Ed.

Attention now is transferred from mammals to birds. Beyond doubt, the most debated and discussed group of birds is the waterfowl, and as the fortunes of this group are surveyed one arrives at a rather surprising conclusion. Of the thirty-four species of waterfowl that have been buffeted around in Minnesota during the past century, only a single species has disappeared from the Minnesota fauna—the trumpeter swan. This largest of North American waterfowl formerly nested regularly on the Minnesota prairie marshes.

Giacomo C. Beltrami, the romantic Italian gentleman who accompanied Major Stephen H. Long on part of his expedition through western Minnesota in 1823, wrote as follows of Swan Lake near the present city of Mankato: "In the evening we halted near a little wood which lies along the banks of the Lake of the Swans. It was the season at which these beautiful birds cannot fly,—the old ones, because they are changing their feathers; the young, because they have as yet only a soft down." Apparently Major Long's haste and not his interest in preserving the swans saved the lives of many of these birds, since Beltrami continued: "We might have had some good shooting, and the *savans* among us might have gained some new and valuable Ornithological information, but the major was intent on *making an expedition*, and consulted nothing but his compass: it was sufficient for him to say, 'I have been there.'" <sup>18</sup>

Equally unconcerned over the welfare of the swans were settlers

<sup>18</sup> Giacomo C. Beltrami, *A Pilgrimage in Europe and America, Leading to the Discovery of the Sources of the Mississippi and Bloody River*, 2:314, 315 (London, 1828).

who established homes near Heron Lake in Jackson County. An old Heron Lake resident, who had lived there since the 1850's, more than half a century later told Dr. Roberts that years before "Swans used to breed there in fair numbers and that men from the east came to the lake, rounded up the cygnets in the open water before they could fly, and shipped them to eastern parts." Minnesota's last breeding record for the trumpeter swan was made in Meeker County only fifty miles west of the Twin Cities in 1884 or 1885.<sup>19</sup>

The trumpeter swan has been gradually pushed westward by agricultural activity, swamp drainage, and shooting, until now not more than four hundred of the species remain in Yellowstone National Park and a few local areas lying to the north in Montana, Idaho, and British Columbia. The bird has been described by many as having a wild and wary nature which shuns contact with civilization, but recent reports suggest that this may not be the case today. During a search for the nesting grounds of the whooping crane in 1947, Dr. Olin S. Pettingill encountered numerous trumpeter swans nesting in comparatively small ponds fairly close to farms.<sup>20</sup> This being the case, there may still be hope that with strict and effective protection this waterfowl can be brought back to at least some of its former ranges. It is even within the realm of possibility that the bird could return to parts of Minnesota.

Oddly enough, no other species of Minnesota waterfowl is at present even remotely threatened with extinction. As a group, of course, their populations are considerably below their probable numbers of a century ago, although no one knows how many existed then. With such a far-wandering group of species, population estimates must be made on a continental, rather than a state basis. The United States Fish and Wildlife Service made an estimate of a hundred and fifty million birds in North America in 1900. The estimate dropped to from twenty-five to thirty million during the drought of the 1930's, but in 1943 it had returned to roughly a

<sup>19</sup> Thomas S. Roberts, *The Birds of Minnesota*, 1:206 (Minneapolis, 1936).

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Dr. Pettingill of Carleton College, Northfield, April 23, 1949.

hundred and twenty-five million, and in 1947 it dropped again to about sixty million. These national figures give an approximate idea of the fluctuations of the number of waterfowl in Minnesota, since this state's populations roughly parallel the national figures. As to breeding populations within the state, they have undoubtedly dropped considerably in the past century. Anything approaching an accurate breeding census of Minnesota is still to be made. Even one of the latest techniques—that of aerial sampling surveys, carried on by Minnesota conservation department biologists—have shown such wide variations in results that Minnesota's nesting duck populations are still only approximately known.

Considering the fact that in 1850 Minnesota Territory had a human population of but 6,077 in an area far larger than the present state, it is obvious that the hunting pressure in the region was almost negligible. The opening of western Minnesota to settlement after the Indian treaties of 1851 and 1855 caused the population suddenly to skyrocket, and by 1880 nearly half as many hunters ranged the duck marshes as do today. In 1945 approximately 130,000 people hunted waterfowl in Minnesota.<sup>21</sup> Thus, for three-quarters of a century, Minnesota's waterfowl have been withstanding a really terrible pounding, particularly during the twenty years prior to 1900, when market hunting and spring shooting were still legal. In earlier days hunting pressure was very spotty, as a result of poor transportation; consequently, comparatively undisturbed nesting and breeding areas for waterfowl were numerous. Today an excellent road system and automobiles make nearly every spot in the state accessible, and the harvest of between two and three million birds annually has reached, and sometimes passed, the annual increase. When that crucial point is reached, a rapidly snowballing decrease is sure to follow. Thus, even though no Minnesota species of duck or goose is threatened now with extermination, it must be remembered that the potential hunting take of the present-day army of hunters is truly enormous. Consequently, extreme care must be exercised in setting up hunting

<sup>21</sup> Paul R. Highby, "Hunter's Bag for 1945," in *Conservation Volunteer*, vol. 9, no. 53, p. 17 (July-August, 1946).

regulations, since overshooting by this army for only a couple of seasons might plunge many species down to the verge of, if not actually into, extinction. When spirited arguments are raging over whether or not to allow a few more birds to be taken per hunter per season, remember this danger, and if in doubt put the weight of your opinion in favor of the hard-pressed waterfowl.

The upland game birds are the subject of a thrilling chapter in the story of hunting in Minnesota, with the passenger pigeon and the prairie chicken as the principal actors. Numerous explorers, from Father Louis Hennepin in 1680 to Louis Agassiz in 1849, saw hordes of passenger pigeons along the Canadian border, while La Vérendrye, Carver, Keating, Schoolcraft, and others reported them during the intervening years in central, southern, and western Minnesota. The number of pigeons varied greatly from year to year, but large nestings occurred in some years well up into the latter half of the last century. The astounding numbers of these birds, mounting into the millions, and the tremendous destruction they met with are familiar to most people today. Local newspapers referred to huge nestings near Rochester, Mankato, Chatfield, St. Charles, Wabasha, Hastings, Faribault, Moorhead, and Pillsbury. That of 1882 at Pillsbury, north of St. Cloud in Todd County, apparently was the last big nesting in the state. Although these "roosts," as they were called, did not approach in size those in Michigan and Wisconsin, they often covered areas of several square miles. After 1882 only small nestings occurred, and the last authentic Minnesota nest apparently was one found near Minneapolis in 1895.<sup>22</sup> The last surviving passenger pigeon died in the Cincinnati Zoo in 1914.

The case of the passenger pigeon is a strange one. The tremendous flocks were very destructive to crops, and in their original numbers and with their flocking habit, these birds could not be tolerated in agricultural areas. Minnesota residents as a whole showed little concern for the welfare of the passenger pigeon. After 1877 laws protected them during the nesting season in two counties,

<sup>22</sup> Swanson, "Conservation of Minnesota Game," 142-148; Roberts, *Birds of Minnesota*, 1:584.

Olmsted and Dodge, but it was legal to snare or net them until 1891. This was only four years before the last authentic nesting record for the state was made. The reason for the complete disappearance of the species after it was reduced beyond certain limits remains a mystery. It may be that the passenger pigeon was one of the species of birds that remain in breeding condition for only short periods. To ensure successful nesting, it is to the advantage of these species to nest in colonies, where the maximum opportunity is afforded for the mating of breeding males with females also in breeding condition. When the population of a colony dwindles below a certain minimum number, too few successful nestings occur to perpetuate it and it gradually dies out. This may explain the passenger pigeon's failure to survive after being reduced below a critical minimum for the species.

It is remarkable that the mourning dove, a bird superficially similar to the passenger pigeon, should have such a different history. The dove is really a smaller relative of the passenger pigeon, and frequently in recent years large and brilliant male doves have been mistaken for the extinct pigeons. The dove, however, never tended to flock in enormous swarms, as did its larger relative, and it has always nested in scattered pairs instead of in large rookeries. Then, too, it lays two eggs instead of one, as did the pigeon. Early accounts rarely mentioned the mourning dove. Dr. Roberts, however, finds that "the Mourning Dove is one of the few birds that have increased greatly in numbers in recent years. It was always common but it is now abundant and getting more so each year. . . . Civilization suits it, as food of the kind it wants becomes more plentiful."<sup>28</sup> For some years the dove was hunted in a limited way in Minnesota, but the state legislature removed it from the game bird list in 1947, and there now is a chance that this bird may nest in shade trees and shrubs even more commonly than it has in the past.

It will be a surprise to many people to learn that originally the prairie chicken was not a Minnesota resident. Hennepin, the Sieur Du Lhut, and Carver did not record this bird in the area in the

<sup>28</sup> Roberts, *Birds of Minnesota*, 1: 574.

seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The resident prairie grouse of that time was the sharp-tailed grouse. One observant naturalist "who lived at the mouth of the Minnesota River long before St. Paul was settled, states that formerly the Sharp-tailed Grouse was the prevailing, if not the only, species there, and that it has been replaced by *T. cupido* [*the prairie chicken*] within his own memory."<sup>24</sup> The bird was well established in southeastern Minnesota by 1850, and it increased rapidly as it followed the settlers in their westward migration across Minnesota after that date. Early primitive farming operations favored its increase, and by the 1870's tremendous populations had sprung up over the prairie parts of western Minnesota. Then there were gala times in the fall, when specially equipped railroad cars were sidetracked in "chicken country" to serve as headquarters for wealthy hunters. By 1881 the bird had spread northward across the state to the Manitoba line.<sup>25</sup> As the prairie chicken increased in numbers, the sharptail moved back into the brushier areas. The prairie chicken remained abundant until heavy shooting, coupled with cleaner, more intensive agriculture, started it on the downward path in the early 1900's. The introduction of the ring-necked pheasant also probably affected the prairie chicken population. Several years now have elapsed since an open hunting season has been allowed on these birds.

The history of the bobwhite quail almost parallels that of the prairie chicken in Minnesota. The quail was not present originally; it came in with early agriculture; and it thrived in brushy areas until intensive cultivation and hunting cut it down. It never was as hardy as the prairie chicken, however, and its numbers never equalled those of the latter bird. Nevertheless, quail shooting was a thriving sport for some time about the turn of the century.

The cyclic ups and downs in the abundance of the ruffed grouse or partridge have been mentioned in many reports left by Minnesota pioneers. The original numbers can only be guessed. The much greater extent of the state's early forest area and the fact that orig-

<sup>24</sup> Elliott Coues, *Birds of the North-West*, 410 (United States Geological Survey of the Territories, *Miscellaneous Publications*, no. 3 — Washington, 1874).

<sup>25</sup> Mary W. Berthel, "Hunting in Minnesota in the Seventies," in *Minnesota History*, 16:269-271 (September, 1935); Roberts, *Birds of Minnesota*, 1:386.

inally the bird thrived both in the southern hardwoods and in the edges of coniferous forests suggest a large total population. Even today this wonderful game species thrives periodically. With maintained refuge areas and restricted shooting regulations, it shows promise of remaining in numbers great enough to permit an occasional open season for many years to come.

Whereas the ruffed grouse thrived best in woods of the more open types, the spruce grouse or fool hen preferred the denser coniferous forests. This bird was never hunted extensively. Although it was common early in the past century, its numbers have been greatly reduced because its habitat has been drastically limited as the result of lumbering and fires, and because people have taken advantage of its unsuspecting nature. Today only small local groups remain. The species, however, is not considered seriously endangered at present. Strict protection and the retaining of large wilderness refuge areas in the North can maintain this bird in the face of man's rapidly expanding activities.

The success as a game bird of the ring-necked pheasant is well known today. This bird, which was introduced in the state, was probably first brought in about 1905. It did not, however, take hold until about 1917, and the first open hunting season was in 1924. Several past seasons have seen over a million pheasants taken annually in Minnesota. The Hungarian partridge, which was first introduced in 1913, has established itself successfully in prairie areas. Although it has provided some good upland hunting, it has not shown the pheasant's adaptability to present land uses.

While the native species of the prairies have not been able to survive the tremendous pressure of the present-day hunting army, the pheasant and the Hungarian partridge, both of which have been introduced, appear to be better able to take the brunt of this pressure. No species has been found that is suitable for introduction in the forest habitat, and the old favorite—the ruffed grouse—is still at intervals affording some excellent hunting. But the grouse has never sustained the continued high populations in the forests that the pheasant seems able to maintain in open country.

Another group which formerly provided sporting shooting and which today is almost forgotten as game is composed of the shore or snipe-like birds. Golden and black-bellied plover, curlews, and upland plover all provided choice prairie shooting, while the woodcock in the brushland and the jacksnipe or Wilson's snipe and other smaller "peeps" in the open marshes were considered very sporty game. One of the most hunted shore birds was the golden plover, which came in long, wavering lines to feed where the grass was short. A common practice was to ride in a horse-drawn vehicle to within range of the birds, which shied away from a hunter on foot. A shotgun blast would bring down some birds; then the flock would invariably circle overhead to investigate the fate of their fallen companions, and more could be mowed down. The process was repeated until a large part of the flock was taken. John J. Audubon accompanied an army of market hunters who were lying in wait near New Orleans for flocks of golden plover, moving in from migration flights across the Gulf of Mexico. He estimated that "a man near the place where I was seated had killed sixty-three dozens. I calculated the number [of hunters] in the field at two hundred, and supposing each to have shot twenty dozen, forty-eight thousand Golden Plovers would have fallen that day."<sup>26</sup> When such confiding birds are thrown in the path of ruthless slaughterers, it is not surprising that their numbers dwindled rapidly. The golden plover was decidedly spotty in its occurrence in Minnesota by the early 1900's, with only a rare migration of any size. Today their numbers vary from season to season, the variation usually ranging from none at all to a few flocks.

Another prairie shore bird was the Eskimo curlew—the one species of the group that possibly has become extinct. In the early 1800's it passed through Minnesota in abundance, but according to Dr. Roberts it "disappeared as rapidly during the latter part of the last century as did the Passenger Pigeon and the Golden Plover, and for the same reason—slaughter in immense numbers by market hunters and thoughtless sportsmen." The United States Biological

<sup>26</sup> John J. Audubon, *Ornithological Biographies*, 3:624 (Philadelphia, 1832).



Survey has two somewhat questionable Minnesota records for 1884 and 1885, received from an old market hunter, Thomas Miller of Heron Lake. Evidently, these are the last records of the species' occurrence in Minnesota.<sup>27</sup>

The long-billed curlew once nested commonly on the western prairies of Minnesota, but records became scanty as early as the end of the last century. A specimen recently acquired by the Minnesota Museum of Natural History probably was the last to be taken in eastern Minnesota. It was shot in 1895 near Moore Lake north of Columbia Heights in Anoka County. The disappearance of the species from some parts of Minnesota was beyond doubt caused by man's destruction, exactly as was that of the Eskimo curlew. In this case, however, the birds still breed in some numbers in certain parts of the western prairies. The re-establishment of this easily shot species on relatively large prairie tracts in Minnesota seems not beyond the realm of possibility, if and when people in general become more conscientious law observers.

Another shore bird that was heavily shot in the early days was the upland plover. Dr. Roberts tells of going out in the 1870's to shoot upland plover on the Shoreham Flats, a prairie in the present city of Minneapolis extending from what is now Central Avenue westward to the Mississippi River and occupied by the Shoreham Railroad Shops and other industrial plants.<sup>28</sup> This bird was at a very low ebb in the early 1900's, but in the last decade or so it has shown signs of coming back, and a few scattered breeding pairs may again be found on sandy prairies even about the Twin Cities.

Woodcock shooting in Minnesota was good in frontier days, though the sport was not followed by large numbers of hunters. According to the *Hastings Gazette* of September 15, 1883, two men shot fifty-five woodcock in one day near that town. Because only a few hunters are interested in this little-known game bird, it still seems to survive an annual open season, in spite of relatively small

<sup>27</sup> Roberts, *Birds of Minnesota*, 1:486. So far as is known, not a single Minnesota specimen of the Eskimo curlew is preserved. The Minnesota Museum of Natural History has a specimen taken in 1903 in Fond du Lac County, Wisconsin.

<sup>28</sup> Roberts, *Birds of Minnesota*, 1:487.

total populations. In 1947 fewer than two thousand birds were reported taken in the state.<sup>29</sup>

Because of its erratic flight, the hunting of jacksnipe has been a popular sport for many years. There is evidence that in 1869 a hunter shot eighty-one jacksnipe in a few hours near St. Paul.<sup>30</sup> As late as 1920, according to the conservation department's records, a kill of twenty-five thousand snipe was reported. Since then a definite decrease in the bird's numbers has resulted in many closed seasons. The highly secretive nature of these birds, the difficulty of shooting them, and their widespread breeding range make it unlikely that they will become extinct. An occasional open hunting season probably can be expected for future years.

From this glance over the shore birds' records, it is obvious that this easily shot group has suffered badly from slaughters of the past century — perhaps more severely than any other group of birds. One species has become extinct, another is no longer found in Minnesota, and all but two have been removed from the game list. Most of these birds are global in their annual travels, and their conservation is an international problem. Until not only our own sportsmen, but our Latin-American neighbors, become conservation conscious, there is little hope for any increase in shore bird populations. A decline in most of them can be expected in the immediate future.

Among the prairie birds considered as game a century ago were the cranes. The large white whooping crane formerly nested over the prairie parts of the state, but it is now fighting what may be its last great battle to stave off extermination. Fewer than thirty individuals now exist. It is encouraging that a few young appear to be reared each year, and there is some scant hope that the whooping crane may stage a comeback. Its struggle, unlike that of the Eskimo curlew, has not been without some concern and help from man. Under strict legal protection, these birds winter on the Aransas Refuge in Texas. Considerable popular interest has centered about the cranes'

<sup>29</sup> These figures are from the unpublished files of the Minnesota Pittman-Robertson Wildlife Survey and Investigation, in the 1948 archives of the Minnesota department of conservation.

<sup>30</sup> *Daily Pioneer* (St. Paul), September 2, 1869.

northward migration; and an unsuccessful search for its unknown Canadian nesting grounds was made by airplane during the summers of 1947 and 1948 by the National Audubon Society and the United States Fish and Wildlife Service. Even if it survives, this big crane, with its apparent aversion for human disturbance, probably will never again be widespread in the agricultural Middle West, but it may be maintained in restricted numbers on large uninhabited refuges adapted to its breeding and wintering habits.<sup>31</sup>

The sand-hill crane, although faring far better than the whooping crane, has been cut down greatly in numbers. Flocks of several hundred migrants still occasionally pass through western Minnesota and a few pairs nest in the state. Popular concern over this bird's welfare definitely may save the species, but it will never again be sufficiently numerous to be considered a game bird.

With all the persecution that birds of prey have encountered during the past century, it seems strange that only one species, the swallow-tailed kite, has been completely eliminated from the fauna of the state. This gorgeous hawk has a graceful sweeping flight that has been compared to that of an enormous barn swallow. In comparatively recent years this most beautiful of all Minnesota hawks has vanished into the recorded past. Dr. Roberts relates that in his boyhood he often saw several kites in a single day near Minneapolis.<sup>32</sup> Feeding as it did on snakes, frogs, and insects, the bird certainly did not merit persecution. Whatever the cause, within the past thirty years its range has shrunk from a large part of the Middle West and South to a section of southern Florida and a few local areas along the Gulf of Mexico in Louisiana and Texas. Even the fact that by nature this bird seems to shun human disturbance of its habitat does not adequately explain its sudden removal from so large a part of its former range in such a short period of time. That

<sup>31</sup> The whooping crane in the Pipestone prairie exhibit of the Minnesota Museum of Natural History is the last individual of the species known to have visited the state. It was taken in 1917 in Roseau County near Lake of the Woods, where it was "shot by curious hunters who wondered what it was." Such a statement appears all too often on the labels of last specimens of a species.

<sup>32</sup> Roberts, *Birds of Minnesota*, 300. An exhibit in the lobby of the Minnesota Museum of Natural History strikingly represents the swallow-tailed kite. The museum has three authentic Minnesota specimens of this kite. The last was taken in 1914. The last to be sighted in the field in Minnesota was seen in 1923.

it is gone and that its disappearance has left our bird fauna definitely less interesting are facts that remain for us to ponder.

The populations of a number of smaller birds have been altered by man's intrusion, but only one group appears to be nearing extirpation in Minnesota. It includes the prairie-inhabiting longspurs and the lark bunting. These species, which apparently never were abundant Minnesota residents, definitely preferred the original, unbroken prairie for nesting. A few lark buntings and chestnut-collared longspurs still reappear every few years to nest here and there on the prairies. The McCown's longspur has not been found nesting in the state since the beginning of the century, and it must be considered to have disappeared as a breeding Minnesota bird. Compensating to some extent for these losses in small birds are definite increases of such birds as Brewer's blackbird, the western kingbird, the cardinal, the cerulean warbler, and, of course, the not too desirable English sparrow and the European starling.

This brief survey of wild-life fortunes through the past century indicates that the individual hunter-sportsman's heyday definitely has passed. The total take of game may still be large, but ever-increasing armies of hunters operating over an ever-dwindling game range point strongly toward more and more limitations on the individual's game take. The biologist and the naturalist, on the other hand, have reason to be optimistic over at least the survival of our wild life, since so few species have actually disappeared from our fauna. And it is in this fact that the hunters, as well as all other outdoor enthusiasts, can see a bright spot in this otherwise gloomy wild-life picture. The tenacity of our wild life has saved remnants of nearly all species, despite the persecutions of the past century. Thus the seed stock needed to promise success for well-conceived game management programs actually has been preserved.

This seed stock is a highly expendable natural resource. Minnesotans of the present day should be educated to a feeling of stewardship in relation to this resource, for it played a glamorous role in the state's romantic past, and it can and should figure largely in affording a fuller and richer life for those who build Minnesota's future.



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