THE CHIEF PROBLEM OF BIRD CONSERVATION IN EUROPE

BY NORBERT AND JEAN STOLL

The information contained in the following article will probably be familiar to our readers at home. It was written for **Audubon Magazine**, New York, with the intention to stir American Public Opinon - to a compassionate consideration of the problems of European Movements for the Conservation of animal wild life in general, and of bird preservation in particular.

The Editors.

When one of the authors spent last Christmas with a family in Binghamton, N. Y., he was surprised to see the variety of birds that came to the feeding place of his hosts, outside their home in Lincoln Avenue. What impressed him even more, was the enthusiasm and care with which each family in that town - and elsewhere in the States - provided food and shelter for birds during the cold season.

The love of animals as Americans possess and profess it, is something which puzzles Continental Europeans anew each time they are confronted with it. In 1944, a convoy of heavy U. S. Army tanks which stopped in the main street of Luxembourg city, in order to allow a stray mongrel dog to finish some private business in the middle of the street, non-plussed natives to such a degree, that the newspapers carried the incident in their main columns, together with long comments on the goodheartedness of G. I. Joes.

It might perhaps be just as hard to understand for Americans, if we say that of all the obstacles with which European

movements for the protection of birds have to cope, human cruelty, or at least thoughtlessness, is the biggest. In fact; the disappearance of many species and the decimation of others must be attributed first to persecution by men and domestic animals, and only in the second instance to such factors as diminishing nesting areas, which in turn are due to a more extensive exploitation of available farming space, the cutting down of hedges, the systematical canalisation of waterstreams and so forth.

The European Leagues for the protection of birds are indeed unpopular in more than one quarter. When the first movement was started in 1868, the mere idea of putting up a fight for a legislation which would end the unlimited killing of birds each year, was a daring challenge to the numerous and often powerful groups which were interested in the continuation of the old policy, that is of no policy except that of indiscriminate killing and capturing: the bird peddlers who caught countless finches, robins, and nightingales each year, to supply the pet shops, the sporting gentlemen who did not want to go without the dubious pleasure of shooting a lark out of a blue spring sky, the gourmets whose spoiled palate would be satisfied with nothing less than the tender meat of thrush and blackbirds, - and the often backward and superstitious peasants who saw in the buzzard, as in many other rapacious birds, their worst enemies.

If the leagues made some headway at the beginning of the 20th century, the merit of this goes to the few idealistic men and women who pooled their forces on an international level, and whose tireless efforts brought forth the International Conferences on the Protection of Birds, in Paris, in 1895, 1900 and 1902. This last conference drafted a covenant for the protection of bird life, to which France, Belgium, Luxembourg and Germany adhered. A special clause of the Treaty of Versailles later on obliged each Party to the Treaty to implement the Paris Covenant by a national legislation.

It was however not until after the International Conference in Luxembourg in 1925, that those provisions began to come into effect. Up to that date, the catching of birds by wire slings had

not been entirely prohibited, but made subject to supervision by the governments only.

A certain number of permits for the catching of birds was issued by the national governments each year: in Luxembourg, a country the size of the State of Rhode Island, the number of permits varied between 100 and 130; in Belgium 2.255 permits were issued in 1924. This does not give an accurate picture at all, because there is no way of determining the number of poachers; it will probably be tenfold the number of official permit holders. The number of thrush (Turdus pilaris L.) killed in the Grand-Duchy of Luxembourg in 1924, has been estimated at 80,000.

By 1928, most of the European Leagues had obtained in their respective countries that a legislation was brought into force, which prohibited the killing of all birds which were «of use to agriculture and forestry». While these laws brought forth some changes (they prohibited the use of the pole trap for rapacious birds, for instance) it soon became clear that they were full of imperfections. The legislators, while giving satisfaction to one part of their electorate by passing these laws, had taken pains not to annoy the other, and the phrase «of use to agriculture and forestry» turned out to be the laws' Achilles Heel. No legislation had undertaken to define which birds were useful to agriculture and to forestry, and which were not, or whether they were so at all times and instances. We still remember the raging controversies about the utility of cuckoos. This bird, which lays its eggs into the nests of other species and whose young one throws out the legitimate children of his foster parents, was long believed to be a pest, until foresters found out that the grown bird's diet consists of a hairy kind of larvae which has for years on end been a threat to our forests, and which no other European bird will eat. A similar argument would turn up every time a violation of the protective law was brought into court, with the difference only, that the counsel for the defense would try to demonstrate that the utility of the killed bird had not yet been scientifically proved; and the result usually was acquittance on grounds of insufficient evidence.

Confronted with this new situation, the leagues changed their policy insofar as they did not only continue to press for a more efficient legislation, but that they started educational campaigns consisting of press articles, popular lectures, exhibitions, Natural Science Clubs, and finally managed to introduce a bird protection programme in the syllabus of elementary schools. Much of the progress thus achieved is due to the enthusiastic and zealous co-operation of the teaching personal, a great majority of which were active and fighting members of the leagues. These campaigns had a very valuable result. Public opinion was eventually interested in, if not altogether converted to, the idea of bird protection and conservation. The half-hearted laws were finally replaced by more strict ones. Today, no more distinction is made between useful birds and others, in Belgium and Luxembourg. If a certain species threatens to become a plague or a menace to forestry or agriculture, its reproduction is controlled by the Government. Likewise, the Ministries of Agriculture and Forestry are taking steps to prevent the complete disappearance of various species, not only by prohibiting their destruction, but also by creating sanctuaries, new nesting areas, feeding places, and by providing new covering undergrowth for low flying birds, etc. Feeding by the population, during the cold season, is now also done on a larger scale than ten years ago. Most species of birds have increased considerably, especially the almost extinguished rapacious birds.

Yet, while a small minority persists in killing and capturing birds, and while they are left to carry out their butcher's task by a community slightly apathic to these goings on, the whole problem remains unsolved. One good marksman can kill a great many birds while he has ammunition, and one poacher can easily put from two to three dozen slings one night. But it is not so much to these surreptious violators that the dubious credit for decimating our bird world goes. There exist movements in Europe today, and very often they are Sporting Clubs which have written «Fair Play» on their banner, which organise anti-protection campaigns and go to great troubles and expense, to prove that they mean business. One such organisation, in Switzerland,

recently planned a big scale exhibition of how to capture birds by nets, after blinding them with reflecting mirrors. The Swiss Federal Government intervened and prohibited the exhibition. The organisation thereafter transferred its annual conference to neighbouring Italy, and there, at a so-called protest meeting, held a dinner during which over 3.000 small birds, finches, larks and thrush, were consumed!

In one of its recent editions, (at the time of writing this. - the authors) a well known Belgian magazine on ornithology printed a veritable guide for those who wanted to catch nightingales. We quote: «It need not be said, that the cage must be clean, well aired and in general good order, to receive its guest. If you have been lucky, and got a bird, (with mirror and net - the authors) put some twenty meal worms in the crip. The worms must be alive. — If, after one, or two hours at the most, the bird has not eaten yet and is still bumping its head against the bars of the cage, you better relieve him and try to get another one.» - Just how many birds are still thus being deprived of their freedom, and in the course of the procedure tortured, mutilated or even killed, is anyone's guess. We fear the annual number will be a five figure unit.

The new laws had scarcely been in effect, when campaigns were launched from interested quarters to abolish, or at least to cripple them. Two years after the new legislation had been passed in Luxembourg, a Sporting Club managed to have a considerable number of birds taken off the «protected» list again. Thus the thrush, whose numbers had considerably increased during the period of complete protection, has again become a target for the shotguns of sportsmen. Whether these men are the sports they like to think they are, is another question, on which our opinion certainly greatly differs from theirs.

How many more birds will share the fate of the thrush in European countries, during the years to come, will depend on the fighting stamina of the leagues. They are fighting a lone fight against greed, self-interest, indifference, superstition. Europe has more pressing problems to think of now than bird protection. This explains why interest of public opinion has diminished. We

are getting a lot of help from America today. Without wanting to sound pathetic, we think it might be worth a try if those who take care of the conservation of animal wild life in the States, would give us the moral support we need above all, if we are to succeed. Maybe that in addition to supply us with canned foods, silk ties and Bebop, and a lot of things for which Europe is most certainly grateful, our Americain friends could help us to instill into our fellows the love of our small brothers which is experiencing such a bloom in the New World.