6-1-1924

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How to Study the Western Birds

Radio Talks Over KGW

By GRACE MCCORMAC FRENCH, June, 1924

It has been taken for granted that a bird lecture should be accompanied by pictures but radio has developed a new method of presenting the subject. I have heard several of these radio bird lectures and will follow their plan of trying to arouse the curiosity of the audience so you will go to books and the open world and find out the fascination of this study for yourself.

There is a fraternal feeling among those who study the wild birds and a willingness to help beginners. It was an article in the National Geographic Magazine that first awakened my desire to know the names of the birds.

I followed the advice of the writer, Frank M. Chapman, by taking my opera glasses, pencil and note book when I started for a walk. A short distance from the house I found fourteen birds that I had never seen before. I wrote down their size and color, but was bewildered by seeing so many strange birds. I still have that note book to laugh over, and in all the years that I have observed the birds, that morning's experience has been repeated but twice, for what I had met on my first bird walk was a migration wave of many species of warblers.

Our western states are so thinly settled that the sale for a book describing the birds of Oregon alone would be very limited, so the authors made their books serviceable for the whole Pacific coast.

The first book upon "Birds of Oregon and Washington," (now out of print) by William Rogers Lord, has long been used in the schools. This quotation from the book expresses perfectly the idea I wish to present: "Certainly all education should tend to ennoble character and furnish the sources of the highest happiness. If this be the end sought, then a sympathetic and aesthetic interest is the thing we must seek to get and give, in our pursuit of knowledge of birds."

"Indeed, it is a pursuit fairly dangerous to our own possible enjoyment, when we set out with opera-glass and note-book to name and catalog the birds, lest we shall be less satisfied to listen with exquisite satisfaction to some superb singer, than to get his description in our note-books. It is not a tithe as important that we should know the name and habits of a bird as that we should answer his ecstasy of song with ecstasy of delight."

As in any other study, one must go through an apprenticeship.

To gain the ideal, opera-glass and note-book are necessary equipment for accurate observations. When one tries to remember descriptions it is very confusing later, in looking them up in books, so the size, color and distinctive markings of a bird must be recorded when that bird is seen.

The names of our western birds have historic significance. Lewis and Clark each gave their name to a bird, as did many early ornithologists who followed in the trail of the explorers through the northwest.

Beginners in the study of birds are much like the owners of a new radio set, they often report the impossible. One of the first things to do is to learn the list of birds that are found in your vicinity, and to become familiar with their pictures; then it will give you a real thrill to recognize the birds out of doors.

When people say that there aren't any brilliantly colored birds in the west like there are in the east it is because they remember the birds of their childhood and in their later years just don't go where the birds are. Name your gayest songsters in the east and we can match you with one just as lovely, if not more so in the west; be it Tangier, Finch, Grosbeak or Warbler.

The average person cares nothing at all about museum specimens and Latin names, but he does want to be able to recognize the birds and to learn their calls and songs. The books by William L. Finley and Willard Ayres Elliot will give you the information you seek about Oregon birds, in a most entertaining way.

If you live beyond the territory covered by the Portland Library association you may borrow practically all of the bird books in the circulation department of the State Library at Salem, Oregon. In mailing your request have your banker or member of the school board sign your application card. The only expense attached is that you will be required to pay postage both ways on the books. No matter how isolated your home may be the books in the state library are within your reach if you live in Oregon.

If farm life and birds just bore you, why—tune your set to another station, for this talk will not please you and no doubt at the close you would feel like Bliss Carman when he wrote this verse:

"I love the birds and bees And the little lambs that frolic But there's such a thing as being A trifle too bucolic."

But if you love the country and the songs of the birds perhaps I can give you a picture of the quiet beauty of the Willamette valley—its broad fields and rippling streams, the fir timber and orchard-covered hillsides and the lanes bordered by rail fences, overgrown with vines and trees and wild rose bushes, weighted with fragrant blossoms, this lovely June day. It is in such surroundings that I learned to know the birds. The song of the russet-backed thrush at twilight; all the bird voices through the day and the song of the white-crowned sparrow coming sweetly, clear from the hedgerow all through the night. A little book by Agnes Ruth Lockhart "A Legend of the Coos," tells an Indian legend about the white-crowned sparrow's first appearance in Oregon.

The group of naturalists who live in Portland have a national reputation. The photographs of birds by Herman T. Bohiman and William L. Finley have appeared for years in the best magazines and the drawings and paintings of R. Bruce Horsfall illustrate many of the best bird books.

The writings of Mr. and Mrs. Finley often appear in nature magazines and their book "Little Blue Bird," would teach any child to love the birds. The best book for beginners is a recent publication by Willard Ayres Elliot entitled "Birds of the Pacific Coast." The size is convenient to slip in a pocket, and its colored pictures by R. Bruce Horsfall will soon teach you the common birds.

Mr. Elliot is an authority on western birds and his book is the result of many years of study.

It would be well for you to write down the titles of the books in which you are interested, as I mention them, for they are very similar and difficult to remember exactly right; then when you go to a library, or book store you will get what you want without confusion. Since my knowledge about Oregon birds has
been gained entirely by reading and observation I will act as guide along the trail that I have made through the endless amount of literature that has been written about birds.

Often a bird will have a local or common name that does not appear in a book. This is an experience that I had. We were at the coast some years ago and saw many shags coming and going from Three Arch Rocks. I had my reference books with me and looked through them all, but did not find the word Shag. When we arrived home the dictionary told me that a shag is one species of a corncrane.

The voices of the night birds seem strangely mysterious. One moonlight night in September our guests, Mr. and Mrs. Vernon Bailey, picked out the voices of five species of owls that were screeching and hooting in the woods. Mrs. Bailey is Florence Merriam Bailey, the author of "The Handbook of Birds of the Western United States," which is used as a college text book. She has also told about some of her experiences with birds in a pleasing story form. "A-birding on a Broncho" is especially good and teaches a beginner just how and what to observe and record in a note-book, for future reference and comparison.

If you are planning to visit the National Parks this summer by all means write to the government printing office at Washington and get a copy of the bulletin describing the animals and birds of the park you intend to visit. The bulletin about the animals and birds of Glacier National Park was written by Mr. and Mrs. Vernon Bailey and is a book half an inch thick with many illustrations and would be a valuable addition to any library whose owner is interested in western birds.

The government bulletins about birds are well illustrated and very interesting. Some have colored illustrations.

If you wish to keep posted on bird life in Oregon get a scrap book and clip the editorials, letters and stories that appear frequently in the papers.

Mary E. Raker is a young ornithologist who has contributed many stories to the Sunday Oregonian.

After an absence of some years I visited my old home on Coos Bay. Of course many changes had taken place in that time and there was much for me to see and do, but wherever I went I was seeing and hearing the birds. It was during that absence of ten years that I had studied about the birds, so my insight into nature's secrets kept adding new delights to old familiar places.

Of course as a child I knew the sea gulls along the harbors, the blackbirds and meadowlarks on the marshes and the flashing wing drills of the snipe on the mud flats but, I did not know the song of the thrush in the woods or the bell-like notes of the wren-tit in the brush on the hill-side. I once heard a story which illustrates this point: Mr. Vernon Kellogg, the naturalist, and a friend were walking on one of the busiest streets of Chicago when he stopped and said, "I hear a cricket." Naturally his friend laughed at such an idea but on investigating the cricket was found under a loose brick near the basement window of a tanyke, where the escaping steam from the heated room kept the insect warm. Mr. Kellogg then told his friend that he had been too close to the person's ears and he attempted to sound that their minds are trained to hear, and illustrated this by throwing a handful of pennies on the pavement in a dense crowd. They heard the clink of the money and there was a pause in the rush for a train.

A young girl was invited to a luncheon at the White House and was prepared to listen to discussion of the affairs of the nation. She was seated near John Burroughs and he and Theodore Roosevelt carried on a heated argument throughout the meal, as to the exact number of syllables in a certain bird song; so you see this idea of bird study appeals to the greatest in the land.

Did you ever notice that the topmost spire on the fir trees along the highways are so often bent over? The reason is that many large birds, hawks, owls, and crows use these trees as resting places and lookouts.

The interpretation of all such small signs adds significance to commonplace surroundings.

If you are the driver, keep your eyes on the road; but if you are a passenger on your next auto ride through the country keep your eyes wide open and watch for glimpses of the birds; the dashing flight of the pheasant; a sparrow hawk poised on quivering wings above the fields; or a company of gay little goldfinches singing as they pass in wave-like flight. In retrospect these lovely sights will give you pleasure for many days.

My longest list of birds was made one day in May when I saw and heard 63 different species of birds in a two-hours walk on our farm.

Do you really hear wild birds sing? Does that seem a strange thing to ask? This experience prompted me to put the question. A friend of mine and I sat on the porch one summer evening when a group of the neighbors children who were crossing the clover field began to sing. These children attended a parish school and were singing the music of their church.

My friend who was a trained musician was charmed by the sweet, clear, childish voices singing such music. When I suggested that she listen to the accompaniment she asked what I meant; yet dozens of birds were singing all around us; but she was not conscious of it until her attention was called to the bird voices. So I ask you again, would you have heard the birds and would you have known what birds they were?

The reaction of various people to the songs and calls of wild birds is surprising and often amusing. Different temperaments interpret these bird notes to suit their moods. In one instance a city woman who was visiting on a farm, thought the cheery call of Bob White was melancholy, and it "got on her nerves" to such an extent that she stayed but one day.

Many of us were greatly amused when we read that the residents of Lauralhurst objected to the noise made by the water fowl kept on the lakes in the park. No doubt the whistle of the trains and horns, the street cars and other noises of the city, bothered them not at all.

The Oregon Audubon society was organized in 1900 and has accomplished much for the protection of the wild birds in this state. Some of the legislation accomplished through their influence was the adoption of the model bird law in Oregon in 1903 and their successful defense of the measure in 1905. Through their solicitation President Roosevelt created Three Arch Rocks and Malheur Lake bird reservations.

The society is most fortunate in having a strong public opinion in its favor. Its walks and talks are popular, and the weekly lectures, by the best of talent, have been received with much enthusiasm.

The Oregon Audubon society recommends the books in this list:

* Key to North American Birds—Cone; Hand Book of Birds of the Western United States—Bailey; Birds of the Pacific Coast—Eliot; Western Bird Guide—Reed; American Birds—Finley; Oregon Birds—Lord; Bird Study Book—Pearson; Govt. Bulletins Numbers 4, 5, 6, 493, 506, 513, 609, 620, 760.

This quotation from the preface of "American Birds" by William L. Finley describes the book:

"In this book no attempt has been made to include all the different bird families, but a series of representative birds from the humming bird to the eagle has been selected. Each chapter represents a close
and continued study with camera and notebook, at the home of some bird or group of birds, a true life history of each species. It is the bird as a live creature, its real wild personality and character, that I have tried to portray."

Mr. and Mrs. Finley visited us and made a moving picture of a Slender-billed Nuthatch family that lived in one of the birdhouses in the yard. It was a revelation to me to watch these tenacious little birds. The parent birds showed no fear at all and kept on feeding the five little ones no matter where they were placed. After the picture was finished the baby birds were put back in the house and they did not fly for three more days.

The Good Housekeeping magazine has been publishing some splendid bird stories; one by Gene Stratton Porter describes the spring migration flight of thousands of wild geese. I once saw just such a flight.

On April 21, 1921, the geese began to pass over at noon and in the first hour we estimate that 4400 had gone by, and the geese kept coming in undiminished numbers until 5 p. m. It seemed as if all the geese that had wintered in the Sacramento valley were in the procession. This dramatic event occurs about the middle of April every year when the geese fly north over the Willamette valley.

I suggest that you read Homer Davenport's story "Last of the Hutchins Geese." You will find the story in Horner's "History of Oregon."

One morning in May nearly a month after the geese had gone north we found a single Hutchins goose in the yard among the poultry. It was as tame as the chickens and stayed and fed with them all day. When the guinea fowl went to roost in a large cedar tree that night the goose stayed on the ground beneath the tree. It was there at 10 p.m., but in the morning it had disappeared.

On the big rice plantations of the Sacramento valley the water fowl congregate in great numbers in the winter so pens of wild geese, swan and ducks are kept for decoys, and I wondered if the Hutchins goose that visited us could have escaped from one of these pens and was trying to reach the breeding grounds of his clan in the far north. I hope that it found other friends along its way to give it food and a quiet place to rest.

If you live on a farm, have a thought for the birds, and don't destroy all the native, wild, fruit-bearing trees and shrubs and then complain if the birds help themselves to your cultivated crops. In one corner of our orchard is a group of snowberry bushes where the song sparrows live all the year through. I enjoy the beauty of the bushes at all seasons, for at the earliest opening of spring these bushes are among the first to show the faint pale green of their leaves. Later their pale pink blossoms are as pretty as any garden shrub and when all the leaves have fallen their branches droop beneath the weight of waxy snow white berries that many birds eat in winter. If you clear out all of this natural growth the birds must go elsewhere for shelter. When the ground is covered with snow one can trace a covey of Bob White by their tracks as they follow along an old wooden fence overgrown with briars; and if a hawk appears they are near shelter. But the trim modern wire fences furnish no shelter to the game birds.

More and more the improvements of city life are appearing in the country. Many a farmer in the Willamette valley has put up an aerial in his yard and in some cases fir trees one hundred feet high have been used. These high wires attract the swallows and they seem to think the aerial was put there for their especial benefit, when they flock before migrating in the fall. Last October I actually saw the swallows leave; at least the birds that were raised and had lived in the bird-houses in the yard. I was watching a hawk soaring and above the hawk hundreds of swallows were circling when suddenly they all gathered in a flock and started south. The next day no swallows twittered on the wires and I was depressed by sense of coming winter.

The books of Gene Stratton Porter have been a leading factor in creating a national interest in our wild birds.

If hunters and picnickers would read "The Song of the Cardinal," they will see that the owners would get the farmers' point of view towards those who trespass on their property and would understand why the landscape bristles with "No trespass" signs.

Since the automobile has become so common the country road is no more the quiet place it used to be, and the many men who want to hunt are too much with us.

As a matter of fact, I am safe in saying that the majority of farms that are posted with "No Trespass" signs belong to the owners who formerly lived in a city, and they brought the city idea of property rights to the country with them, and insist on applying it to their country acres. They think that the general public has no more right to hunt, pick flowers or camp on their farms without permission than they should have on the few feet of a city lot. In one case where an owner told a hunter that he did not allow shooting on his farm, the stranger replied that he was a 'free-born American citizen and he would go where he pleased.' But he didn't.

This is something for hunters to remember: There are farmers in the valley who will allow shooting on their places if you ask permission so they can tell you where the cattle and horses are grazing, and so you may avoid the danger of shooting their stock.

Many animals have been killed and human lives endangered by careless hunters during the season for shooting upland game birds.

One of the tragic phases in the life of the pheasants and quail is the danger they run of being mauled or killed by farm machinery. Often a mower will strike a pheasant as she sits on her nest, for a pheasant hen will hide instead of flying. In one instance a binder in cutting wheat had the sickle set about eight inches high and thus avoided hitting the bird; and the pheasant hen stayed on the nest while the binder passed over her. It left her nest exposed and a dog frightened her away.

This year I have not heard the drumming of a single Ruffed Grouse. A reliable observer told me this story: He was walking in the woods when he heard a strange noise and silently parting the leaves he saw a Ruffed Grouse and China Pheasant fighting. The grouse won but the strange part was that the grouse fought three pheasants one after the other and came out victorious.

The pheasant will often nest within a short distance of the house. Once I found a nest of a guinea fowl in the brush by the roadside. There were three eggs in it. The next time I looked there were four guinea eggs and a pheasant egg. They laid in the same nest for several days but finally the guinea must have objected for the pheasant left after leaving five eggs.

In another instance I saw where a pheasant laid in a turkey nest.

It may not please you, Mr. Sportsman, but the law and public opinion are on the side of the land owner. Many of the old homesteads in the valley are being sold so it is a good idea to ask permission to hunt even if you have been a welcome guest in other seasons.

Perhaps the farm has changed owners and it might save you the embarrassing situation in which one disqualified gentleman found himself. He had invited some friends for a pheasant hunt at his usual place but was met by a little woman who told the men that no hunting was allowed on the farm. The man replied, "Oh,
that's all right, your husband knows who I am." She at length convinced the men that the farm was to be a game refuge and as they never did any shooting themselves they would not allow any one else to hunt. The state game refuges are going to be a big factor in increasing the number of game birds. I have watched as many as 20 pheasants one after the other leave a field where there was shooting and seek refuge on a protected farm. The birds soon learn where they will be safe.

The following quotation is from the Oregonian for October 18, 1921:

"The opening of the pheasant season Saturday, brought out thousands of hunters. F. M. Brown, Chief Deputy Game Warden, yesterday estimated that 16,000 hunters were in and about the Willamette valley."

This gives some idea of the army of hunters that invade the peaceful country in October.

There are two types of people who are interested in birds: the sportsman who wants the game laws enforced so there will continue to be good shooting, and those who want all birds protected for the love of the birds.

"The Importance of Bird Life," by G. Innes Hartley, discusses birds both wild and domestic with chapters describing the bird's place in nature, relation to agriculture, effect upon the health and works of man, and future chapters discuss game birds and game laws and an explanation of the government policy toward conservation. The book closes with this paragraph:

"Birds have been found to be a national asset. They will therefore be saved. If they are to hold their own and thrive in civilized communities—regions which ordinarily mean death and destruction to wild life of every kind—they certainly will survive in territories inhabited by savage peoples—a thing they have accomplished since immemorial time."

This book also says that the sandhill crane is exterminated in all but six states where it is exceedingly rare. A letter in the Oregonian described the migration flight of thousands of sandhill cranes through Lake county this spring; so protection is giving them a chance to survive. Our bird treaty with Canada declares a closed season for the cranes until 1927.

The latest publication about western birds is "Birds of California," by Dawson. A comprehensive review of this set of four volumes appears in the May-June number of Condor Magazine.

After reading "Our Vanishing Wild Life," by Doctor Hornaday, you will have a clear idea why so many influential people and organizations are working to save our wild birds and animals. Who would think that the growth of the automobile industry in this country would affect the bird life of the Malay Peninsula and yet it has, for in clearing away the jungle to plant rubber trees the birds' nesting places have been destroyed.

One rare bird that I see each spring when it stops a few days to rest on its journey north is the Phalarope. T. Gilbert Pearson describes the habits of the Phalarope in the "Bird Study Book."

"Mrs. Phalarope has no intention of being shut in with her eggs for a month while her mate goes roaming at large about the country, nor has she any idea of playing the part of the Georgia Mockingbird and bringing five-sixths of the food which the young require. Her method of procedure is first to permit her mate to search for a suitable nesting site. When some sheltered spot in the ground, quite to her liking, has been found, she deposits the eggs and goes her way. Little companies of female Phalaropes may be seen at this time of the year frequenting the ponds and sloughs they inhabit. The well-trained dutiful and well-trained males are all at home, where they are responsible for the entire task of caring for and incubating of the eggs."

If you are a musician, take "The Field Book of Wild Birds and Their Music," by F. Schuyler Mathews with you on your vacation. It is illustrated in color, and the bird songs are set to the musical scale. I wonder what Dick Haller and the degree team of the "Keep Growing Wiser Order of Hoot Owls," will think of this writer? He says: "The Hoot Owl has the reputation of a pirate and the voice of a fiend."

"Bird Notes A-Field," by Charles Keeler, is another California book. The illustrations are from Bohlman and Finley photographs. The very titles of the chapter have a charm all their own—"Patrolling the Beach," "March in the Pine Woods," "Summer Birds in the Redwoods," "In Sight of Shasta," "In a Mission Patti."

Before I read it, I had heard much about the book, "A Bird Lover in the West," by Olive Thorne Miller, for the enthusiastic companion referred to by the author was Mrs. Florence Merriam Bailey. They spent a summer together in Utah, and as Mrs. Miller was writing her experiences among the birds, Mrs. Bailey wrote "A Summer in a Mormon Village," so she told me. "The Children's Book of Birds," by Olive Thorne Miller, would be a lovely gift to a child. It has colored illustrations.

"Western Birds," by Harriet Williams Myers should be of interest to the casual readers as well as the student, for she has told many amusing stories of bird life.

"The Western Bird Guide," by Chester A. Reed, is a small book with colored illustrations of all the western birds from the Rocky Mountains to the coast. Its convenient size makes it a useful companion on outing trips.

If you plan to go to Netarts Bay or adjacent beaches this summer, read "Where Rolls the Oregon," by Dallas Lore Sharp, and when you look out to sea and view "Three Arch Rocks," you will have some idea of the thousands of sea birds that live at this rookery.

This quotation from the chapter "On the Marshes of Mulheen," gives some idea of the bird life on this great reservation.

"The sedge was full of birds, the tules were full of birds, the skies were full of birds;—clouds of them, acres of them, square miles—143 square miles of them. I was beside myself at the sight—at the sound—at the thought that such wild life could still be anywhere upon the face of the earth, to say nothing of finding it within the borders of my own land. Here was a page out of the early history of our country; no, an actual area of that wild unspoiled, unslaughtered country as the Indians knew it, as Lewis and Clark saw it on that first trip across the continent."

Last October Ann Shannon Monroe read a chapter in her new book from KGW. She gave a splendid description of one of the great breeding grounds of water birds on an eastern Oregon lake.

I have mentioned but a few of the bird books to be found in the circulation, reference and art departments of the Portland library.

When Miss Mulheron asked me to prepare a talk for one of Aunt Nell's afternoon programs I felt very much the same as if I were going to read a paper before my club, for I have been a radio fan since the beginning of broadcasting, and know that there are hundreds of women who listen regularly to the various courses of lectures given from KGW, and while unknown to each other we really are a radio club. Today instead of tuning my radio set, I am here with Aunt Nell.