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THE GRAIN GROWERS' GUIDE

Common Prairie Birds

By Dr. H. M. Speechley, Pilot Mound, Man.

"But what a few birds we have on these prairies!" And others, often oldthese prairies!" And others, often old-timers, will tell you that a number of "new birds are coming now." On en-quiry one finds that the birds men-tioned have been recorded all over the Northwest for more then thirty years Northwest for more than thirty years back, and to naturalists are well known. The fact is that observation has sharpened of late years and eyes have been opened. Sometimes people have passed by birds and flowers and such things so absorbed in wheat, cattle or machin-ery that they have simply been blind to them, just as a color-blind man can-not see the brilliant orange lily of our prairies. They do not see any value in noticing these wonderful gifts of the Almighty, and talk of people who do take notice as "star gazers" or "bug hunters," or, as in my own case, the "canary and weed man," somethe 'canary and weed man,'' some-times playfully, sometimes more or less scornfully. The old Book with su-preme wisdom says: ''Man doth not live by bread alone,'' and that ''A man's life does not consist in the abundance of things that he possesses. Hence I am not ashamed or apologetic for approaching an audionce such as for approaching an audience such as the readers of The Guide, because I have a great theme, a great opportunity to show the extraordinary value of our common birds to the farm, nay, even to the dwellers in town and city also. You must not suppose that I am writ-You must not suppose that I am writ-ing for you as an authority, but as a lover of birds who has dabbled a little more than most in the subject. Our real authorities in the Northwest are, I believe, Norman and Stuart Criddle, of Aweme, all-round naturalists of more profound and exact knowledge than any others in Manitoba, at any



The Barn Owl is a real friend of the farmer

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rate. Nor have I had any peculiar ad-vantage over the settlers in the prairie provinces. When I settled in Pilot Mound in the fall of 1901, at the age of thirty-five, I at once began to ask questions about birds, but found it hard to get much information. Everything that wasn't a hawk, owl, prairie chick en, goose, duck, meadow lark or robin was a "little brown bird."

Bird Books

However, I bought "Bird Neigh-bors," by Neltje Blanchan, and Frank Chapman's "Handbook of the Birds of N.E. America," and later on these ex-cellent little handbooks of Chester Reed, all of which proved a great help because they gave the key to observa-tion. In 1903, with some doubt as to my capacity, I undertook to observe the spring migration of birds for the Biological Survey of the U.S.A. My opportunities were those of any country doctor. There was my small garden in the middle of Pilot Mound, there were my neighbors' gardens, and then my country drives took me over the prairie, into the bush, along the ravines tribu-tary to the River Pembina and the lakes of the district. I will admit that a pair of good binoculars was also a great aid to observation, because they permit you to spot birds at such a distance that they are not too much scared by your presence. As glasses are very

Quite a large number of people say, - useful for spotting stray cattle and other happenings on the prairie, may I suggest that boys and girls should be I suggest that boys and girls should be encouraged to use them for spotting birds as an excellent training of their powers of observation. Thus a book on birds or a binocular spy glass make excellent birthday presents for Jack or Jenny. Lots of girls, if only encour-aged, are clever at bird knowledge, especially those who fetch the cows in early morn or dewy eve when birds are most easily seen. are most easily seen.

Economic Value of Birds

I wish, however, to bring to your notice the practical value of bird knowledge to the farmer in a way that will appeal to you. This bird question is not mere sentiment, as you will soon see from a number of facts collected see from a number of facts collected by the naturalists employed by the Biological Survey of the U.S.A. It has been estimated by the scientific "bug hunters" that the farm interests of the U.S.A. suffer a yearly loss of some seven hundred million dollars owing to the ravages of insects, let alone weeds altogether, and that but for our birds not only would the loss he much birds not only would the loss be much greater but life for human beings would become impossible owing to insect plagues. We can get some idea of what this means by a number of interesting calculations and facts. In 1910 the farm products in the U.S.A. were valued at \$\$,926,000,000. Now, one of the best weed seed eating groups of native birds is the sparrow family, which, excluding entirely the English sparrow, is abundantly represented in the three prairie provinces of Western Canada. Of this family the tree sparrow, which returns to our prairies regurow, which returns to our prairies regu-larly close to April 1, in adult life con-sumes a quarter of an ounce of weed seeds daily. On this basis the tree sparrows in the state of Iowa—to give an exact estimation—eat annually about 875 tons of weed seeds. "Some good work that!" do you say? Well, then, a moderate estimate of the total consumption of weed seeds by the whole sparrow family in the whole of whole sparrow family in the whole of the U.S.A. results in a saving of one per cent. of the crops, which is equal to a sum of \$\$9,260,000 saved to the farmers of the States in 1910. hordes of these sparrows which winter far to the south of the international boundary move up into the prairie provinces for nesting purposes, we have from April to September the full benefit of their weed seed habits and simply cannot get along without them. A grateful municipality has conferred up-on me the dignity of weed inspector of sec. 9, twp. 3, rge. 11, and I ought to know! Ha, ha, what do you know about that?

Crows, Hawks and Owls

Take the common crow, which this year returned to our prairies about a week later than its usual date, March 25 to wit, and see what a bad name some people give to it. I would remind you that prejudice is not proof, but that the best proof of what a bird eats is the contents of its crop and stomach. In Southern Manitoba I do not know that crows hurt any crops, but it seems that they will destroy the eggs and young of prairie chicken and other use-ful birds which devour either insects or weed seeds, and even of poultry. On the other hand crows always, as proved by their stomachs, devour many insects as well as grubs, such as cut-worms and white grubs, also meadow mice in

abundance. Hawks and owls get a bad name as poultry robbers, and if one of these fine birds takes to such bad habits he probably must be shot, but in my thirteen years on the prairie I have seen hundreds of hawks and owls catching grasshoppers, beetles, mice and gophers. As many as a hundred grasshoppers have been found in the stomach of a Swainson's hawk, one of our common larger hawks with a big brown patch in the middle of its breast. In the nesting place of a pair of barn owls more than skulls have been found, 97 per 3,000 cent. of which were those of field mice, house mice and rats. It is sheer craziness, then, from a farmer's point of to shoot hawks or owls unlessand here's where knowledg; comes in



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