

A TWENTY-FIVE YEAR STUDY OF THE BIRD LIFE IN
SEQUOIA NATIONAL PARK - 1906 to 1931

By
Judge Walter Fry

A twenty-five year study of the bird life in Sequoia National Park - 1906 to 1931 - has been made by Judge Walter Fry, and reveals facts somewhat discouraging to all lovers of bird life. During that quarter century period many species have been greatly reduced, while others that were formerly abundant now do not occur. The greatest reduction is in water fowls and shore birds, while black birds, mourning doves, and California roadrunners are almost extinct. Little difference is noted in the appearance of the various kinds and number of song and small perching birds; on the whole they seem more plentiful.

During this period one new bird, the western meadow-lark, has been added to the list of park birds; while two foreign species, ring-necked pheasant and wild turkeys, were imported before the National Park policy against introduction of foreign species was formulated. The meadow-lark we still have, but the pheasants and turkeys have vanished. The larks made their appearance at Shepherd Cove during the season of 1908, where they since have nested every year.

A pair of Japanese ring-necked pheasants, donated to the park by the Visalia Rod and Gun Club, was liberated on March 5, 1907, at Colony Mill, elevation 5,525 feet. The birds nested during the following May and hatched a brood of seven, which was raised to maturity. Of the young, 3 were males and 4 females. The birds remained about the cabin where we fed them until November, at which time heavy snow forced them to Cedar Creek, 4,500 feet, where they remained throughout the winter. The following spring the birds located on Dorst Creek, some 6 miles north of the place of their liberation, elevation 5,500 feet. For several years thereafter the birds were seen during the summer months in this locality, but finally disappeared. As none of the birds have been reported since October 10, 1917, it is safe to presume that none are left. I believe this species of bird would thrive in the park if planted in a much lower altitude.

Four consignments of wild turkeys, imported from the California Game Farm, were liberated in the park, as follows:

1909	Nov 2,	39
1910	July 13,	50
1910	Sept. 19,	29
1910	Nov. 1,	12
Total		130

The turkeys were donated to the Park Service, and transported into the park free of charge, by the California Fish and Game Commission, and the park rangers purchased grain to feed the fowls during the winter months. Of the 130 birds sent, 58 were male and 72 female. The turkeys were liberated along the Middle Fork River at points near Ash Mountain Station, Potwisha, and Hospital Rock, at altitudes of 1,300, 2,000, and 2,700 feet, respectively.

The turkeys all came through their first winter without loss, but it was during the nesting period and the raising of their young that misfortune assailed them. During this period they scattered out over the mountains in every direction, where they were killed off by wild animals and birds of prey. A great many young were hatched, but they, as well as the older birds, soon were missing. So the flocks commenced to dwindle down from year to year, until finally no more were seen. The last were seen on October 16, 1918, when four gobblers and two hens were observed near Camp Potwisha, so it is safe to presume that all are gone.

It would seem from these two unsuccessful experiments in introducing birds foreign to the park region, it would be much better to confine our efforts to saving the native species we now have.

While the park area, owing to its geographical and topographical location, never was considered strictly a breeding ground for water fowls and shore birds, it furnished a splendid refuge for them during the winter months in the lower elevations along the rivers. Until recent years, it was a common sight to see many of the fowls such as ducks, geese, swans, and others during the autumn, winter and spring, some of which remained throughout the year. Now most of these species are seldom seen, and when seen they are few in number. The rapid decrease in water and shore birds started about the year 1909, and has continued every year since. I attribute the falling off to four principal causes: the settlement and drying up of their breeding grounds, length of open hunting season and bag limit, increase in number of hunters, and disease.

Some twenty-five years ago, the hunting of water fowls along the rivers adjacent west of the park proved an excellent winter sport, and many birds were taken. Not all were taken by use of fire-arms, however, as the following incident shows. During 1907, Mr. A. G. Ogilvie had an orange seed-bed of one-half acre growing on his ranch a little west of the park. As a means of protecting the plants from winter frosts, he had stretched a white canvas over the bed, the same being supported by wire on posts six feet above ground. In November of that year, twenty one white swans (Whistling Swan) came in from the Valley and established their roosting quarters in the canyon of the Middle Fork River at the mouth of the Marble Fork. Every day about sun-rise the birds could be seen in flight down the canyon to the vast wheat fields for food, returning in the evening to their regular roost.

All went well with the swans until the 31st day of January following, when a most exciting event caused their departure; for on the morning of that day, as the flock was winging its way down the canyon, a sturdy old gander who was leading them seemingly mistook the white canvas for a pool of water, and straightway lit on its top and was unable to rise again from the sagging canvas. The noise and frantic efforts of the gander to rise frightened the other birds so badly that they scattered pell-mell in every direction, leaving their leader behind. One of the Ogilvie boys, who was working under the canvas at the time, caught the struggling bird by its feet and cooped it, releasing it on the following day. I never saw a finer specimen than this bird. It was full five feet in length, fat, snow white with the exception of its black bill and feet. The swans all left the vicinity immediately, and no more were seen until the following autumn.

Of the 40 different families of bird life within the park in 1906, which represented 175 different species, aside from the Japanese pheasants and wild turkeys, compared with 1931, the following table shows the losses:

	<u>Family Represent-</u> <u>atives in 1906</u>	<u>Family Represent-</u> <u>atives in 1931</u>
Family Grebe	1	1
" Loon	1	1
" Cormorants	1	1
" Ducks, geese, swans	17	2
" Herons, egrets, bitterons	4	2
" Rails and coots	2	1
" Stilts	1	-
" Snipes and sandpipers	2	1
" Plovers	2	1
" Grouse and quail	3	3
" Pigeons, doves	2	2
" Vultures	2	1
" Hawks and eagles	12	10
" Owls	8	8
" Cuckoos	2	1
" Kingfisher	1	1
" Woodpeckers	10	10
" Goatsuckers	1	1
" Nighthawks	1	1
" Swifts	3	3
" Hummingbirds	5	5
" Flycatchers	7	6
" Crows, jays, magpies	6	5
" Blackbirds, orioles, meadowlarks	5	3
" Finches and sparrows	28	28
" Tanagers	1	1
" Swallows	6	6
" Waxwings and phainopeplas	2	2
" Shrikes	1	-
" Vireos	2	2
" Wood warblers	11	10
" Wagtails	1	1
" Dippers	1	1
" Thrashers	3	3
" Wrens	3	3
" Creepers	1	1
" Nuthatches	2	2
" Titmice	5	5
" Kinglets, Gnatcatchers	3	3
" Thrushes, solitaires, bluebird	6	6
Total	<u>175</u>	<u>144</u>

It will be seen that within the last quarter century the Sequoia National Park has lost entire representation of two families and 31 species of bird life it formerly contained, all of which are migratory species, and only one new species (the Western Meadowlark) has come in. This rapid decrease in the past quarter century makes one wonder what the conditions will be in the next hundred or thousand years. Of course, apart from the California Condor, California is thoroughly capable of caring for its native state birds; but to save the migratory species will require speedy efforts of State, Federal and inter-federal laws.