


2-1932

Consider the Sparrow

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.uni.edu/science_bulletin

 Part of the [Health and Physical Education Commons](#), and the [Science and Mathematics Education Commons](#)

Let us know how access to this document benefits you

Copyright ©1932 by Iowa State Teachers College

Recommended Citation

(1932) "Consider the Sparrow," *Science Bulletin*: Vol. 4: No. 6, Article 6.
Available at: https://scholarworks.uni.edu/science_bulletin/vol4/iss6/6

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by UNI ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Science Bulletin by an authorized editor of UNI ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@uni.edu.

Offensive Materials Statement: Materials located in UNI ScholarWorks come from a broad range of sources and time periods. Some of these materials may contain offensive stereotypes, ideas, visuals, or language.

Park near Strawberry Point and has ice the year round. These are both evidently fissure caves. Neither of them are very large. The cold freezing winds of the winter blowing through the fissures in the hills freeze them. Then in the summer the currents of air reverse and the freezing cold air from within freezes the water at the entrance of the caves.

O. B. Read.

CONSIDER THE SPARROW

Most of the birds which you and I know best are fair-weather friends. That is to say, they stay with us just so long as the sun is warm and food is plentiful, but when winter comes, they forsake us. Nearly all of our common birds behave thus, which must mean, if birds are anything like humans, that it is our climate and not ourselves that they like. True, a number of our game birds such as the quail and the pheasant stay all the year round, and although they occasionally come into our barnyards to eat with the hogs and chickens, they do so because of the food, and not because of any liking for us. The jay and the crow and the cardinal remain also, but neither of them is fond enough of mankind to stay very near. But the little fellow I am thinking of, like the poor, is with us always; he will not be rebuffed by our coldness, he likes us and we cannot help it.

He is no larger of body than a hulled walnut; short of beak and wing and leg; plain of feather and humble of taste. But what are such handicaps to a fighter like him? For seek him where you will, he is there,—rural, urban, suburban. No farm or town is too large or too small for him; on roof of city warehouse or country cowshed, he is equally at home. In the streets of New Orleans, on the wheat shocks of Manitoba, around the towers of New York, or in the alleys of Chinatown in Frisco, he flits his sooty wings and chirps his strident song. He is the very spirit of the explorer and the pioneer. He is the English Sparrow!

Watch him as you feed your hogs on the farm or your poultry in the back yard. Watch him get his share

of the grain, yet always managing to keep out of the way of the hogs' jaws or the beaks of the stinging hens. Watch him in the streets as he picks up the edible things too small for your eye, but always avoiding the wheels of traffic, always just keeping from beneath your feet. He never hops or flies further than necessary to get out of danger; you can almost pick him up, but never quite. Try it, and he will hop just out of your reach; pass on, and he will go back to where the picking was good. He is a bird who lives with man, and in spite of him. He'd like to be friendly, but if man won't be friendly—well, he is going to remain with him anyhow. I don't know of any other wild bird like that.

When he takes up his abode around farm or city home, few other birds come near, partly because they fear him, partly because there is no room—the available quarters are already fully occupied by sparrows. To the martin or bluebird it must be very much like staking out a claim on land already homesteaded. For the sparrow is a great 'squatter' and once he gets the notion to settle down in a place, the inhabitants thereof generally leave in disgust, because they know the sparrow has come to stay.

He resents competition. Let some robins or bluebirds come near a sparrow dwelling, and the whole population immediately hold an indignation meeting to discuss ways and means of ousting the unwanted guests. The affair usually ends with a sparrow victory, for why, in sparrow logic, should red-vested or blue-coated interlopers such as robins or bluebirds, who are going to remain only a few months at best, be allowed equal hotel privileges with a bird who stays all the year round?

His food is largely grain gathered from shocks, corn-cribs, elevators, and the streets; he eats but few insects. He crowds his nests of feathers and straw into every accessible crevice, sometimes using a bushel of trash for one nest. He roosts everywhere, and the farmers pretty generally hate him for fouling stored grain and machinery. He is continually brawling and creating noise and disturbance; he flies from farm to farm, and has been accused of

carrying diseases of hogs from one place to another.

Thus, by human standards, he is a rascal, a pariah, an unmitigated nuisance—something to be destroyed on sight. But aside from human moral standards which are only relative at best, and have no application to the sparrow, he is the finest example I know of a perfectly adapted piece of animal machinery. He has made good against great odds.

We rate a man's greatness by his start in life, the difficulty of the obstacles, the methods he used in surmounting them, and the degree of success attained. Apply these standards to the sparrow, and how does he rate?

He came here about eighty years ago, a pilgrim so to speak, dragged by force from his native land, yet in that eighty years he has gone from Main to Florida, and from New York to Frisco. Imagine the achievement! In eighty years he has invaded and conquered more territory than our fathers did in two and a half centuries. What of that for a colonization record? To say nothing of the fact that he is all over Canada and Mexico and has been reported in Honolulu. But he has not merely invaded these countries; he has stayed there and reared a family, and his children have done likewise.

Most birds owe their success in life to some special physical adaptation to the conditions under which they live. The common quail, for example, blends so perfectly with his surroundings it is almost impossible to see him when not moving, and his young are ready to run as soon as hatched. Hawks depend largely upon their great powers of flight, their powerful beaks and feet, and their keen eyes. Owls upon their noiseless flight, their amazingly acute ears, and their fly-by-night habit. Crows seem possessed of a sixth sense—what might be called the 'danger sense', and an almost pathetic fear of a gun. Woodpeckers have special beaks for drilling out insects and a rigid, pointed tail to prop them against a tree while doing it. Many birds can either wade or swim, and are thus fitted to capture prey or escape enemies. Still others, on account of their beautiful colors or vocal powers, invoke protection

by their appeal to the aesthetic. Finally, nearly all birds meet climatic changes by the migratory habit.

But in spite of all these special devices for getting along in the world, in spite of all these precautions on the part of nature for the saving of her children, most of our common birds, with the possible exception of the crow, are either just holding their own or are actually decreasing in numbers.

Now as I see him, the sparrow has no outstanding physical adaptations. It would be easy to name a hundred birds that have longer wings and can fly faster. Outside of a general plumpness of figure, not much can be said for his beauty. He dresses in the severest colors, and never raises his voice in song; his vigorous chirping may indeed be music to him and his kind but certainly to no other creatures. He is one of our smallest birds; his beak is short and wide, and but little adapted either for offense or defense. His feet and legs are dumpy and fitted only for hopping. In short, he has no physical feature that is not possessed in a larger measure by many other birds. What is the secret of his success?

It must be admitted that the cause of the diminishing numbers of many of our common birds is that man has turned his attention to killing them for food or sport, or from a mistaken notion that they are harmful. I say 'mistaken notion,' for it may well be doubted that there are half a dozen harmful birds in this whole country. But whatever the reason, when man turns his attention to destroying a thing, it usually disappears rapidly, for he is the greatest killer of them all.

Yet the strange thing is that given equal chances, many kinds of birds disappear much faster than others. The wild turkey, for example, is getting scarcer every year. Geese and ducks are disappearing at a slower rate, but none the less certainly; the sand-hill crane is now extinct over much of its former range. The jack-snipe and woodcock are also vanishing rapidly. But the best example of a bird that couldn't stand man's persecution was the passenger pigeon.

There has probably never been a

wild thing in this country in as great numbers as this beautiful bird. Many men now living have hunted this creature and can bear witness to its numbers. Audubon attests that the flocks of these birds were one hundred fifty miles long and a mile wide. They darkened the sky, and when they alighted at their roosting places, often broke off great branches under the sheer weight of countless bodies.

Then man turned his attention to killing them for the market. They were trapped and shot, and being simple-minded birds, were often caught by the hundreds in the same trap. They roosted so thickly in the trees that my grandfather, who did his share in exterminating them, told me that it was not even necessary to take aim in shooting them. He simply pointed his gun into the tree top, pulled the trigger, and the dead birds that rained down from this murderous pot-shot were gathered into gunny sacks, and the wounded left to crawl away and die. It was too much trouble to catch them in the dark. Today, so far as I know, there is not a single live passenger pigeon in the whole world. They vanished, and nobody knows where they went, yet it is plain that they couldn't stand the fierce gaff of human persecution.

Yet the striking thing about all this is that during the same time that these countless millions of pigeons were disappearing forever from the earth, the English sparrow was increasing from just a few individuals in eastern United States to his present unnumbered hosts spread all over the country.

Do not get the impression that the wild pigeon disappeared because of his enemies, and that the sparrow increased because he had no enemies. Nothing could be farther from the truth; it would be difficult to find a bird that has as many enemies as the sparrow. For while all the other birds of his size are protected by law against killing, and the destruction of eggs and nests, he enjoys no such immunity. It is 'open season' for sparrows all the year round. Nobody builds him a bird-house, or puts out food for him in snowy weather. Making a living is strictly up to him.

When I was a boy he was my daily target at rifle practice. Show me the farmer's boy, or boy of the small town who hasn't killed a sparrow or maybe an hundred of them. It would be harder still to find a house cat that hadn't killed its quota of sparrows. At least three kinds of hawks eat him, and one species lives chiefly upon sparrows. Owls kill him at every opportunity, and many are the luckless individuals who fall before these dragons of the night. Several states have offered bounties on his head, and many attempts have been made to destroy him wholesale by traps, poison, and other devices.

Yet in spite of his enemies, he continues to thrive. "It's of no use to try to get rid of him," said Coues. "Kill one and a hundred will come to his funeral." I believe that the sparrow is holding his own, while other birds under much more favorable conditions are dying out, because he is making use of the very same principles which man uses to achieve success, not consciously perhaps, but none the less certainly. If this statement seems foolish, examine it for a moment.

The great men and women of the world have arrived at greatness simply because they made use of certain qualities. They all had courage, pugnacity, self-assertiveness, perseverance, and a willingness to meet conditions as they found them, coupled with the saving grace of common sense. The English sparrow, as I see him, has all of these qualities. Where he has any chance at all, he will stand his ground against almost any bird, and will defend his possessions with vigor. No one can safely accuse him of over-modesty. When a bird house is newly built, he believes that the first one on the ground should have possession, hence he is usually first. If he is a little late to the feast, like many of his more intelligent but not less unscrupulous human brothers, he is not averse to moving up a few places in 'the line'.

Another of his qualities of greatness is to take things as he finds them, and to be not too 'finicky' in his tastes. He bathes like any other bird, but when water is scarce, he does without. If he cannot sleep in

the barn, the roof of the cow-shed will serve as well; any place out of the wind will do in a pinch. He eats what he finds, abstains when he must, and voices no complaints. Food to him is food, whether in the pig-sty, in the wheat shock, or in the offal in the street.

But his strongest claim to greatness is his perseverance. Tear out his nest and he will build another in the same place, and he starts rebuilding at once without stopping to grieve over the loss. Destroy his eggs, and more will come; drive him out of the barn, and he will roost in the straw-stack; poke him from there and he will roost in the trees. He is simply bound to stay somewhere, and that somewhere is pretty likely to be on those particular premises. You can't drive him away permanently. When I was a boy, I spent half my time shooting sparrows, but I never succeeded in driving them off for more than an hour or so. There is not another bird in the world that will stand such treatment and still stay on the job.

Yet he rarely allows his perseverance to overcome his common sense. He soon learns to know a gun, and that a man with a gun and a man without one are two very different persons so far as sparrow safety is concerned. Go out to feed your hogs and Mr. Sparrow is under your feet; go out with a gun and the same individual will be entertaining his friends at a respectful distance. I am positive, also, that he watches to see when you go back into the house with the gun.

All this is not meant to imply that he has no weaknesses. You may catch him in a trap without much difficulty, but you can do so with almost any other bird. He will occasionally allow you to shoot at him a few times and maybe kill some of his fellows before becoming doubtful of your good intentions. But this is sometimes true of that wary old fox, the crow. I once killed seven out of one tree in five minutes. He may be poisoned also, but in all these ways he shows himself only to be truly bird-like, that is, relatively simple-minded when pitted against human intelligence. Yet when it comes to getting along with difficul-

ties—I should say, in spite of them—he is far ahead of any bird I know.

It is zero out of doors as I write this, but even now, three or four of them, mere balls of ruffled, sooty, brown feathers, are sitting on the stone window sill looking in at me with bright, watchful eyes. Ishmaels they may well be, but as for me, may their numbers never grow less.

THE INERT GASES

CHEMISTRY

A hard-headed, clear thinking, international business man has recently arrested the attention of educators by setting up an educational measuring stick. Owen D. Young, ex-teacher and industrialist, has listed the goals of American education, and places near the top the healthful stimulation of the emotions. In its application to teachers of chemistry, two opportunities open. Chronologically, they represent extremes. Pupils can be inspired by the wonderful contributions which chemical accomplishments have made to our daily lives. Teachers seldom fail in this regard. But the pupil can be equally, and more effectively, inspired by the history of chemical discoveries and the men who battled upon their frontiers. Especially is this true if such men labored and achieved within the lifetime of our own generation. Argon and helium are elements whose history is strictly modern and truly romantic.

Nitrogen gas is lazy. A chemical revolution may enlist and lead away nearly every other element and compound in the air, but nitrogen will stay at home and refuse to become excited. Less than forty years ago, Lord Rayleigh in England made use of this characteristic by removing the other components of the air and collecting the remaining supposedly pure nitrogen in order to study it. This pure nitrogen had a weight of 1.2572 grams to the liter. He also obtained pure nitrogen from pure chemicals. This sample of the gas had a weight of 1.2505 grams per liter. Strange, he thought, I must have made a mistake in purifying my gas from the air. Repeatedly he prepared nitro-