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SOUTHERN FARMERS AIDED  
BY INSECT-EATING BIRDS

Some birds are handsome, others melodious, others interesting or companionable. But what are they worth to the farmers in practical value other than their esthetic qualities? The Biological Survey of the United States Department of Agriculture attempts to answer this question for the Southeastern States in Farmers' Bulletin No. 755-F, "Common Birds of Southeastern United States in Relation to Agriculture," which was first issued ten years ago and has been revised for republication.

With cotton as its principal crop, the South is interested in enemies of the cotton insects, the cotton boll weevil, the bollworm, and chinch bugs. The orioles, swallows, blackbirds, meadowlarks, titlarks and Carolina wrens are some of the more important, though the bulletin lists 65 species known to prey to a greater or less degree on the weevil, and 41 on the cotton worm. White grubs injure corn and also damage garden crops. Fifty-seven kinds of bird policemen feed on either the grub or on the adult forms known as May beetles. Nighthawks, chuck-will's-widows, crows, and screech owls feed voraciously on the adults; and crows, crow blackbirds, and robins favor the grubs. The nighthawk, or bull-bat, is a bird that has been persecuted by wanton shooting for target practice, but the scientific studies of the feeding habits of this bird show that as one of the most useful of birds it deserves the strictest protection.

Birds vary in beauty, plumage, and song, but their economic value to agriculture depends very largely on what they eat and at what time of the year they eat it. The Biological Survey finds the facts by analyzing the stomach contents of birds. In Farmers' Bulletin 755-F, there appear detailed reports of the food habits of 23 of the more important of the 460 species of birds found at one time or another in the southeastern quarter of the country. The kinds considered are

the house wren, Carolina wren, mockingbird, brown thrasher, cardinal, gray grosbeak, painted bunting, common crow, blue jay, meadowlark, boat-tailed grackle, bluebird, Carolina chickadee, tufted titmouse, purple martin, scissor-tailed flycatcher, red-cockaded woodpecker, chuck-will's-widow, nighthawk, yellow-billed cuckoo, bob-white, barn owl, and turkey buzzard.

Of these, only the boat-tailed grackle was found to be guilty of doing more harm than good. This bird lives near the coast and depends on marine crustaceans for a considerable share of its animal food, and corn is the principal vegetable food. One good report from Texas was an analysis of the food of six birds taken in fall and consisting largely of bollworms. In any locality where this grackle is very abundant, it is almost necessarily harmful to the corn crop without rendering any well-defined service in return.

Certain other birds, the bob-white for example, eat more or less grain, but the grain feeding is largely in winter months and from scattered seeds left in the fields. In the growing and harvesting months insects are preferred. The barn owl is highly recommended for its habit of feeding on small rodents in the South and on pocket gophers farther west.

The turkey buzzard is credited as useful in its capacity as a scavenger, and the prejudice against it as a carrier of animal diseases probably is undeserved. By experiment it has been proved that the buzzard digests and renders harmless the spores of anthrax, and that the droppings from buzzards that had fed on the flesh of hogs dead from cholera did not cause cholera when mixed with the feed of healthy animals.

The house wren, for all its diminutive size, is a most useful bird. It feeds almost exclusively on harmful insects, and as the wrens usually rear two broods a year the parents are kept busy from morning till night searching for food. Its only bad habit is interference with the nests of other birds. The gray grosbeak eats a relatively large proportion of vegetable food, but even in this it is beneficial, for nearly 45 per cent of its food is composed of foxtail and bur grasses, which are pernicious weeds, and the painted bunting has somewhat similar tastes with strong preferences for foxtail or pigeon grass seeds.

Both the crow and the blue jay are recognized as occasionally mischievous but they are considered less so in the South than farther north.

Farmers' Bulletin 755-F, as revised and republished may be obtained on application to the United States Department of Agriculture, Washington, D. C.

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