



DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

INFORMATION SERVICE

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

For Release SUNDAY, JULY 7, 1940.

MARSH HAWKS EAT LOTS OF MICE, NOT PHEASANTS, STUDY REVEALS

The traditional villain of the bird world, the marsh hawk, is locally a beneficial bird and not a bad fellow after all, according to the Fish and Wildlife Service, United States Department of the Interior. While many individuals charge the hawk with preying upon desirable forms of wildlife, recent findings of the Pennsylvania Cooperative Wildlife Research Unit show that mice are the staple food of the marsh hawk, and pheasants are not a normal item in the diet.

To learn the food habits of the marsh hawk in Pennsylvania and to observe whether it preyed on pheasants, Pierce E. Randall, a graduate student of the Cooperative Unit, conducted an investigation on a 1,675-acre sample plot in Lehigh County that is typical of the best pheasant range in the Keystone State.

The work was directed by the unit leader, Dr. Logan P. Bennett, of the Fish and Wildlife Service, and his assistant, Dr. P. F. English, of the Pennsylvania State College. The unit is financially supported by the College, the Pennsylvania Game Commission, the American Wildlife Institute, and the Fish and Wildlife Service.

An examination of 60 pellets collected from roosts in weedy stubblefields showed that early in fall the marsh hawk diet consisted of mice (73.6 percent), birds, mostly songbirds (21.6 percent), and 1 shrew, 1 cottontail rabbit, 1 skunk, and 1 unidentified mammal. Late in fall, the marsh hawks ate more mice (83.2 percent) and less songbirds (12.2 percent).

In winter, Randall examined 156 pellets. He found that mice still predominated in the diet (83.2 percent), while the proportion of songbirds taken fell to 7.9 percent.

"Despite the presence of a large number of pheasants on the study area," Randall reported, "no evidence of predation by marsh hawks was found, either in the pellets or in the field." He asserted that the marsh hawks paid no attention to pheasants feeding in the open.

Bobwhites and mourning doves observed on the study area likewise were not molested by the marsh hawk.

Thirty-five species of hawks have been recorded as residents or visitants in North America north of Mexico, but several are so seldom observed that their economic value is not a matter of public interest. The marsh hawk is the only species that beats back and forth over marsh, meadow, and grasslands with a floppy sort of flight, dropping on the prey it surprises in openings.

Larger than the crow, the marsh hawk has long wings and tail. The rump is always white, a good field mark by which to recognize it. Its flight is gull-like, and, in fact, at a distance the light-gray old males look much like gulls.

The marsh hawk, known scientifically as Circus hudsonius, breeds from northwestern Alaska, northwestern Mackenzie, northern Ontario, central Quebec, and Newfoundland south to northern Baja California, southern Arizona, southern Texas, southern Illinois, southern Indiana, Ohio, Maryland, and southeastern Virginia.

It winters from southern British Columbia, western Montana, western South Dakota, the southern parts of Wisconsin, Michigan, New York, Vermont, and New Hampshire south to the Bahamas, Florida, Cuba, and Colombia.

Randall's report of the investigations in Pennsylvania has been published, and copies are available to the public upon request as long as a supply is available. Copies may be obtained by writing to The Pennsylvania Cooperative Wildlife Research Unit, Pennsylvania State College, State College, Pa., or to the Pennsylvania Game Commission, Harrisburg, Pa.

- C -