

River Bird Life

BY JOHN D. CARTER

THE time has long passed when even the keenest observer can reasonably hope to find a new species of bird in the Delaware valley. Stragglers from other regions may be found, for accidents always have happened and always will happen. Such sporadic occurrences are interesting, but are not usually of much significance except in the rare cases in which a bird is shifting its range. The outstanding facts of the lives of most of our birds, the times of migration, feeding and nesting habits, plumage changes and so forth, are fairly well determined. The day of the intensive student, the observer with a metaphorical fine-toothed comb, has come. Most of us have little opportunity for such study. But if each one would record what he does observe, there must result a decrease in the great sum-total of our ignorance. So much in explanation of the publication of the following notes, made beside the Delaware River at Chester, Pa.

The time of observation has been limited to an hour or less near noon of each day. The point of vantage made use of, is the end of a dock extending into deep water. Down river, toward the southwest, the high ground near Wilmington forms the horizon. In the opposite direction the tall stacks at League Island can be seen in clear weather. In front beyond two miles of open water rise the low shores of New Jersey. Somewhat up stream and near mid-river, lies Chester Island, an expanse of reeds, relieved by a few small trees. Below the visible end of the island, a bar extends for more than a mile.

At the outset, let it be understood that the bird-life of the river differs from that of the land very strikingly, in that the winter, and not the summer, is the season of greatest activity. Even the wonderful spring migration which fills our forests and shade-trees with birds of marvelous beauty, is represented but feebly on the river.

About the middle of the 4th month (April) come the very attractive little Bonaparte Gulls. Trim and neat in figure, light

and airy in motion, they make the Herring Gulls seem heavy and awkward. Instead of pounding the water with their feet, as the Herring Gulls do, when they rise from the surface, the Bonapartes spring lightly up, more like pigeons leaving the ground. Their dark heads, when they happen to have them, are good field-marks, permitting confusion only with the Laughing Gull. These seldom stray so far from the salt water. I have seen only one at Chester in three years, so the confusion is more possible than actual. In any plumage the Bonaparte may be recognized by its three white areas, as seen from above, namely, its tail and a broad band along the front edge of each wing, from the bend of the wing outward. When flying away from one, the white of the tail flanked by two waving bars of the same color may serve for identification at any distance up to a mile. The Bonapartes tarry only a few days. With their passing, the bird life of the river dwindles rapidly. The Herring and Ring-billed Gulls gradually vanish away. An occasional flock of geese may afford brief excitement and a few Ospreys may draw their easy circles above the river. The sweet whistle of the Yellowlegs may sometimes be heard, and even less frequently, a bunch of misguided Semipalmated Sandpipers or Ring-neck Plovers may drift past. A few kinds of land birds may be seen, but these clearly have no interest in the river. To them it is but a mere accident of the landscape. The Swallows, however, do seem to use the river as a highway. Barn and Bank Swallows have been identified. It is probable that other species also should be included. What use is made of the river by night migrants, of course does not appear from these limited observations.

By the middle of 5th month (May) except for the noting of Turkey Vultures over New Jersey, (where they may be seen at any season) and an occasional Crow, the daily record begins to read thus: "no birds", "no bird life of any kind". This dearth of life continues almost unbroken until summer has begun to wane. Of course, the rails, marsh wrens, bitterns, etc. are hidden away among the reeds, and do not show themselves in the open.

Sometime in the 8th month (August) there come the Black

Terns for their annual visit. They are never seen in spring. A few wear their dark body-clothes, making them look very different from what is expected of a tern. The birds in immature plumage, appear more nearly normal. So far as I have seen they are the only terns which resort to the river at that time. They go actively about, at times uttering a rather shrill squeak. They appear never to plunge into the water, but descend lightly to the surface and at once rise again. When the reeds are well grown, the metallic clink of Reed Birds is heard, but their little forms are so lost in the expanse of air that they are not seen as frequently as might be expected.

Early in the 9th month (September) the first gulls appear. For some time there was much uncertainty in my mind regarding the identification of Herring and Ring-billed. Even yet there are cases of doubt. When it is remembered that their colors are almost identical, that either may look, black, gray, bluish, white or parti-colored according to circumstances, and that the lights and distances over the water vary interminably, this need not cause much surprise. The Ringbills are slighter in build than the ponderous Herrings, more airy in flight, rising more easily from the water, more likely to make sudden turns while flying, and work their wings more rapidly. A color difference which appears to be useful and generally reliable is that the Ringbills in immature plumage show the basal part of the tail much whiter than the Herrings in corresponding plumage. The general habits of the two appear very similar, though I have no record of the Ringbill soaring at great height, as the Herring frequently does. The voices of the two are similar, so far as I have heard them, but that of the Ringbill is rather more shrill on the squealing notes. I have never heard them cackle as the Herrings do.

At first the Ringbills have it all to themselves, but in 9th month there appear a few Herrings, fore-runners of the winter population. The two species mingle freely together, and even during keen competition for some article of food, I have never seen evidence of ill-feeling of either toward the other. The same may be said of occasions, when Crows also come to the feast. All through the bright autumn weather the two kinds of gulls

add life to the broad expanse of water. As the days become colder and drifting snow-squalls tell of the approach of winter, the Ringbills slowly decrease in numbers, while the Herrings become more numerous until they are the only species to be seen for weeks or months together. In fact the Herring Gull must be regarded as much the most notable bird of the whole river avi-fauna.

As indicated above, the Herring Gulls look very different under varying conditions. The birds in immature plumage often seem to be of one color throughout, and that so dark as to appear black, when seen against fleecy clouds or tossing white-caps. Between this and the blue and white adult plumage there are many phases, grading one into another. Some of the last to be seen in the spring, as well as the first to arrive in the fall, are in the dark plumage. When settling down upon the water they nearly always drop gently, unless in a great hurry to secure a morsel of food. If they spy something of interest while passing rapidly over it, they either apply the brakes by taking almost an upright position in the air and beating the wings directly forward, or they pass on and return by a series of spiral curves. I have never seen them check their momentum by skating along on their feet after the manner of some water birds, which have heavier bodies or less wing surface.

Frequently they endeavor to secure the food by catching it up in their beaks as they pass over. When the wind is high and the waves are running, there are many exhibitions of admirable balancing in executing this feat. Sometimes the object thus secured is at once dropped again, indicating that even gull eyes may be deceived. At other times, they settle upon the water and eat more at leisure. Even then there is no loss of time, for in a surprisingly short space, many others assemble so that there may not be enough for a taste apiece. It is probable that civilization furnishes most of their food while on the river. The only fragment which I have been able to identify was a piece of bread.

When swimming or resting on the water, the gulls carry the points of their wings well above the surface, making them look "high behind," in contrast to most, or all, of the ducks. The flight may be direct by steady beating of the wings, or this may

be interrupted by periods of sailing or by graceful circling. Sometimes, and more frequently as spring approaches, they soar in beautiful circles to great heights. At such times they may be mistaken easily for hawks. On a few occasions I have seen great numbers of them engaged in this sport,—the whole wheeling concourse drifting slowly before the wind.

As a rule the Herring Gull in winter on the river is a rather silent bird. One may sometimes fly about uttering a plaintive squeal. A less common sound is a low chuckle, not audible for more than a few yards. But when a bunch of them get together, especially in disagreement over an insufficient supply of food, they sometimes show that they have real voices. There may be only one or two notes; or these may be continued into a long cackle, not musical to be sure, but with a delicious flavor of wildness. It is a rather curious fact that during most of the winter, at the noon hour many more gulls pass up the river than move down. Sometimes the count reads about "30 up" to "2 down." Or it may reach the unusual total of nearly one hundred, divided in about the same ratio. No doubt they come back again sometime. On other days, as though by common consent, they all go foraging promiscuously, without any definite lines of flight. I have not been able to detect any relation between these movements and either tide or weather conditions.

Associated more or less with the gulls is the everyday Crow. Sometimes great flocks assemble on Chester Island or the Jersey shore. When ice is plentiful in the river they ride about on it and fly from place to place seeking food. When the surface of the water is free from ice and not too rough, they go about as the gulls do, descending and picking things from the surface. They look as though they were in danger of falling in and drowning, but I have never seen any such accidents. It should be mentioned that, a few times, I have noted Purple Grackles acting in the same way. On two occasions, when the sounds of civilization were hushed, when there was no slapping of waves nor grinding of ice, I have heard the faint voices of Crows and on looking through field-glasses have found them on the shore or treetops on the other side of the river. There were none any-

where nearer in that direction, so it seems certain that the voice of the Crow can be heard for two miles. On one of these occasions the voice of a rooster also carried across the river.

Of the ducks I can give no satisfactory account. This is because of their settled practice of keeping far from the Pennsylvania shore, or because of the limitations of human vision, or both combined. At the distance of a mile, a duck is a small object, and at two miles approaches the invisible. So although I see some thousands in the course of a season, I can rarely learn what they are. Why does not some one who knows, publish a scheme by which distant ducks may be identified? During three years I have known four Ducks to pass fairly close to the end of the dock. Two, which came along while I was not there, appeared to be American Mergansers. Another might have been a Bufflehead. The fourth deserves more particular mention. There was much ice in the river, more particularly over the bar below the island and along the Jersey shore. Perhaps for this reason, a Duck came in from mid-river and settled on the water, close to the shore, and not more than three hundred yards from my lookout. The crown was dark. Just below that on the side of the face and neck was a large light spot. These marks showed it to be a Ruddy Duck. I at once looked to see if its tail was pointed skyward and found that it was not. The bird dived frequently, doubtless in search of food in the shallow water. After some time it drifted away with the tide, without diving. Its tail then appeared to be held up, as I expected it to be at first. This suggested that perhaps the Ruddy Duck makes some special use of its stiff tail while under water, and when not expecting to dive, lifts it carefully out of the way. If this is not the reason, why *does* this duck have a stiff tail?

Throughout the winter ducks of whatever kind they are, may be seen in flocks of 10 to 80, passing either up or down, or resting on the water over the bar or near the Jersey shore. They never seem to dive. I suspect that they are chiefly Black Ducks and Pintails. Occasionally, and without notice, the ducks have a moving day. On one such day there passed up-river during an hour, 20 flocks, estimated to contain 1035 birds. There also passed down 5 flocks, containing 108 birds. This

can scarcely be considered a migration, as it happened on 1st mo. (Jan.) 21 of this year. The greatest numbers appear late in the winter or early in the spring. The flocks are so intermingled that it seems hopeless to try to estimate the numbers, and mere guesses carry such a large percentage of error that they are scarcely worth making. At such times I always feel glad that so many have escaped destruction, and wish that their numbers might be doubled and trebled. I never wish for a gun—still less for a gunner—but only that I might know what they are.

One particular incident, although briefly noted in a previous issue of *Cassinia*, is thought worthy of fuller description because of its rarity and the questions which it raises. One day in early spring, the tide was flowing rapidly but smoothly up-river. A sea-going tug, with a string of loaded coal-barges was passing down. A few Herring Gulls were doing nothing in particular, some hundreds of yards from shore. Everything was quiet and perfectly normal. Suddenly, from over the city, came a bird of medium size, carrying something in its talons. The sharp-pointed wings, the powerful figure, the swift direct flight and the dark color showed it to be a Duck Hawk. Why it was carrying its prey out over the river, where there could be no resting place for the sole of its foot, is not clear. But it soon became evident that it had made a very bad blunder. Under other circumstances, I have seen gulls and hawks in close proximity, when neither seemed to notice the other. But this time, the moment the gulls spied the hawk coming toward them they shouted "Ha! Ha!" in tones that seemed full of derision. At once the chase began. The unincumbered gulls gained rapidly on the laboring hawk. For a few seconds it tried to escape, then, in despair, dropped its prey upon the water with a splash. I expected to see the gulls descend upon the fallen quarry and wrangle for a morsel apiece. But to my surprise they seemed to have no interest in it whatever, and not very much in the hawk, except that they were determined to prevent it from recovering its lost property. Time and time again it would circle about and come near to the coveted prize, as though to lift it from the water. Whenever it came near,

one or more gulls would dive at it and force it to move on. At such times the speed of the gull seemed fully as great as that of the falcon. There was no sign of retaliation, not even any back talk, and the usually courageous bird of prey fled like a driven coward.

While this was going on, the tide had carried the whole action a quarter of a mile up river. Then the hawk gave up the struggle and flew entirely away, while the gulls scattered to their usual occupations. It seemed to be the end of the incident, but it was not. After about twenty minutes the hawk reappeared. The tug and barges were then nearly out of sight down the river, but without hesitation the hawk went to the spot where it had dropped its prey. Beating back and forth, it carefully examined the surface of the river, following the course taken during the altercation with the gulls. Naturally, it did not find what it was looking for, because by that time its prey was a half mile or more further up the river. Instead of continuing the search, the hawk gave up, at the point where it had been driven away, rose high in the air, made a few vicious-looking plunges at some gulls, which were not doing any harm just then, and finally disappeared in the distance.

I have seen gulls mob a Fish Hawk which had made a good catch. In that case there was every reason to think that the gulls would gladly have eaten the fish, if they could have secured it. But why did they assail this Duck Hawk, which had a perfect right to carry something about if it wished to, if they did not desire what it carried? Was it simple meanness for them to prevent it from recovering its property? Did the hawk go away so as to allow the troublesome gulls to disperse? If it had that much sense, why did it fail to understand that the drift of the tide would go on while it was away? Did it know anything about the tide at all? Or was the sense of time poorly developed or altogether wanting? Memory there surely was, and an accurate sense of locality, not disturbed by the removal of one of the most prominent features of the landscape. There was every indication of resentment toward those gulls. But who can say how nearly these psychic processes correspond to our own? Perhaps that is part of the work laid out for the observers of the present and the future.