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DEATH OF A SALT POND

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(From Massachusetts Audubon Newsletter, October 1962)

On Friday, August 3, 1962, at 11:30 a.m. a helicopter flew along the northerly shores of the Cotuit narrows and emitted a cloud of DDT insecticide.

A brisk southwest breeze took the cloud ashore depositing some of it on the children sailing boats in the narrows, some on the salt pond and the surrounding marsh grass, but most of it on the upland. Here it contaminated my piazza, my huckleberry patch where robins were feeding, and where one of the few remaining orioles came the day before the spraying.

The cloud of DDT contaminated me, my wife, my daughter and my grandchildren who were farther up the beach. This was the final insult in a long drawn-out tragedy that has been going on for a decade.

Our salt pond is a half acre of brackish water, close under the bank on which our house stands. It is surrounded by salt marsh and a tidal stream connects it with the narrows of Cotuit Harbor. Fresh water runs into the pond from springs in the bank. It was beautifully balanced to produce organic materials that give a rich food supply to many kinds of life.

After the cloud of DDT passed, the pond looked as lovely as ever; the water was blue, the grass green, the sand white where it borders the outlet and forms the barrier beach. But the pond was strangely quiet. No herons stalked along its edges, no terns dove for minnows and no children hunted crabs or fished. The pond was quiet because year after year it has been steadily losing its animal life.

About ten years ago when the pond was first sprayed for mosquito control, it was speckled next morning with dead minnows, bottom up. Since then the men who seek to eradicate the insect "pests" have learned to use poisons that are not so immediately fatal; but in the end they all have the same result--the loss of animal life in our salt pond.

Take the case of the Fiddler Crabs: they are extremely susceptible to DDT, and are killed by direct poisoning. A few years ago we had three colonies of fiddlers of more than 500 each running on the beach. Now there are none. Green Crabs and big Blue Claws were abundant in the pond, now only an occasional small one comes in with the tide. Eels also lived there, feeding on the minnows. Now we see a few small eels.

*Dr. Cobb is one of the state's leading neurologists, and an avid ornithologist as well. A member of the A.O.U. for 52 years, he had his first paper published at the age of 18. In 1943 he contributed a paper (the Auk) indicating the dangers of tree spraying to birds.

Birds are the most conspicuous and lively of our animals, so their absence is most keenly felt. Let us consider them systematically. I have records that go back to 1913, not perfect notes, I admit, but still enough to show the great diminution in many species in this area.

Up to four years ago tree swallows nested here in my bird box; none for three years. Kingbirds used to breed regularly and enliven the air with their chatter and forays after crows. They lived largely on the greenhead flies, and helped in keeping them down; of course they are gone. Wood Pewees used to be common. I have seen only one in three years. Phoebes and Least Flycatcher have also disappeared, probably because their food supply is so greatly reduced.

In our oaks, pines and huckleberry bushes warblers used to breed. Prairie Warblers, Black-and-White Warblers, Pine Warblers and Yellowthroats were the most abundant. Only one Prairie was heard this year and no other warblers have stayed.

The herons have practically deserted the pond. I used to find four or five Night Herons roosting in the cedars and pines that grow on the north bank, close to their hunting grounds. Green Herons were also regularly present; ten years ago two pairs were usual; three years ago one pair; now none.

I could often see the Great Blue Heron fishing for eels at dawn or dusk. That picture is seen no longer. Similarly the pair of Kingfishers that used to nest in the bank, perch on the stakes and fish in the pond, are gone. Minnows are easily killed by DDT, so the birds that live on them are either killed or leave the pond.

The beach fleas are gone and presumably other crustaceans on which the shorebirds feed. We have always had a pair of Spotted Sandpipers breeding here, sometimes two pairs; now there are none, although other sandpipers that breed in the unsterilized Arctic, have increased enormously in numbers in recent years.

Terns have also increased on the islands at the mouth of Cotuit Harbor where they breed. Least Terns and the other larger species used regularly to visit our pond to dive for minnows. This year, despite their abundance two miles away, I have not seen a single Least Tern hovering over the pond nor even heard the kree-lee of a Common Tern.

One could go on AD NAUSEAM reciting instances, but enough is enough. The pond is nearly dead. The mercenary-minded citizen may say, "Of what use are Fiddler Crabs and Terns?" He cannot deny the usefulness of Blue Claw Crabs and the minnows that are bait for larger fish, nor can he deny that clams are contaminated.

But this is not the main point. What must be emphasized is that DDT is a poison, although said to be harmless in small amounts, it is not easily destroyed or removed; it accumulates in the leaf mold, the mud, the soil, plants, animals and in human beings. Scientists do not know just where the danger line is to be drawn. Some talk in percentages, but the fact is that their figures are only opinions based on inadequate data. Do we wait until we pass the danger point before we rebel? It is no doubt pleasant to be free of insect bites, but at what price?

BIRD NOTE FROM KAUAI

"... I had a new bird come to my house. It came and sat near a feeding tray for just a few seconds, I sitting there mouth open too stunned to take many notes. But I did get its breast markings and size. It looked me over, didn't like what it saw, said chirp and joined another bunch, evidently the same kind, down in my little valley. Coming to, began phoning to everyone who knew what a bird looked like. Hit pay dirt at last, in the Fish and Game Commission. Next day Jerry Swedberg and David Fullaway

came with pictures, and I spotted my bird at once, it was an Indian Sand Grouse. They had been released a year and a half ago at Kokee, and they vanished, no one had seen a feather of them, until they came to me. The boys, may be I should say men, were as thrilled as I. I felt as if I had been knighted with at least The Garter. One just never sees a new bird. ..."

Jean Langille

National Audubon Society announces:

Audubon Camp:

This summer many thousands of miles were covered in an intensive search for a new Camp home in the West. Sites and facilities in Arizona-Utah-Wyoming-Oregon-Washington and, of course, California were visited and surveyed. But in most instances accommodations were far too limited without extensive developments, or the sites did not lend themselves to a rich teaching experience. While we do know the location and facilities at Sugar Bowl Lodge will be difficult to duplicate, we feel certain there is a "place waiting". Yes, we have thought about the possibility of building our own accommodations should a site become available, but this would require a financial undertaking of considerable magnitude. It may be the only answer. In the meantime, the search will continue and your continuing suggestions and guidance will be more than welcome, always.

National Audubon WESTERN Conference - April 6-9, 1963:

Final arrangements will move into high gear with the mailing of the Official Registration Form and Program Announcement on October 1 to all who have requested this priority information. There is still time to send in your request for this information. Write to Audubon Western Conference, 2426 Bancroft Way, Berkeley 4, California. As time passes the Conference Theme becomes ever more timely, "Our Living Heritage-Going, Where?" You will not want to miss the thought provoking presentations of outstanding speakers. Make your plans NOW to be at Asilomar April 6-9 next year.

Officers for 1963 were elected at the annual meeting on December 17, 1962.

JANUARY ACTIVITIES:

- January 8 - Board meeting at the Auditorium of the Honolulu Aquarium at 7:30 p.m.
Members are always welcome.
- January 13 - Field trip to see shore birds, led by Mike Ord.
Meet at the Library of Hawaii at 8:00 a.m.
- January 21 - General meeting at the Auditorium of the Honolulu Aquarium, 7:30 p.m.
Look for newspaper announcement of speaker.

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