



U. S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Office of the Secretary

Press Service



Release - Immediate.

April 26, 1922.

BIOLOGICAL SURVEY TELLS
HOW TO MAKE A COUNT OF BIRDS

Renewed interest in the bird population of the United States has led to a revival of the efforts, begun in 1914, by the Biological Survey of the United States Department of Agriculture, to collect information on the number and distribution of the birds breeding in this country. Counts have been made each succeeding year, and interested persons who are thoroughly familiar with the breeding birds of their respective vicinities are asked to aid in the work. Many people have an idea that taking a bird count requires access to an area frequented by numerous birds. It is just as important, however, from the standpoint of preservation, protection, and increase to know how they are distributed, even where birds are few.

By continuing these counts over a period of years and counting the same areas each year, knowledge can be gained, not only of our total bird population but also of its fluctuations from year to year. The counts, moreover, will greatly help in determining what effect the present State and Federal laws have on the increase of game and insectivorous birds. The Department hopes that counts will be continued on all land where they have previously been made, and it especially desires to obtain also series of counts indicating the bird life on the Plains, on the deserts, both with and without irrigation, and in the Southern and Western States.

Breeding Season Proper Time

It might be well to select new areas where physical conditions are not likely to change much for a number of years, so that if succeeding annual counts show changes in bird population it will be known that they are not due to changed environment brought about by man. On the other hand, there is much to be learned regarding the adaptation of birds to changes of environment; any area therefore on which reports can be made year after year may be chosen, even though conditions are likely to change. Possible inability to repeat a count on the same tract need not, however, deter anyone from making the count this year.

The height of the breeding season should be chosen for this work. In the latitude of Washington, D.C., at latitude 39 degrees, May 30, is about the right date for the first count. In the latitude of Boston the work should not begin until a week later; while south of Washington a date still earlier than May 30, should be selected. In any locality the count should not be made before the end of the migration. If the work is done too early there is danger of counting as nesting some individual birds that will go farther north to breed.

The Department wants to learn how many pairs of birds actually nest within the selected area. Birds that visit the area only for feeding purposes must not be counted, no matter how close their nests may be to the boundary line.

Several Counts Needed.

Several kinds of counts are needed for a study of the relative abundance of birds under changing and stationary conditions. It is hoped that many persons interested in bird life will make one or more counts this

season. If only one count is made, the tract selected should represent average farm conditions for the locality, should not have an undue amount of woodland or orchard, and should contain not less than 40 acres a quarter of a mile square nor more than 80 acres. If there is an isolated piece of woodland of 10 to 20 acres conveniently near, a separate count of the birds nesting there will be useful in addition to the count on the rest of the farm. In this case the report, in addition to specifying the size and exact boundaries of the area, should give the principal kinds of trees, and whether there is much or little underbrush.

A third count is desired of some definite area of woodland, which is part of a larger timbered tract. Still a fourth count, supplementary to these is needed. The average farm in the Northeastern States contains about 100 acres, and the average count hitherto has been of the birds nesting on the 50 acres of the farm nearest to and including the farm buildings. It is now necessary to obtain counts also of the remainder of the farm, the wilder part containing no buildings, especially on the same farms where counts about the buildings have already been made. Besides these, counts on any other kinds of land are much desired for comparison.

Anyone who is willing to do this work is requested to send his name and address to the Biological Survey, Washington, D.C. Full directions for making a count and report blanks will be sent in time for plans to be made before the actual time for the field work. Since the Bureau has no funds with which to pay for this work, it must depend on the services of voluntary observers.

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