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MARKET GROWING FOR GAME PROPAGATED IN CAPTIVITY

The importance of the industry of raising game birds in captivity must be judged from the standpoint of both production and consumption of the products, as is the case with the poultry industry in general. According to the United States Department of Agriculture there are more individuals directly interested in keeping and breeding fowls than in the production of any other class of animals or any class of plants. The birds produced in this way include not only chickens, turkeys, and guinea fowls; but also pheasants, peafowls, ostriches, and migratory waterfowl--ducks, geese, and swans--and these are raised in all parts of the United States and under a great variety of conditions. To a discussion in the latest Yearbook of the Department of Agriculture on the economic importance of the poultry industry in the United States, W. L. McAtee, of the Biological Survey has contributed the following chapter on "The Game Poultry Industry:"

In the United States the game-bird market has undergone a complete change within a generation. Formerly this market was as well supplied both in quantity and variety as any in the world, the game consisting entirely of wild birds. Now, after almost complete elimination for a period of years through legal restrictions, the game-bird market, although enormously decreased, is gradually growing. The birds marketed, however, except for certain imported species, are for the most part propagated in captivity.

Between 1870 and 1880 the passenger pigeon was shipped literally by the carload, and a single consignment of prairie chickens to a New York dealer weighed 20 tons. Wild ducks by the tens of thousands were poured into the game markets from all the important hunting grounds of the country. It gradually became evident that an increasing demand, easily catered to because of improved facilities for shipping and marketing, was rapidly depleting the wild stock. Conservation laws multiplied, sale was prohibited, and through a final enactment, the Federal migratory bird treaty act of 1918, the market for wild game birds in the United States was practically closed.

This law, as well as those of numerous States, has provisions designed to permit and encourage artificial propagation of game birds and their marketing under restrictions intended to prevent drafts on the wild stock, such as our former experience proved to be incompatible with its maintenance. Such legislation has developed unevenly, as is usually the case when the 48 States act independently. No fewer than 28 States have fair to good laws on the subject, and at least 12 others have made a beginning. The problem is a difficult one, and game breeders should realize that there is no disposition to hamper them; rather the almost universal desire is to encourage them so far as can be done without endangering our present standard of protection of wild game.

The propagation and sale of migratory waterfowl (that is, wild ducks, geese, and swans) is legal under regulations issued by the Secretary of Agriculture, and thousands of persons have obtained permits issued by him to possess, propagate, and sell birds of this class. Recent figures compiled show that in one year 4,291 game breeders reared approximately 42,800 birds, of which about 12,200 were sold for propagating purposes (including those used for decoys), 10,100 for food, and 8,000 were eaten at home.

The breeding of nonmigratory game birds, such as pheasants and quail, is under State regulation, but statistics as to the extent of the industry are very unsatisfactory. State game departments in a number of instances rear and distribute many pheasants, but this activity can not be reckoned in estimating the commercial importance of the propagation of these birds. Definite totals can hardly be attempted with present knowledge of the subject, but the statement may be ventured that the 13,100 pheasants, exclusive of importations, sold for food in New York and New Jersey in 1922 exceeded the number sold for such use in other States. The number sold for propagating and stocking purposes doubtless is far larger, but definite figures have been unobtainable. So far as individual propagators are concerned the data available would indicate that, while fewer are engaged in the culture of upland than of aquatic game birds, the numbers of these birds sold for propagation and for food are somewhat larger.

Under present conditions the market for artificially propagated game birds is mainly with those desiring to engage in rearing the birds and with sportsmen who wish to use them for decoys and for restocking shooting coverts. Prices realized from these sources are so high that only a limited demand exists for the birds for table use, mainly by the most luxurious hotels and clubs. So long as the demand for decoy, stocking, and propagating birds absorbs most of the output at fancy prices, it is not likely that production of birds for food will become much more important than it is at present. However, should the rearing of game birds continue to increase, prices would decrease and a more general market could be established.

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