



DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

INFORMATION SERVICE

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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FARMERS' PROFITS GUARDED BY NATURE'S AIR FORCE

Farmers who indiscriminately shoot hawks and owls are making a mistake, according to the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service. All the small hawks and owls, and most of the large ones, do much more good than harm. Even though an owl or hawk may kill an occasional game or song bird, the thousands of rodents they capture rate the hawks and owls among the farmer's best friends.

The few hawks that might be considered destructive--such as the sharp-shinned and Cooper's hawk--are furtive birds seldom seen by observers. The great horned owl, likewise is infrequently seen. This owl preys on cottontail rabbits and an occasional game bird. The snowy owl, which is conspicuous and tame, is shot in great numbers during its periodic visits south of the arctic circle. Yet this attractive winter immigrant eats quantities of mice and rats--even though the infrequency of its visits limits its net effect on the total rodent population.

Rodents destroy millions of dollars worth of farm products each year, and are known to have taken or spoiled as much as 20 to 40 percent of specific farm crops. The farmer who protects hawks and owls on his land is aiding in the natural control of costly rodent pests, the Fish and Wildlife Service points out. As the farmer's police, hawks are on guard throughout the day, and owls patrol the farm at night.

Other birds serve as aerial watchmen about the farm, too. Woodpeckers are especially helpful. By searching every inch of bark on the trees of the farm's orchard or shelter belt, woodpeckers dig out destructive insects and grubs. Their small allies, the titmice and nuthatches, also scour the bark for insects. In fact, almost all birds may be considered beneficial in some degree because they eat insects and weed seeds. Even the quarrelsome blue jay performs a service in planting trees, although his purpose in burying nuts is for his own use later.

Practically every bird is employed in nature's police force and has a beat of its own to patrol. Some watch only for rodents, others turn over leaves and twigs looking for weed seeds and insects, and some drill for grubs. A few, such as the swallows, feed while in full flight by snatching insects out of the air. Young birds in the nest eat approximately their own weight in food each day. To produce such a quantity of insects requires many hours of effort by hard-working parents.

It is the business of the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service to know which birds are friends of farmers and which are enemies. However, a bird which is a desirable citizen in one locality may be a nuisance in another. Some birds are known to be crop-destroyers at times--like the keenly competitive and pugnacious starlings--and consequently are on the Service's list of undesirables. Such birds cannot be imported into the U. S. or its possessions, nor are they protected by law--as are most of the song birds. Where unusually large concentrations of birds become destructive to grains, berries, fruits or other crops, the Service suggests means for preventing or minimizing their forays.

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