

BIRDS IN THE FOREST

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Birds play an important role in the life of the forest. In fact it is doubtful if forests could long exist without them. In the absence of birds trees would soon become obliterated by the ravages of insects and their never-failing followers—fungi.

Periodically we read of insect epidemics responsible for the destruction of thousands of acres of woods, incidental to the destruction of birds by severe Winters preceding. For instance, in the years 1918 to 1922, 90,000 acres of conifer woods were destroyed by the Nun Moth in Central Europe, and this would appear to be closely associated with the destruction of birds caused by the severe Winter of 1917; and we all remember the onslaught by chermes on trees and other plants and the wiping out of vegetables by caterpillars in the Summer and Harvest of 1947. This, no doubt, was due to the havoc caused amongst the birds by the memorable frost and snow which lasted eight weeks in the Spring of 1947.

Birds are the only effective natural agents we have to prevent the rapid increase of insects. The gardener can protect his fruit trees to some extent by spraying with insecticides, but the spraying of the forest would be well-nigh an impossible task. Consequently, birds are indispensable, but it is not in this respect alone that birds are useful. They render life in the forest more interesting, and delight the ear with their sweet songs. They are weather and season guides. The cuckoo sounds the first note of Summer and on the approach of rain "Low o'er the grass the swallow wings."

We are indebted to the birds for the distribution of the seeds of many trees and shrubs, such as Mountain Ash, Whitebeam, Holly, Whitethorn, Cotoneaster. The Red Bearberry (*Arctostaphylos Uva-ursi*), a beautiful creeping shrub found in the West is a native of the Mountains of Central Europe, where the bears are said to feed on its berries. Its seeds, no doubt, were carried by birds and deposited in their new and congenial home amongst the limestone crags of Burren and the rocky hillocks of the bogs of Connemara.

Some years ago, myriads of starlings, after their daily toil on the farm lands of Clare and Limerick, began to congregate at night in the young spruce forest of Kiltrush on the Atlantic Coast (the only forest in that vicinity). So numerous did the birds become that it was thought that serious damage would be caused to the forest by their droppings. Some trees did suffer from incrustation on the foliage, but so great was the resulting fertilization of the ground that the trees soon began to show extra growth and vigour and were better able to stand up to the Atlantic gales.

Even birds normally looked upon as destructive have their uses. For instance, the Crossbills, which come from Northern Europe in the Winter, break up cones of Scots Pine, larch and

other trees, to feed upon the seeds. In the disintegration of the cones many seeds escape and fall to the ground and thus contribute to the natural regeneration of the woods.

On the Continent it has long been the practice to attract birds to the forest by the erection of nesting boxes on the trees. In Germany various species of insectivorous birds are catered for in this way, but it was only in comparatively recent years that the practice was taken up in this country. In the Spring of 1944, the Forestry Service sent out 20 boxes for erection at Avondale.

The boxes used are of the Westphalian type 7" x 9", 10½" high at back and 9½" high in front with roof 10" x 9". Entrance hole 1¼" in diameter is in the door on the side. They are intended for small birds only.

The boxes were erected on 1st March on different species of trees and in different positions. On examination on 15th May, 75% of the boxes contained nests with eggs. Some had as many as eight eggs and broods were hatched out later in all cases. The occupants were mostly tits, but there were a few tree creepers.

At the end of the Harvest, the boxes were taken down, cleaned and stored until Spring, when they were re-erected. The results were somewhat similar in the following years until 1947 when the percentage fell to 50, due no doubt to the havoc caused amongst the birds by the great snow in the Spring of 1947.

The boxes best patronised were those erected on old beeches in the vicinity of dwelling houses, those in more backward situations being less favoured.

It is to be hoped that the Forestry Service, seeing the success of this experiment, will extend the good work to other forests and that private individuals will be induced to take up the matter and give more attention to the preservation of birds.