

## A Day To Remember The Birds?

It is good to have a day titled “Thanksgiving” to remind us to notice the small daily gifts of the natural world. I have heard that peace of mind begins with thankfulness and perhaps it begins with a look out the window. John Keats may have said it best: “The poetry of earth is never.” But Keat’s brief life ended in 1821 before the word ‘ecology’ was used and before there was any realization that the natural world was, in its way, as fragile, as breakable as human life.

( Ecology – origin, late 19<sup>th</sup> century; originally written as oecology from the Greek oikos (house) + ology. Don’t you love these idle trips to the dictionary? The dictionary does make it clear that it is our house, our responsibility.)

Romantic poetry may not be prescribed for children today in the doses recommended before World War II. Whatever the story line was in Keat’s “La Belle Dame Sans Merci” is a dim memory but a line from that poem haunts me still in its evocation of desolation. “The sedge has withered from the lake. And no birds sing.”

Can you imagine a world without eagles and chickadees, cardinals and sparrows?

We did come close to losing them when DDT, esteemed as a vital pesticide during WWII, was being used with such enthusiasm that in some bird species more birds were dying than hatching. When we finish being thankful for blue skies, sunny days and a turkey in the oven, we should express a very definite ‘thank you’ for the pioneering research done by Rachel Carson.

According to the Nov/Dec Audubon Magazine when Carsons’s “A Silent Spring” appeared in 1962, Chemical World News condemned it as science fiction.” Even Time magazine, which should have known better, not being an official organ of the chemical industry, fluffed it off as an “emotional and inaccurate outburst.”

“A Silent Spring” was to have been condensed by Readers Digest that Procrustean bed for literature cut-to-fit. It was cancelled. Actually, “Silent Spring” was not dismal but merely a warning full of hope as well as love for the natural world. Ten years later in 1972 Carson was proved right. DDT was banned and we are thankful and all the richer for her efforts.

A look back at the environmental movement gives us hope for the future. In the late ‘70s the federal government reached a high point in spending for natural resources, about 2.5 cents out of the federal dollar. Today spending on such things as clean air, drinkable water and parks has dropped to about 1.4 cents per dollar.

You may have noticed to your dismay that our beautiful state is 50<sup>th</sup> in per capita spending on the environment. This means it is particularly important that we not add to the pollution

problem by the choices we make in our own homes. Just a few people can make a difference.

At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century birds, rare and beautiful ones like egrets and the tropical bird of paradise were decimate to provide plumes to decorate women's hats. (It this seems a sexist observation I remind the gentlemen that the survival of beavers was threatened to provide men's hats.) Groups of ladies, shocked by tales of tortured birds, demanded a stop to the trade.

Not only the ladies were shocked. Ardent bird watcher Frank Chapman counted 174 birds of 40 species in a walk from uptown Manhattan to the fashion district on 14street. These were birds or parts of birds on hats, not on the wind. It is hard for us to imagine that era, from the 1890s until about 1910, when a lady would no more leave her front porch without a hat than to appear in public without her shoes. Therefore, what was a fashion became a cause, since hundreds of thousands of hats were under scrutiny.

In state after state Audubon societies were founded to protect birds and Mr. Chapman became founder of the publication of the magazine that became Audubon. States and eventually Congress passed sufficient protective legislation and hats were bird-less. Of course now ladies are hat-less. Sic Transit Gloria!