

THE PRESIDENT'S PAGE

This is written to you, who love the out-of-doors, as I sit beside a singing swamp at even' tide, in late spring, listening to the night voices of the birds recently migrated into southern Alabama. I am made aware of what Rachel Carson has written in her recent book, SILENT SPRING. I quote from the fly leaf of the book, "For as long as man has dwelt on this planet, spring has been the season of rebirth and the singing of the birds. Now in some parts of America spring is strangely silent, for many of the birds are dead -- incidental victims of our reckless attempts to control our environment by the use of chemicals that poison not only the insects against which they are directed but the birds in the air, the fish in the rivers, the earth which supplies our food, and, inevitably (to what degree is still unknown), man himself." These words do not find us unaware of what is happening. Charles Broley, a deceased honorary member of A.O.S., gave us the same thoughts when he was the speaker for our Spring Meeting in April, 1958. This organization is dedicated to the preservation of our natural resources.

Thomas Z. Atkeson, Jr. brought to the attention of the Society, at the Spring Meeting, 1963, that there is not a backlog of population density data for the summer resident birds. He reminds us that our nesting birds are here in the summer but the only information we are gathering is that of the winter residents, during the Christman Bird Censuses. Mr. Atkeson recommended that a Summer Resident bird census be made to establish the backlog of population data which we need to definitely establish the status of the resident breeding birds. He suggests that we try the Fourth of July Bird Census.

The singing, clucking, and whistling sounds from the swamp remind me why we're here -- to study the nesting wading birds, Cattle Egrets, and Little Blue Herons. In our party tonight is Mr. Charles W. Summerour, III, an ornithology student at Auburn University, who is doing a thesis on Cattle Egrets. When requesting permission from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to collect some Cattle Egrets for thesis material, he received a letter of reply that the Cattle Egret was not on the Migratory Bird Treaty Protection List, therefore, he did not need their permission to collect the birds. This was quite a surprise to us because if one heron is not protected, all other herons are endangered. We must move to initiate and support a program to add the Cattle Egret to the protected list.

The Fall Meeting of A.O.S. will be held at Decatur, Alabama on November 15-17. Headquarters will be the Holiday Inn. Mr. T. Z. Atkeson, Jr., Manager, of the Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge has invited us to hold our field trip on the refuge whereby to study the ducks and geese.

The moon has risen and is shedding it's smoky yellow rays over the land. It is now time for us to move on into the swamp for our nightly foray, just as it is time for us to begin to take action on these problems of ornithology and make our reservations for the Decatur Meeting.

Rosemary T. Dusi

COMMON GRACKLES CATCHING LIVE SHAD

James E. Keeler

During the period, February 1, to March 7, 1963, Common Grackles, Quiscalus quiscula (Linnaeus), were observed catching and feeding on live shad on Lake Demopolis in Marengo County, Alabama. Although first reported on February 1, by Mr. Walter Beshears, Jr., Biologist for the Alabama Department of Conservation, it appears probable that these birds were fishing prior to this date and possibly throughout most of the month of January. Fishing by Common Grackles was not reported on any other impounded lakes of Alabama.

Lake Demopolis consists of 10,000 acres of surface water created by the construction of a lock and dam on the Tombigbee River in 1954 by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers for the purpose of flood control and navigation. This lake contains an excellent population of fish, with a very high population of shad. It is quite probable that two species of shad, the Threadfin Shad, Dorosoma petenese (Gunther), and small Gizzard Shad, Dorosoma cepedianum (LeSueur), were being caught by the grackles since both species are numerous in the lake. These shad are subject to winter kill, caused by low water temperatures, parasites and disease. Extreme temperatures for the month of February ranged from a high of 75 degrees to a low of 17 degrees Fahrenheit. According to U.S. Weather Bureau daily records, low temperature readings reached below freezing during 15 days of February.

The shad observed in the water ranged from approximately two to five inches in length and exhibited definite behavior patterns. They would rise gradually to the surface of the water, turn on their sides, and make a few feeble attempts to right themselves. The lack of strength to right themselves and the very weak and circular swimming motion indicated the shad might soon die. No schools of shad were observed rising to the water surface and only individuals were noted at any one time. This indicated that a school of shad had passed below the surface out of sight, leaving an occasional weak fish which would eventually rise to the surface.

Thousands of grackles were seen fishing on Lake Demopolis during each day that observations were made. They appeared to be fairly evenly dispersed along the edges of the lake. It was interesting to note that each grackle would spend only a short time in any one location and if unsuccessful in catching a fish would fly to another area. The birds would scan the surface intently as they perched in trees and bushes along the water's edge and on snags projecting above the water. At the moment a shad approached the surface and turned on its side, it was seen immediately by one or more grackles.

At first it was noticed that the usual method employed by the grackles to catch a shad was to fly over the fish, hover, and gently lower the body toward the water. Then, if necessary, the bird would actually sit in the water for an instant, grasp the fish with the bill, spring out of the water and fly away. Observations made during the latter part of February indicated, however, that many of the birds had

overcome their fear of the water and would actually hit the water head first in a fashion similar to kingfishers and terns. This increased bravery allowed them to catch shad at least four inches below the surface.

It was quite evident that some grackles were more experienced than others at fishing for shad since certain grackles would fly over a fish, hesitate, then retreat and allow a more skilled bird to retrieve it. It was also noticed that even though a certain grackle fished a shad out of the water, this by no means guaranteed that the bird would retain possession of it. In many instances, a bird would catch a fish, begin to fly away, and be pursued immediately by as many as four other grackles whose persistence would cause it to drop the fish. On one occasion, a bird dropped the fish when chased and another bird caught it in mid air and flew away.

It was interesting to note that grackles would not retrieve a dead shad floating on the surface of the water. One dead shad approximately three inches in length was observed for about thirty minutes. During this time, about fifteen different grackles flew to the fish and most of them hovered over it, looked it over, and flew away. A few birds actually grasped it with their bills and immediately dropped it. Finally one bird picked it up and flew to the bank but eventually abandoned it.

All of the grackles observed through binoculars appeared to be the bronze-backed type and their habits could be grouped into two general classes; birds that fished, and birds that pursued the successful fishing birds. This activity indicated that catching fish was a learned trait and not a natural behavior pattern since some of the birds refused to touch the water even though the fish was close to the surface. It was estimated that hundreds of pounds of shad were caught daily from Lake Demopolis by these grackles. It was apparent that these birds discovered a new source of food during a period when most natural foods were scarce and immediately adapted themselves to take advantage of it.

Alabama Department of Conservation
Montgomery, Alabama

CATTLE EGRETS AT MONTGOMERY

Robert W. Skinner

Montgomery can now claim a new breeding bird -- the Cattle Egret. July 13, 1963, five miles south of Montgomery, the author and Bill Summerour, III discovered several pairs of cattle egrets nesting in a colony of little blue herons and American egrets. Several days later five young were banded. July 17, several birds were noted out in the pastures among cattle north, east and south of Montgomery. July 18, 1963, five miles north of Montgomery an adult female was collected by myself to be deposited as a specimen in the State Conservation Department collection. There were eight birds present in the area at the time of collection. The measurements are as follows: Wing, 245; Culmen, 55; Tarsus, 71.5; Tail, 96; Total Length, 480; Weight, 434 gr. The stomach content included the following -- grasshoppers, 72; crickets, 10; frogs, 7 (whole); spider, 1; beetles, 2.

State Department of Conservation
Montgomery, Alabama

SOME OBSERVATIONS OF A NEST OF THE CATTLE EGRET

Julian L. Dusi and Rosemary T. Dusi

In our studies of a wading bird nesting colony located about ten miles southeast of Opp, Covington County, Alabama, on the Covington County Wildlife Management Area, we were fortunate to be able to secure a group of precise observations on a Cattle Egret, Bubulcus ibis (Linnaeus), nest and the development of the young.

The nesting colony, located in a tupelo-oak-pine limestone sink, was shown to us by James E. Keeler in 1962. He had banded nestlings of other wading birds there before and we intensified the study. It was predominantly a Little Blue Heron, Florida caerulea (Linnaeus)- White Ibis, Eudocimus albus (Linnaeus) colony with a few Anhingas, Anhinga anhinga, (Linnaeus) and Common Egrets, Casmerodius albus (Linnaeus), at that time.

Our first trip to the area in 1963 was on March 19. Then, there were about 50 Little Blue Herons and 8 Common Egrets present. Nesting had not been started. Our next visit on May 4, revealed about 60 Little Blue Heron, 20 White Ibis, and 2 Common Egret nests. The young were too small to band. Two adult Cattle Egrets were seen but their nest was not found.

On May 17, accompanied by eight ornithology class members including C.W. Summerour, III and Ann Tyer, we banded a number of herons and located the Cattle Egret nest. The following day the nest was photographed. Of the four eggs present, one had just hatched and another was being pipped. The nest had the appearance of a Little Blue Heron nest and was placed close to several of them.

On June 1, just two weeks after the first bird had hatched, we returned to band and photograph the young. All of the eggs had hatched but only three of the nestlings were large enough to band. They were banded and measured as follows:

- 636-44073. Total length 272 mm., tarsus 55 mm., culmen (exposed) 32 mm.
- 636-44074. Total length 235 mm., tarsus 45 mm., culmen (exposed) 30 mm.
- 636-44075. Total length 230 mm., tarsus 47 mm., culmen (exposed) 30 mm.
- Unbanded Young. Total length 137 mm., tarsus 23 mm., culmen (exposed) 20 mm.

We believe that they hatched in the above order: the first two being the same age, two weeks, the third several days younger and the smallest about one week old.

On June 22, we returned to the area accompanied by C. W. Summerour, III. Three young were present in the tree above the nest. There was no sign of the fourth young. After a treetop chase we managed to catch one of the young which evidently could not fly quite as well as the others. It was 636-44074. We measured him to get his five-week-old dimensions.