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TRAGEDIES IN BIRD LIFE

(These Wildlife Articles Are Written by William
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Accidents

Tragedies are common in bird and animal life. The end is generally tragic. The weak fall prey to the strong. Nature knows not the decline of peaceful old age. Life is all spent on the march and in the firing line. The waning of strength, a moment's lack of alertness, are fatal. In some form the shape of death glides along every trail, creeps about every orchard, lurks in the deeper woods, skims the placid surface of the river, cowers in every nook and corner that Nature owns. The cat, the fox, the weasel, the snake, the hawk and all such creatures are hunters and hunted, pursuers and pursued.

One day I saw a shrike or butcher bird strike a goldfinch. The shrike is a murderer and he kills his own kind for the taste of blood and brains. His name comes from his habit of hanging his meat on a hook or in a crotch.

Although the shrike is the enemy of small birds, they often do not seem to realize that he is dangerous until he strikes one in their midst. But even though the shrike takes toll from the smaller creatures, he in turn is not exempt from the larger pirates.

A pair of shrikes had a home in a small juniper up the hillside. One day I heard a commotion and looked up toward the nest. A Swainson's hawk flew deliberately into the

tree, reached into the shrike's home and sailed off across the canyon with a young shrike dangling in his talons. Another moment, a shot rang out and the hawk fell dead, tragedy following tragedy in rapid succession. Yet it strikes no pall on the face of Nature.

In the treatment of her wild children, Nature does not adopt human methods. We may pass from the busy city street to the long white rows in the hospital ward, but Nature has nothing of this kind. She has no time for sickness and sympathy. Occasionally I find a sick or weakened creature, but it is rare. Her unchangeable law is the survival of the fittest. The battle is to the strong and healthy. These become wary, elusive and fit to mate. In this way Nature safeguards the species and makes it permanent at the expense of the individual. She taught the Greeks that it was better to expose the sickly child on the face of the mountain.

Nature sometimes makes a queer mistake and we find a freak bird or animal that survives. Such was the case of a young cormorant that I saw in a colony on a rocky island in northern California. The bird had a deformed bill. The upper mandible turned down just as in the hooked bill of a hawk and it fitted into the lower mandible, giving the bird a hooked nose appearance. "Poor unfortunate," I thought as I approached him. But he lunged at me like a rattlesnake.

Along with his hooked bill, he had acquired the fighting spirit of an eagle.

I wondered if a freak of this kind would win out in the survival of the fittest. After watching him and studying him awhile, I came to the conclusion that he would. He had this advantage over his mates: when his mouth once closed on a fish, it could never slip away. It seemed as if Nature had surely returned to some past age, for a picture of the young cormorant looked like one of the monsters of mythical times.

A little later I came upon a black tern's nest built on some floating reeds. There were two young half-grown terns sitting on the dead body of a third. I moved them aside and one look told the story. The bill of the dead bird was deformed in such a way that the upper mandible turned outward. It could not take food as readily as the other two. When young, the parents had fed it more carefully, but as the struggle for existence grew stronger among the three nestlings, the fittest won out. And here was a mute example of Nature's law,-- how often I have seen bantlings lying dead in the nest, for where the competition for food is so keen, only the strongest can win.

One day I was watching a pair of yellow warblers in the orchard. They were flitting about a vine-covered fence. They were either building or just about to build a nest in

the vicinity. The first thing I noticed, the male paused on the fence fluttering his wings. His mate flew down beside him. He tried to fly to the limb of a nearby tree, but fell short and wavered to the ground. His wife was right beside him chirping all the time. I went nearer for a closer view. He lay flat on his back writhing in pain. I could see he was dying. His wife was on the fence scarcely a yard from my hand, fidgeting and calling for him. But he died almost instantly, stricken by I know not what.

Two days later, I was sitting on the front porch with a flock of English sparrows sputtering and quarreling in the street in front of the house. Suddenly the Englishers scattered like fragments in an explosion and a sparrow hawk nabbed one just at the trellis over the porch. With two blows, he caved in the skull and sat on the post at the corner of the tennis court to finish his meal. For a few moments the sparrows kept hidden, but in half an hour they were sputtering and fighting in the dust as if nothing had happened. The next morning, the creeping form of some neighbor's cat shot out from a tuft of grass. There was a smothered chirp, and another of the flock had gone.

In my neighbor's back yard, I found a song sparrow hanging dead in the woven wire fence. In some way the foot had been caught in the twisted wires. The bird, in trying to release itself, had wedged the leg over and finally broken it.

At another time, I found the body of a thrush hanging to the barb of a wire fence. The wire ran straight across the top of a zigzagged fence, and the bird in full flight, had just skimmed the top of the rail to go full force into the wire before it was seen. The barb had caught in the neck and the force had swung the bird's body over from below, locking it in a death grip. Sometimes we hear of birds that have been entangled in the threads or horse hair used in nest building. A careless step often means death.

Accidents are not uncommon where birds are nesting in colonies. Years ago I visited a colony of herons that nested in some sycamore trees in a swamp at the lower end of San Francisco Bay. The young night herons are very expert at climbing, but sometimes they misstep and fall to the ground. I saw where one young bird had hung itself by getting a foot caught in a crotch. That in itself was not unusual, but a second bird hung by the neck only a few inches away. He had fallen or overbalanced on a small limb and, as is the custom, had hooked his chin over the branch to keep from dropping to the ground. The head was not caught between the branches, but simply hooked over a bend in the twig. Here he had hung himself rather than fall to the ground. His clutched right foot showed that the death struggle had been a reaching and stretching to regain the limb. Had he thrown his head back a trifle, he would have dropped to the bushes below. It seems impossible that the bird could have held the rigid position of the neck through the death struggle. The force of instinct against falling was strong even to death.