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HAWKS THAT CHECK THE RODENT PESTS

The common large hawk that one ordinarily sees circling with motionless wings is the western red-tail. If one watches the wheeling bird as the light strikes it at the right angle, the broadening on the tail shows a dun red color in contrast to the brown wings and back. In England, the close relative of our red-tailed hawk is commonly known as the buzzard. The early English settlers who came to this country applied the name buzzard to the vultures instead of to our larger soaring hawks where it belonged.

Of the thirty-eight species of hawk found throughout the country, a good portion are rare and seldom seen. Only two of these, the sharp-shinned hawk and the Cooper's hawk, are really injurious to small birds, game or poultry.

It is unfortunate that the red-tailed hawk is commonly called chicken hawk, unfortunate because it very rarely catches a chicken. To some farmers, every hawk is a chicken hawk and the only good hawk is a dead hawk.

It's a common habit among sportsmen to blame hawks for the decrease in game. Sporting magazines and hunting clubs, encouraged by ammunition companies and others, have spread plenty of false propaganda to the effect that it isn't the sportsmen who destroy game but various species of birds and mammals. The blame has been laid largely upon hawks and owls.

Inasmuch as various forms of animal life are linked together in what has been called the balance of nature, it has been proven that insect pests would often destroy a whole crop if they were not kept in check by song birds. In various parts of the country, there is a well defined group of animals called rodents

that live largely upon vegetable foods. These are the rats, mice, gophers, squirrels and others. Nature's check upon these is the hawk that hunts during the daytime and the owl at night.

There are many examples that show the value of hawks and owls on some of the newly irrigated lands in the west. The change of conditions gives rise to plagues of field mice. This comes very naturally if there is no check because the normal increase of a single pair of field mice and their progeny in five seasons amounts to nearly a million individuals.

Where these rodents have been unchecked, the yield of hay has been reduced one-third. Potatoes and root crops are largely destroyed. Alfalfa fields are ruined by mice eating the plants. Fields are riddled by their holes, which are scarcely more than a foot apart. A careful estimate shows that there are eight to twelve thousand mice to each acre.

The common opinion that predatory birds such as hawks and owls do more damage than good is incorrect. Years of careful field work by experts have proved that the successful tilling of the soil would be very difficult if there was no system of checks and balances among various forms of wild animal life.

It is not contended that the hawks alone can control a plague of rodents after the fields have been over-run. The important factor is the daily check throughout the year of the predatory birds upon the rodents that keeps the balance normal and prevents the outbreak of a plague.

Occasionally the hawk that is hunting squirrels will make a mistake. One was circling above a rocky rim when suddenly

he curved and dove straight toward the ground. He was successful on the catch and began to rise with a small animal in his talons. At a height of forty or fifty feet, he began to flutter but circled higher and higher as feathers began dropping from the hawk's body. After reaching a height of several hundred feet, he began to descend rapidly and soon dropped to the ground. The hawk had pounced upon a weasel, clutched it through the hips but had not killed the little animal. The weasel in the death struggle had literally disembowelled the big bird.