

Wisconsin School of the Air
Afield with Ranger Mac
October 2, 1939

FUR AND FEATHER ON THE HIGHWAYS

Hello Boys and Girls:

Last summer a good outdoor loving friend of mine made up his mind that he was going to have some good trout fishing. He had been fishing in the streams throughout the state but with not much success. "Too many fishermen", he said, "More fishermen than trout. I'm going to go where there are no fishermen". That is just what he said in a rather disgruntled manner. So he packed his family into a car and went to Colorado. Who else he thought would be crazy enough to go to Colorado to fish trout and I'll have things pretty much to myself. Well, he went to Colorado, learned where the streams were located, followed the winding tortuous road to one of them, and what should his wondering eyes behold but a stream lined with fishermen who just like himself, thought they were going to get away from the crowd and have some splendid fishing all to themselves. Each stream he journeyed to he had the same experience. There were fishermen everywhere. You see with 29,900,000 autos, one for every four to five persons, and with the development of roads, it is now possible for people to visit most every little hidden nook and corner on this continent until now there is not a stream or lake anywhere that amounts to anything but what is visited frequently. I have among my acquaintances many persons who have taken the wilderness trips in Canada - trips which a few years ago were taken only by the most adventurous and those who were willing to stand hardships. What is true about fishing is equally true about hunting. The auto has increased the number of hunters by the thousands, at the same time made it possible for them to reach places where hitherto our wild folk lived without hearing the report of a gun. This has given rise to laws of all kinds and officers to enforce the laws. Laws governing feeding and hunting, laws prohibiting the transportation of trees and shrubs were passed because of the auto, just as more rigid protection of our wild flowers is now being enforced because of the auto. On September 7 last the governor of our state signed a law providing additional protection to wild flowers, making the penalties more

drastic and adding bitterweet and the pitcher plant to the list of flowers formerly protected by law. It has been so easy for people traveling by auto to ravage the vines of bitterweet that this plant now needs protection.

The auto is one important reason why the state maintains so many well equipped fish hatcheries, constantly supplying small fish to our streams and lakes that the drain made by the auto travelling public may not deplete the supply. The auto is the important reason why the state establishes refuges and other protected areas for birds and animals, places where these creatures may live and rear their young without being molested. The auto is the important reason why the legislature passed the non-trespass law to protect farmers and land owners who post their land from the damage done to their property and their wild life by the auto traveling public. Because of the auto the roads have been increased in number, widened and kept clean from fence to fence. These roads or city streets now occupy about one percent of the area of our state. The right-of-ways are no longer places for flowers and shrubs and vines to grow, nor are they habitats for birds. Because they are well drained and hard, water flows freely into the ditches and causes the sudden swelling of streams after heavy rains and melting snows. Cigarettes thrown from cars cause many of our forest fires. Signs deface our landscapes because of the autos. Big ones, little ones, odd ones, ugly ones, glaring, screaming, billboards, to catch the eye of auto travelling public.

Of course, Ranger Mac is not mentioning the many and many benefits that come to us because of the auto; but am just stating some of the problems that arise in conservation circles because this form of transportation is readily available to so many people. 29,000,000 cars are now plying 3,065,000 road miles in the United States. The very density of the traffic gives rise to another tragedy - the terrific loss of valuable birds and game each year. Last summer I witnessed a scene that will long remain in memory. I was driving along a well wooded highway in northern Wisconsin when a half grown fawn stepped into the road about 100 yards ahead. That is a sight one likes to witness, so I pressed the brake pedal. For a number of seconds it stood

there, ears erect, and then with a graceful leap it disappeared into the dense foliage. My car was practically stopped now when another fawn appeared, following its companion, stood in the middle of the road watching me, ears erect, a beautiful sight. Tourists feel that they have had a successful trip to our northland when they can witness a sight like that. All at once a car suddenly whirled into sight from around the bend just beyond. Brakes screeched and the car slowed down. Thanks to the driver's quick action, the young deer had ample time to gain cover, but a death scene had been set and that picture will long remain in memory. It suggests all too vividly the many and many similar situations where wild life tragedy is written, and taking these tragedies in total there must be a terrific loss of wildlife each year. A truck driver driving his truck in Fond du Lac county and a portion of Dodge county kept a record of the specimens of wildlife he found killed along his course. He reported his findings to the State Conservation Department over a period of nine months. He counted 43 cottontails, 39 pheasants, 22 skunks and 5 raccoons, 107 in all. From my own check of the highways on various trips and from what others say, it is quite safe to say that the cottontail rabbit suffers the greatest disaster of all the back-boned creatures. But in our part of the country, the northern tier of states, I guess the death record of the rabbit may be almost equalled at certain seasons by the skunk. In every state where the deer play an important role among the wildfolk, records of the number of victims are kept by the conservation departments. In Maine during 1938, the record shows that 167 deer and 14 moose killed by autos. In New York 350 deer were killed by automobiles in 1938. In Michigan 300 and in Wisconsin 197. Pheasants, quail, squirrels and woodchucks are among the heavy sufferers. Generally, the ground nesting birds, the low flying and night flying birds are the most frequently hit of the feathered folk. About a week ago I drove to Sauk City, a distance of 25 miles. It was about 10 o'clock in the morning. I discovered that 3 rabbits, a fox squirrel and 4 red headed woodpeckers had been killed by automobiles up to that hour. Of all the birds the red headed woodpecker seems to be the most stupid when it comes to avoiding the auto. They will dart after insects in the road without using the precautionary measures that most wild folk use in the face of every present

danger. I have had them dive after a bug in the road within five feet of my moving car. There is no question in my mind but the toll of woodpeckers in Wisconsin exceeds that of any of our feathered friends. Of course, it would be next to impossible to estimate accurately the number of birds and animals killed annually along our highways, but records have been kept for a number of years by various people in different parts of the United States, and so there is some basis for making an estimate. Of the 3,000,000 miles of highway in our country, there are about 1,000,000 miles of surfaced highway. Surveys show that a fair average of wildlife killed on surfaced highways in summer and fall would be about one a day for every five miles. Now if you apply your arithmetic, you will find that it amounts to 500,000 creatures killed each day in the United States. This is not taking into consideration the unsurfaced roads. Of course, in the northern states, winter brings very few deaths. This is because of the hibernation of animals, the absence of migratory birds, the lessened activity of wildlife generally, and to the lighter traffic and slower traffic. But Spring brings on a much heavier toll and from June to November we find the real loss.

Now here is a real arithmetic problem for you. Suppose we take a modest estimate of one death per day over each five miles of surfaced highway of which there are 1,000,000 miles. This would mean 200,000 deaths per day. Now suppose we select the time of the greatest killings from June to November, which would be five months or 150 days. 200,000 deaths a day for 150 days would make the total 30,000,000 deaths. This is throwing out of consideration seven months of the year and the 2,000,000 miles of unsurfaced highway. This, I believe is a very modest estimate, and I know you will agree with me that it presents a problem of a serious nature, one very few of us ever thought about.

It is difficult to promote safety for wild birds and animals that must cross the paths of high-speeding automobiles. We have faith to believe that most drivers are not vicious, but many are careless. People with a sense of fair play may not need any warning, but the millions of cars that are rolling over our highway are guided by men and women of varied minds. No doubt most of them are not aware that

the death toll is very high. Most people when they learn are more alert and considerate. And no education seems to be the only logical remedy to lower the great toll of wildlife along our highways. 3,000,000 miles of highways; enough to circle the globe 120 times, 29,000,000 automobiles, one for every five people; more automobiles than are operating in the whole of the eastern hemisphere. Along with this comfort and convenience, we should learn to give our wildlife a break.

As I was gathering these figures for you yesterday afternoon, I looked out the window and on the lawn there must have been as many as fifty robins and white-throated sparrows, some of them fighting for possession of the bird bath. Birds on their way south; birds in flocks; they must find something in this companionship that gives them courage for their arduous journey. If birds are like men, then this is true. There is something about October, more than its bright blue weather, that sets the gypsy blood astir. I guess it must be the birds in migration, the wonder and mystery of it all. In your trips to and from school do not fail to notice these restless winged creatures in flocks now headed southward. And wish them good luck today for tomorrow they will be gone; maybe to be followed by another flock.

And Ranger Mac too must be on his way for our time is up. And if I could be a bird I think I should choose to be a Bob-O-Link that gurgles over our meadows in summer and lives in the Pampas of Brasil in winter. What bird would you choose to be?

Good luck until next week!