

ORNITHOLOGY

Bird Life of Florida Little Changed Since Ice Age

FLORIDA winter residents who watch with wonder and admiration the beauty and grace of Florida birds are unconsciously paying tribute to the descendants of a race of Florida tourists who found that semi-tropical peninsula a good land to dwell in during a winter much longer than the ones we know today. For during scores of thousands of years of the later Ice Age, when the whole of eastern North America groaned under a Greenland-like burden of glaciers as far south as the Ohio river and the prairies of Iowa and Nebraska, the bird population of Florida was essentially the same as it is today.

This fact has developed from studies by Dr. Alexander Wetmore of the U. S. National Museum, which he has just rounded up into finished manuscript form. They will appear as a technical publication some time in the near future.

Fossils of bird bones from half a dozen localities in central Florida have been identified, yielding a total bird fauna to date of sixty-five forms. All but three of them are of birds still living; and of the sixty-two species and varieties all but nine are still to be found in Florida, either breeding there or as winter migrants. These include such striking and beautiful birds as white ibis, egret, snakebird and black duck.

Included in the nine still living but

not now known in Florida are the rare trumpeter swan, the almost extinct whooping crane and the jabiru stork. The three extinct species comprise one teal, one turkey and a great condor-like bird. Twenty-six of the sixty-five Florida fossil birds have not previously been known as fossils.

Because of the smallness and delicacy of their bones, bird remains do not fossilize as well as those of larger animals. Until the Florida finds began to come in, sent by several collaborating collectors, practically all American bird fossils were from various parts of the West.

So far, one hundred forty living North American birds are known also as fossils, the list representing about fifteen per cent. of existing North American species.

Science News Letter, May 30, 1931

Alaskan whaling stations still make an annual catch of 300 to 400 whales.

Government tests show that banana powder made from fresh, raw bananas is a good source of vitamins B and G.

Amplifiers are being tried in some court rooms, to insure that the words of weak-voiced witnesses will carry across to the jury.



May-Apple

THE waxy white flowers hidden under the broad leaves of the May-apple are beginning to give place to the round, fleshy little fruits. Shortly children will be making a second pilgrimage to the wide patches this plant forms in the open woods, to gather in the yellow "lemons"—provided the raccoons have not been there first. The May-apple is sometimes called "raccoon apple."

These great, spreading patches of May-apple usually start from a single plant. They are indeed, strictly speaking, single plants. For if one digs carefully among the stems, one finds that they are all connected by means of endlessly rambling, branching rootstocks or thickened underground stems, which burrow about through the soil, constantly enlarging the domain of the patch.

The May-apple is known also as the American mandrake; its root yields a bitter cathartic principle known as podophyllin, much used in medicine. It is not to be confused with the European mandrake, which belongs to an entirely separate plant family, being kin to the potato and nightshade, whereas the American mandrake is related to the barberry.

It is the European mandrake which gives rise to the odd, oldtime superstition that its forked root, shaped roughly like a man's body, shrieked aloud when pulled up, and that whoever heard its cry must certainly perish. Hence the old herb-gatherers' books directed that it must be pulled up by a cord tied to a dog's collar, while the dog's owner remained safely out of ear-shot.

Science News Letter, May 30, 1931

Italy's net increase in population is now 'about 450,000 a year.

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