



Rejected Rainbow

➤ EXCEPT for man and some of his nearest relatives among the primates, most mammals seem to be color-blind. Birds, on the contrary, are clearly able to distinguish between colors. Principal exceptions are nocturnal birds such as owls, and crepuscular or twilight birds like whippoorwills; these distinguish colors either badly or not at all.

Not only are most birds able to tell colors apart, but they will hesitate to take food if it is of the "wrong" color. This was first noticed years ago when an effort was made to control the numbers of English sparrows by scattering poisoned grain. The birds would not pick up grain that had been soaked in Paris green or London purple, seemingly because it just didn't look right.

Now this reluctance to eat "off-color" grain is being used in reverse, to save useful song and game birds from being killed by poisoned grain baits intended for prairie dogs, ground squirrels and other rodent pests. The method was worked out by a biologist of the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service, E. R. Kalmbach, at the field laboratory in Denver.

After the grain has been impregnated with poison it is dyed bright green,

saffron yellow, staring purple or flaming red. A spoonful is dropped at the mouth of each rodent burrow, and in 24 hours it is usually all cleaned up. But birds very rarely touch it.

Mr. Kalmbach has run scores of tests, offering grain (unpoisoned, of course) in its natural color and in rainbow hues to a wide variety of birds, from barnyard fowl to sparrows and doves. The birds regularly pick up the natural-colored grain and let the dyed grain lie, even when the choice means rejecting perfectly wholesome though strange-colored food. Rats and other grain-eating rodents, on the contrary,

pay no attention to color but pick up all the grain indiscriminately.

There is one partial exception to the birds' rule of rejecting colored grain. Ducks and other water-fowl will sometimes eat at least a little of it, though even they show a preference for natural-colored food. Mr. Kalmbach thinks it possible that this may be connected with the fact that water-fowl do a good deal of their feeding under water, where the food is either obscured by turbidity or even actually buried in the mud, and hence found by touch rather than by sight.

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