

Decline in grassland birds barometer of environment

By Phil Sander

During the mid 1930's I visited frequently with Henry DeBerg and Mike Link, old-time Kenoshans. Our mutual interest talks were about Kenosha's history, hunting and fishing. Discussions led to the sighting of Passenger Pigeons in Kenosha County. They related seeing the spring and fall migrations, especially the scattered flocks along the Pike River valley during the 1890's. I remember my father telling me stories about hunting pigeons along the Rock River in Illinois, and seeing barrels of pigeons at market places in Chicago.

Recorded sources documented wide-spread migration through all the counties along Wisconsin's southern border as the birds winged their way to their central nesting sites near Wisconsin Dells. More than 100 million birds once migrated through the state.

The Passenger Pigeon disappeared forever in 1914. Will other birds succumb to the same fate? Ornithologists and biologists have placed a number of species on the "Watch List" Their recent inventory in the United States shows a steady decline of endangered species, which includes 72 birds, 38 mammals, and 71 plants.

Kenosha County once had an average population of native game birds. Quail and prairie chicken were common on many farm prairies. Since the 1920's these birds have disappeared from the county. The last prairie chicken I saw was in 1925 east of George Lake. Quail vanished about that same time in the Twin Lakes and Wilmot areas.

Pheasants and Hungarian partridge, introduced about 1929, adapted very quickly to their new environment and were exceedingly prolific. From the 1940's through the 1960's these birds could be found in substantial numbers on all farm lands in each of the eight townships of the county. Recent surveys show that ground-nesting birds, such as pheasants, bobolinks, meadowlarks and upland sandpipers are dwindling each year.



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The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources and sportsmen's clubs are monitoring this decline and are initiating plans to revive critical habitat with the cooperation of farm owners, and soil conservation service.

Multiple abuses such as intensive land use, fall plowing, loss of habitat and heavy use of pesticides are the main factors in the decline of both game birds and song birds. The effect of chemical pesticides, specifically DDT and chlorinated hydrocarbons, on raptors, game and song birds in the mid-1960's resulted in a population crash. Drastic changes in the environment are due to the use of long-lived chemicals. Studies show that pesticide residue in food sources cause birds to produce thin egg shells that are too fragile to last through incubation period.

Heavy DDT spraying in the 1960's to control Dutch Elm disease dealt a critical blow to many song birds. It was not the spray that effected the birds, but the insects and worms that absorbed the chemicals and were subsequently ingested by the birds.

Chemicals known as PCBs also affect bird life. The Salmonid Fish species of Lake Michigan absorb crustacea which has eaten toxic

plankton. PCBs at the end of the food chain are retained in the fatty tissues of the fish. Shore birds and song birds that eat contaminated fish often develop serious physical defects, with the end result as a deformed or mutant bird.

Recently I observed some of these defects that may be contributed to PCBs: a plover and a male cardinal with defected bills. Some fish-eating birds from the Great Lakes are showing rising rates of "cross-beak" syndrome. Fish eating terns, especially near Green Bay have been born with club feet that prevents them from standing properly. Also, I observed two mallard ducks with twisted wings and a purple grackle with a closed claw. Birds are delicate barometers of our environment, and will multiply or decline as a result of changes in their surroundings and food habits.

Factors such as periods of drought or extended rainfall can cause a sudden decline in bird populations because of unsuitable nesting habitat damaged by weather. The period between egg hatching and the feeding of the young birds is critical. Natural weather conditions play an important part in survival.

Crippled by increased human demands on the land and on the waters, nature can no longer manage wildlife alone . . . and needs the helping hand of mankind. Primary requisites for the preservation of wildlife and habitat are protection and management. The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service are dedicated to programs of management, research, educational and recovery programs for our natural resources. Sportsmen, landowners, bird watchers, conservationists and interested citizens must all cooperate and support practices that protect the wildlife and habitat of our environmental heritage.

6021 73rd St Apt 108
□ Sander, of Kenosha, WI 53142
Kenosha, is an historian, archeologist and naturalist. He is a member of the board of directors of the Kenosha Historical Society.