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BIRDS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON CAMPUS

ROBERT C. MILLER AND ELIZABETH L. CURTIS

THE University of Washington campus in the restricted sense comprises 582 acres of land, with a frontage of about one-quarter of a mile on Lake Union and about one mile on Lake Washington, these two bodies of water and the ship canal that connects them forming the entire southern border and part of the eastern border of the campus as originally laid out. The recent establishment of the Seattle Arboretum under the administrative control of the University has added another 267 acres which, being separated from the original tract only by a narrow arm of Lake Washington, may reasonably be included in the campus.

The present study thus concerns itself with an area of 849 acres, or about one and one-third square miles. In this area the writers have themselves seen or secured authentic records of 148 species or subspecies of birds. The opinion is here set forth, somewhat hesitantly but after careful consideration, that this represents in all probability the largest bird population of any American university campus, and even that it constitutes one of the largest number of birds authentically recorded from any area of equal size in the world. At all events the list is sufficiently impressive to call for special remark, and to justify examination of the reasons for the existence of so considerable an avifauna in so small an area.

Persons familiar with the habits of ornithologists in the West will undoubtedly at once suspect that the list has been augmented by the inclusion of a dozen or two subspecies, an idea that will gain momentary support from the fact that trinomials have in many instances been used. On this point, however, the writers merely invite attention to the list itself (particularly as regards the treatment accorded robins, thrushes and fox sparrows), and to the fact that elimination of all trinomials would still leave a list of 143.

Among the reasons for the size of this list are, of course, the length of time over which observations have been carried on and the thoroughness with which the territory has been covered. The writers have themselves had the bird life of the campus under observation over a period of some fifteen years. Each has conducted classes in ornithology, and has combed the territory with groups of students. These students have in turn often developed a special interest leading to continued independent observation, and a few have selected limited areas of the campus for thorough, protracted study. The campus has also been a mecca for many other local bird students, some of whom are mentioned below. A few of these have been keeping records longer than the present writers and one of them, indeed, Mr. Samuel F. Rathbun, has supplied observations back to 1890! Thus all in all the area under consideration has had a pretty thorough ornithological going-over, with the quest for the "rara avis" being pursued by experienced observers.

Time and thoroughness are, however, only a part of the story. To discover a large local avifauna, it is first of all essential that the birds be there! The explanation of the abundance and variety of the bird life

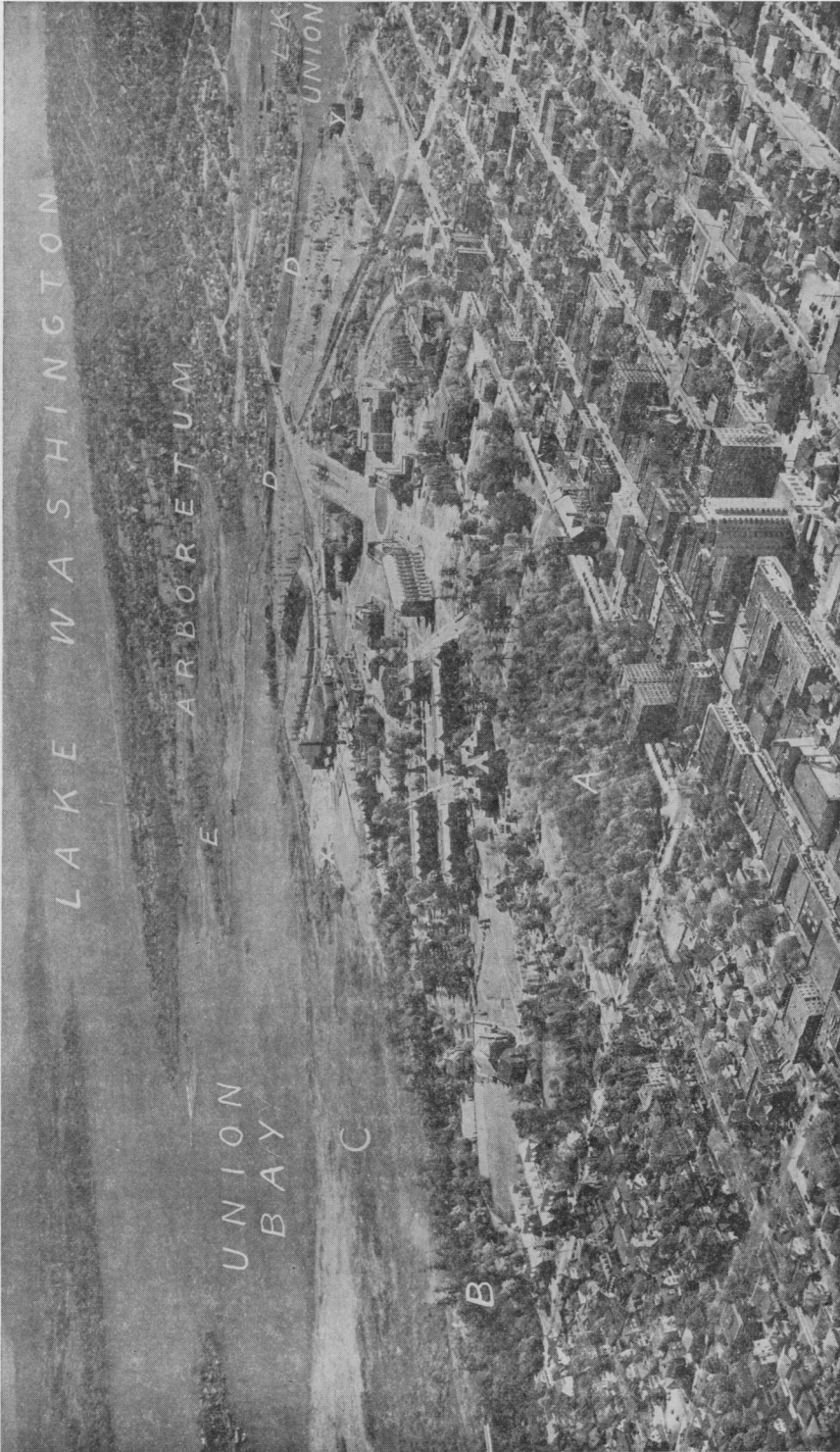


Photo by Pacific Aerial Surveys, Inc.

AIRPLANE VIEW OF UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON CAMPUS
(For explanation see accompanying text)

of the campus is to be found in the favorable conditions which have on the whole prevailed, and especially in the variety of habitats which the area provides.

DESCRIPTION OF HABITATS

The general character of the territory under consideration is well illustrated in the accompanying aerial photograph, the only unfortunate feature of which is that the point of view is that of a person looking southward, thus reversing the directions as we ordinarily think of them in looking at a map. Most of the vegetation is of second growth, the original forest of Douglas fir having been partially logged off at a date not ascertained by the writers, but undoubtedly more than fifty years ago.

The northwest corner of the campus (A) contains about thirteen acres of young deciduous trees, maple and dogwood, with a few madronas, alders and willows. There are some young Douglas firs. Shrubby vegetation consists of huckleberry, elder, ocean spray, Indian plum, syringa, salal and Oregon grape. The second wooded area (B) contains perhaps thirty acres of second-growth coniferous forest, Douglas fir predominating. These woods cover quite a steep hillside, the slope of which is scarcely suggested in the photograph. There are numerous fallen trees, and of course a great many deciduous trees and shrubs among the conifers. Three or four springs come out of the hillside, encouraging a luxuriant growth of thimbleberry, salmonberry, devil's club, nettles and ferns. The whole effect is that of a deep forest with dense undergrowth, and in these surroundings it is hard to believe that one is within a few hundred yards of eight-story apartment buildings.

A third area of particular interest is the swamp (C) by the edge of the lake. Most of this was covered with water until 1916, when a navigable canal (D) was cut through, lowering the level of the lake about 8 feet to that of Lake Union. The extensive flats that were formerly under water are now grown up to tules, with numerous waterways navigable for canoes, and with alders and willows on the higher levels. The willows have, in fact, invaded the lake, their tangled roots forming in many areas a floating mat on which one may walk some yards out from the real shore with a degree of confidence inversely proportional to his weight. Considerable changes have in recent years been made along the "landward" side of area C, through clearing and filling to make a new golf course, but much of the swamp is still unconquered.

The area designated Union Bay is an arm of Lake Washington, the latter extending north and south for a total length of about nineteen miles. Lake Union as labeled in the photograph, is but a small part of that body of water, which extends some distance to the westward to connect with Puget Sound through the ship canal and Government Locks.

The Canoe House (x) and the Oceanographic Laboratory (y) are specifically designated because of references to them in the ensuing text. Other buildings have not been labeled in the photograph, although reference to them is sometimes made by name for the information of persons familiar with the campus. No special comment on the built-up portion

of the campus is called for, as its general character is well shown— university buildings, mostly of large size, surrounded by broad areas of lawn, with some planting of trees and shrubbery. The circle to the right of center is "Frosh Pond," an artificial pool on which an occasional water bird appears by accident or design.

Across the ship canal and slightly to the eastward is the Arboretum largely covered with native vegetation but with a liberal planting of exotics. Particular attention is directed to the area (E) known as "Foster Island," a place well known to all local students of birds. Once in fact as well as name an island, its insularity was lost with the lowering of the lake above referred to. Nevertheless this tract of deciduous thicket, with the lake to the north, and swamps both east and west, remains an exciting ornithological observation point, where the unexpected is certain to be seen! Several "records" in the ensuing pages are assigned to "Foster Island," one of them (the Osprey) being dated fifty years ago.

HISTORICAL

The University of Washington moved to its present campus in 1895, abandoning the location in downtown Seattle occupied since 1861. The new location was very much out in the wilderness. Indeed, it was seriously debated whether students could be induced to travel that far to go to school! And for years the youth in quest of higher education, having finished a hard day on the campus, would sit on a log amid sylvan surroundings while waiting for the infrequent "Ravenna" electric car.

The new campus was heavily timbered, much of the original growth remaining along with second growth timber. An old skid road led down to Lake Union. Denny Hall was the first building to be erected, and old Science Hall (now Parrington Hall) the second. A great change came with the Alaska-Yukon Exposition of 1909, which was held on this site. Considerable clearing and landscaping was undertaken, and a number of buildings put up, some of which (Meany Hall, the Physiology Building, the Faculty Club, and the State Museum) survive to the present time.

In comparing the past with the present, great interest attaches to the L. M. Turner collection of birds, in the possession of the State Museum. In this collection are a number of specimens taken in 1894 during the months of March to June in the "Ravenna" district just north of the campus, and which may be assumed without reasonable doubt to be typical of the avifauna of the present campus as it was at that time. Of particular interest in the Turner collection are the presence of several chestnut-backed chickadees, which were apparently much more common than today, the absence of the Oregon chickadee which is now abundant, the presence of three specimens of the western bluebird, which is now a casual, the occurrence of the red-breasted sapsucker and Townsend's solitaire, which today are exceedingly rare, and of the Oregon jay, which is now entirely absent. Brewer's blackbird was listed as "plentiful, arrives early and breeds in early May," while recent records are all for fall months. The rough-winged swallow was common in 1894. Harris's woodpecker is well represented in the collection while Gairdner's (the common one in recent years) is lacking.

These changes are of the type that would be expected in the transition from a considerably wooded rural to an urban or suburban state. However great the changes on the campus, they are not nearly as great as in the Ravenna district itself, where Turner collected. This, with the exception of the narrow ravine called Roosevelt Park, is now entirely occupied by homes and gardens.

THE NEED FOR CONSERVATION

That a fine stand of native vegetation has been permitted to survive as a bird refuge and natural botanical preserve almost in the heart of a large metropolitan area can unfortunately not be attributed to any considered policy of conservation, but appears to be due rather to the fact that a square mile is a good bit of land, and the University has not thus far been able to employ a large enough crew of workmen to entirely defeat Nature's effort to maintain itself. Nevertheless the struggle goes on, and rarely a year goes by without some new encroachment on the native vegetation, this in turn affecting the wildlife.

It has of course to be frankly recognized that the primary object of setting aside a tract of land for a university campus is not the establishment of a botanical preserve or a wildlife refuge, but the provision of space for the activities and growth of an institution of higher learning. No reasonable person can object to such disturbance of the natural order as is brought about by the erection of a new library, a new laboratory, a new class-room building, or even a new stadium or a little theatre. A growing university community must be provided for, with its various needs and whims. But it takes a long time to cover a square mile with buildings, and in the meantime it does not seem essential to the educational process that the native vegetation be steadily cut away and replaced with carefully nurtured exotics set in rows. There is even a limit to the amount of grass that students require. Many pessimistic views have been expressed of the American university, but only the landscape gardeners have treated it frankly as a cemetery.

In an era of straitened finances it seems pertinent to point out that removal of the native cover of a tract of land not intended to be put to productive use is a violation of both economics and common sense, and the first step in a long chain of wasteful expenditures. It is expensive to clear the land, more expensive to replace the native vegetation with nursery stock or lawns, and most expensive to maintain it under formal gardening through the years. Worst of all, in the present instance, it means that future generations of students of botany, zoology and forestry will have to travel far afield, at considerable trouble and expense, to carry on types of work for which the campus itself has long provided ideal conditions. It is worthy of remark that several other universities have spent considerable sums in the effort to create artificially, on a small scale, some of the biological environments which on the University of Washington campus Nature has provided so abundantly that they are little appreciated and are casually destroyed as fast as labor can be found to do it.

The University of Washington campus is singularly blessed, and to a greater degree than that of almost any other American university, with the beauty of hillside, lake and marsh, and forest and wildlife. To destroy this beauty is both troublesome and expensive. To conserve it is simple and easy, and costs nothing at all. The one thing needful is to let it alone. Whether a more enlightened policy in this respect will be adopted the future will tell. "Wisdom is justified of her children."

VALIDITY OF SIGHT RECORDS

One matter requiring discussion here is the ever recurring question of the validity of sight records. Unquestionably many errors are committed by unconscientious or over-eager field observers, and there is a school which holds that no record can be accepted unless supported by a specimen. It would undoubtedly greatly simplify legal procedure, and even avoid a number of lawsuits, if every witness were required to shoot and bring in the body of the person concerning whom he testifies. However the courts have struggled along with less rigorous procedures, and have generally been content to consider the reasonableness of evidence and the credibility of witnesses.

In a matter such as this it seems to the writers that ordinary common sense is all that is needful. There are cases where a record should not be accepted without a specimen as evidence, and there are cases where a sight record is as valid as any record need be. A case in point is that of the Magpie which appeared on the campus in October, 1936. This bird was completely out of habitat and had no business whatever in the locality in which it appeared. But a Magpie is a bird which cannot possibly be mistaken. It can be identified as certainly by thousands of western farm boys as by the most experienced ornithologist and just as readily at fifty yards as in the hand.

A less convincing case, perhaps, is that of the Long-tailed Chat (p. 45), a record which has in fact been called in question. It can only be stated that the bird was seen and heard on several occasions by the two authors, separately and together, and that they are just as sure that it was there as that they were there.

One solution to the sight record problem has been found by Mr. H. W. Higman, an observer often cited in the subsequent pages. Mr. Higman, after having some of his records called in question by the unbelieving, has obtained photographs or motion pictures of a number of the rarer species, including the Lesser Snow Goose and Anthony's Green Heron.

One might almost commit himself to the paradox that, in the case of a careful and experienced observer, the more improbable a sight record seems the more certain it is to be correct; for the observer knows what to expect in a given situation, and will not admit any deviation therefrom unless he is absolutely convinced.

There are, of course, limitations to field observations. Mr. Adam Balmer (MURRELET, 17:54, 1936) has a specimen of Audubon's Caracara from Grays Harbor County, Washington. If the writers had seen this bird in the field they would not have believed it!

In compiling the present list the authors have depended largely on their own observations, although much assistance has been rendered by others, and almost every record listed could be substantiated from the records of several observers. In specific cases other observers have been cited, by name or by initials.

Particular thanks are due Mr. Samuel F. Rathbun (hereinafter referred to as S. F. R.), Honorary Curator of Birds in the Washington State Museum, who has gone over the list with great care and checked or annotated almost every species. While Mr. Rathbun should not be held responsible for any shortcomings of the present work, his comments and criticisms have added greatly to its value. Others who have contributed freely of their notes and observations are Messrs. H. W. Higman (H. W. H.), Walter Hagenstein (W. H.), Earl J. Larrison (E. J. L.), and Warren Flock (W. F.). Martha R. Flahaut, Assistant in Biology at the Washington State Museum, has kindly made available for study the specimens and original records of the Turner and other collections at that institution. Additional persons who have contributed occasional observations are mentioned by name on subsequent pages.

Inasmuch as one of the purposes of such a list as this is to serve as a check-list for students, some question might be raised as to the desirability of including extremely rare species, or those which have not been seen on the campus for a long time. In favor of completeness of record the authors may mention that on February 6, 1938, a visitor from Australia, Dr. D. L. Serventy, while walking across the campus, saw and called to the attention of other observers a Horned Owl, a bird which, according to all available records had not been seen on the campus for 22 years!

As a matter of fact, the list as here presented is undoubtedly too small rather than too large, and is likely to need amendment almost as soon as it appears in print. Among birds to be expected sooner or later are Bullock's oriole, the yellow-headed blackbird, and the white-throated sparrow, of which last an injured specimen was found in the Montlake district of Seattle May 10, 1940; and there are others. The list which follows includes all species and credibly determined subspecies of which the authors have been able to obtain authentic records to the present date.