

BIRDS AS SCAVENGERS.

(*Extracted from "Practical Value of Birds,"*

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It has long been recognised by ornithologists, and to some extent, at least locally, by farmers and citizens generally, that some species of birds are engaged in the useful occupation of scavengers, disposing of the garbage and carrion of the fields, which would otherwise taint the atmosphere with disagreeable, if not unhealthy odors. During the early history of the Great Plains of Western North America, Turkey Vultures, or Buzzards, as they are popularly called, could have been seen at almost any hour of the day circling over the prairies in search of food. When a bison or other animal died or was killed, these big black birds soon gathered about the carcass and began the task of disposing of its flesh. With the assistance of Crows, Magpies, coyotes and other birds and mammals, they kept the plains and mountains comparatively free from putrifying carrion. With the settlement of the region the Vultures have become rare over a great portion of their former range, owing chiefly to the poisoning of carcasses in the effort to destroy coyotes. The great California Condor, less prolific and never so abundant, has become even more rare, partly from the same cause and partly because its eggs have been so eagerly sought by collectors.

Various other groups feed extensively upon carrion, especially the Gulls. They were among the first non-game birds to come under protection of law, particularly about large harbours, where their value as scavengers has long been recognized. Few more impressive object lessons in economic ornithology have been witnessed than the large flocks of gulls following the city garbage scows as they are being towed out to sea, feeding voraciously upon the waste from the kitchens. The gulls long since learned that much food is thrown from boats. So they may be seen following in the wakes of vessels, sometimes far from land, watching for the morsels that drop into the water. So general is their presence that a painting of a ship hardly seems complete without gulls hovering near, though the artist may have no idea of the reason for their presence. In the harbours there is scarcely a chance for a bit of refuse to escape their sharp eyes. They patrol the beaches and dispose of the dead fishes and other marine life washed ashore by the waves or left stranded by the tides. Yet these beautiful and useful birds have been at times much persecuted and hundreds of thousands of their skins and wings