

Journal - Mar 70, 39

When the steam-dredgers were building Treasure Island in San Francisco Bay for the coming World's Fair, the gulls were the only birds on the job. As the long pipes began belching forth a mixture of mud, water, and mussels, these so-called gullible birds resembled a crowd of noisy newsboys. With a great shoving, flapping, and grabbing, every bivalve was snapped up the instant it appeared.

With the industrial development and crowded population on the shores of rivers and bays, at least one species of the great feathered family can always hold his own. The wide flat area at the north end of Treasure Island reaps a harvest of fifty cents an auto for parking, after a fifty cent admission fee per person, and another fifty cents on the bridge. But the big gull population perches free and helps clean up the careless droppings of the human race.

The fact is, the serene gray gulls lined up in hundreds with heads to the wind on the parking grounds just above the blue bay are about to steal the show from the Oregon wildlife exhibit not far away. Seven Oregon beavers are trying to live in a little concrete pool with a square box as a house and a few sticks of wood as food. The deer on exhibit take shelter in an old shed that is typical of a barnyard. The ducks and geese have a little pond, but there is not a bush or a tree in this wildlife area to remind one of the natural beauty of Oregon.

The gull is a seabird, but when it comes to a rub he

even takes to hunting scraps of bread and meat in the back yards of the city. He can compete with the English sparrow who, in the matter of holding his own, has been called "the rat of the air." When food becomes scarce in one locality, it doesn't take a gull long to find new fields. It is the time honored custom of blackbirds to follow the farmer's plow in spring time and pick up a living of angleworms. The gulls fly inland many miles from water to gather in a line behind the plow, for they have learned that a menu of angleworms on the farm is as palatable as a meal of fish at the seashore.

This web-footed bird is more nearly at the head of the class in intelligence than any other species. In a few moments we shall tell you how the ancient races had an idea that he was a gullible fellow and noted for his stupidity. In truth, he is more versatile than any other so-called seabird. Some gull species live along the seashore, nesting on the off-shore rocks. Others nest entirely on the inland lakes through the northern part of our country. With web-feet, this bird can hunt a living like any other waterfowl, yet he can compete with the robin or flycatcher and skirmish about the fields, or he can gather in a harvest of grasshoppers on the sagebrush desert. Ever since the ferries started on San Francisco Bay, the gulls have always plied back and forth on regular schedules and have taught some people to toss out bread to be caught on the wing. They sail at the stern of a steamer for many days because they know that at least three times between sun-up and sun-down they will get a choice dish of seconds from the cook.

Anyone who has studied birds and knows the wisdom of a web-footed gull may wonder how the word "gullible" was born into the English language. To go back to an earlier day, when the Jutes, Angles, and Saxons moved from the north of Germany over to the coast of Britain, during the primitive years of hunting and fishing together their various languages were gradually melted into the Anglo-Saxon. One might easily picture several fur-wrapped, bare-legged fishermen bringing in their catch and cutting up their fish. A flock of gulls hovered over to pick up the bits that were thrown away. The village wag may have noticed that the birds gobbled every piece that was dropped, and he may have jumped to the conclusion that these birds were simple-minded, easily fooled, and would swallow a rock as quickly as a chunk of fish. One of the slang-users of the tribe may have called a duller companion a "gull." At least, it seems that the word was bandied about, and when the wise ones were gathering the scattered words into a vocabulary they perhaps included this word in order to be up to date.

Along came William Shakespeare and other writers who were in need of words, and "gull" became a synonym for dupe, and "gullible" came to mean stupid and foolish. In order to be complete, when Noah Webster was making up his dictionary, he took in these words, yet he may never have known how close he came to nature-faking.

The qualities of being foolish, stupid, or easily taken in may apply to some people, yet it can hardly be said that a gull is a gullible bird. Not long ago after a hard rain, the paved streets were covered with angleworms. Two of the neighbors thought the worms had rained down from heaven. It is safe to say that such

an idea never entered the heads of these gray-groomed gulls skimming along these city pavements picking up a hearty meal of worms which had wiggled out of the saturated ground.

While two species of gulls like the California and ring-billed, which nest in the same colony on the inland lakes, or the glaucous-winged and western gulls which live together on the sea rocks, are alike in size and color much as an Englishman would resemble a Frenchman, yet they do interbreed. There is a steadfastness of character and trueness to species. If this were not so we should have chaos, not only in bird character but in the world of natural history.

There are nearly fifty known species of gulls and every fall about a dozen different kinds gather along our coast-lines. Coming from the inland lakes and from the storm-bound sea rocks, this white-winged fleet sails into the rivers and bays to winter about the wharf-lined water-front.

While gulls are abundant in every section of our coastline, when an amateur starts out to make the acquaintance of different members of the family he takes on a problem that he can master only in a partial way after long study and observation. At first sight he recognizes the bird of snow-white breast and head and delicate pear-gray back. At the same time he also sees the motley array of gulls of the same size which are partly gray and partly white, and others of mottled-gray plumage without a touch of white. These he might take to be entirely different gulls, yet they may all be of the same species but of different ages.

When a gull chick passes out of his mottled downy stage

he is a plain gray color all over. This coat lasts him the first year. The second year as he grows older, the white feathers begin to appear on his head, body, and tail. He is passing out of his childhood. During the third and fourth years he attains the white head of maturity, the white on the breast and tail with a touch of black on the wings, and the delicate beautiful coat of gullhood. This applies to the herring-gull of the Atlantic, the western, California, and ring-billed gulls of the Pacific. The laughing gull of the Atlantic and Gulf coasts, the Franklin gull of the interior, and the Bonaparte and Sabine gulls of the far North all have the jet-black head instead of the white. The white breasts are flushed with pink and their bodies mantled with delicate gray.