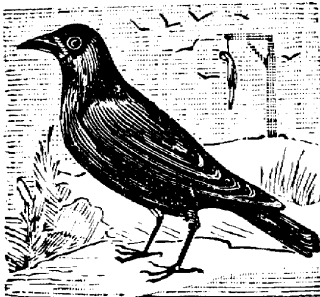


CONSERVATION IN THE 1930s -- A Nickel an Egg, A Dime a Head

William Brett
Indiana State University
Department of Life Sciences
Terre Haute, IN 47809

Sometime about 1937, the State of Illinois decided it should do something to reduce the loss of farmers' corn due to crows. To this end they placed a bounty of 5 cents an egg and 10 cents a head, a head being one that had black feathers on it, not just pin feathers or fuzz; without black feathers it counted as an egg or at least you only got paid 5 cents for it. To the three Bs, Bob Loft, Bob Rasmuson, and Bill Brett, this was something like the announcement of gold being found in California during 1849.

The crows didn't start laying their eggs until late April or early May, but we scouted their nests prior to their laying. We also knew that crows laid 5-6 eggs and therefore locating a nest with less than 5 eggs meant leaving it for another day or two and then returning to harvest a full crop of eggs. If the nest contained young crows without black feathers, we would leave them there and come back later when they were worth ten cents apiece. As you can see we were not only decent biologists but also good economists. Starting out on an egg hunting expedition, we would choose the order in which we would climb the nest-bearing trees. No matter the type of tree, shagbark hickory the exception, or height of the nest when it was your turn you climbed to the nest. Climbing required both hands and feet which was okay going up but somewhat of a problem coming down with the eggs. After trying several techniques, including lowering the eggs in a cloth by way of a piece of twine, placing



them in ones pocket, or placing them in ones cap and then placing the cap on your head, all of which sometimes resulted in broken eggs, we decided on placing the eggs in our handkerchief and then placing the ends of the handkerchief in our mouth. One couldn't talk on the way down, but it did free our hands and feet and succeeded in getting most of the eggs safely to the ground. We learned in

our first one or two trips how to tell a crow's nest from a squirrel's nest. The crow's nest was mainly sticks; whereas, the squirrel's contained a great deal of leaves.

I recall one trip in which another boy, Ditto Meyers, his real name was Robert, wanted to go along. After getting him to promise to bring cookies from home we let him join us. When his turn came up, we selected a squirrel's nest for him. He had some doubts about it being a productive crow's nest, but we all solemnly assured him it was. He dutifully



climbed up to the nest and just as he was about to place his hand in the nest to obtain the eggs, the squirrel jumped out ran down his arm across his back and jumped to another branch. We all admired Ditto's ability to hang on to the branch under such obvious surprise, but our admiration grew greatly when we observed the speed with which he descended to the ground. It reminded one of how a fireman slides down the pole at the sound of the fire alarm, but the fireman doesn't have a lot of branches to hinder him on the way down. For some reason, Ditto chose not to go crow egg hunting with us again. On a good day we could collect 20 to 40 eggs which brought a total of one to two dollars.

The eggs were turned into Gail Downing, who owned the paint-wallpaper store and was the local mortician. He would count the eggs, give us our money, and then take the eggs to the back of the store and throw them into a metal container that was supposed to break the eggs. Well, it was supposed to break the eggs, but as we noticed some of them survived the drop. Knowing this, and using proper timing and caution, we would return and collect the unbroken eggs. We also collected the bounty money twice on the same eggs. Not believing we were doing anything really illegal, but at the same time not bragging about our accomplishment, we sometimes extended our back of the store egg hunting to eggs brought in by boys other than ourselves. We tried the

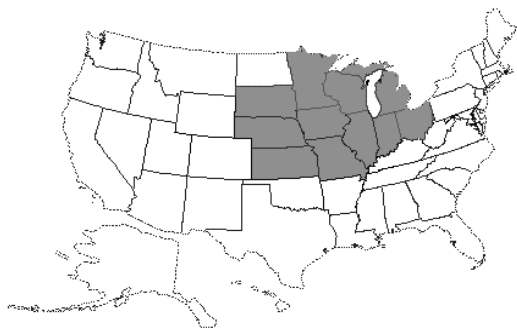
same procedure with crows' heads and this is where we made our mistake. A couple of the heads had maggots in them and Gail knew that fresh heads didn't carry maggots. After that he disposed of the eggs and heads in another, secretive manner. He didn't chew us out too much for our attempted larceny; in fact I think he secretly admired our enterprising methods. Although the bounty money seemed like easy money to us, measured in time and effort we really earned our pay. We usually went egg hunting on Saturday, leaving at about 8:00am and returning about 5:00 or 6:00pm. During this time we would walk a minimum of ten miles and climb 30 to 40 trees. Climbing trees is not the easiest activity on ones clothes. There were also hazards in crossing barbwire fences, walking across pastureland that sometimes contained a bull, falling out of trees, and getting torn up by blackberry bushes. I recall one particular incident in which I walked into a strand of barbwire a farmer had strung about head high between two trees. One barb caught me on my right cheek just below my eye. Luckily I jerked my head in such a manner that the barb was drawn down my cheek rather than into my eye. It laid open a gash about 2 inches long which my pals assured me was just a small scratch. After continuing with our hunt for another two hours, I arrived home and presented my blood stained

face to my mother. Either my mother hid her concern real good or she was so used to me coming home with blood on various parts of my anatomy, that she didn't indicate any particular shock but just took me to the bathroom, washed my face, sterilized the cut with alcohol, and then used what she called "butterfly" strips of tape to pull the wound together. The scar that resulted was much less than I have seen as a result of a doctor suturing a wound of this type.

The bounty on eggs only lasted about two or three years and then the State rescinded it. They determined that it was not having that much affect on the numbers of crows or their affect on the corn crop. I suspect it was due more to natural selection. The crows that built their nests on the highest and thinnest branches had a better chance of producing offspring and following Lysenkoism theory, their offspring also built their nests in places difficult for egg hunters to reach. At least that is what it seemed to us; the nests got harder and harder to reach as we got somewhat older and a good deal heavier, not to mention more cautious or smarter.

Egg hunting also provided me with one of my favorite pets, a red tail hawk, but that's another story.

MY, HOW WE ARE GROWING!



AMCBT THEN --

At the first meeting in 1957, there were 44 members representing 11 states.



ACUBE NOW --

As of April 1998, there are 314 members representing 24 states.

Note: Help ACUBE as well as your colleagues by letting them know of the benefits of *your* organization.