

CORRESPONDENCE.

The Extermination of the Wild Turkey in the State of Virginia.

EDITORS OF 'THE AUK':

Dear Sirs: — Recently in conversation with a friend, and Ex-Congressman, and one greatly interested in the game and game laws of the State of Virginia, I gained some reliable information in regard to the present status of the Wild Turkey in that section of the United States, which was a surprise to me, and may be to other ornithologists who have not of late especially investigated that subject. It is a well-known fact that many years ago in all the wilder and, for the turkey, suitable parts of the State of Virginia, this species was to be found there in great numbers. Indeed, it is well within my recollection when one had to go but a very short distance from Washington, D. C., into Virginia, in the forest regions, to find Wild Turkeys more or less abundant, and the hunters shot them there and brought them to the Washington Markets. My friend informs me that only fifteen years ago they were fairly abundant in Rappahannock County, less than one hundred miles from Washington, which is a division of the State where not one is at this writing to be found. What is true of Rappahannock County is probably more or less true for the entire State of Virginia, and as Virginia is a State that has not settled up very rapidly, the reason for the comparatively sudden disappearance of this bird there must be attributed to some other cause rather than to the encroachment of man on its domain, which cause invariably proves fatal to the existence of any wild form upon which he preys,— either for food or for other purposes. After fair and extended investigation my informant is of the opinion that the blame for the practical extermination of this magnificent American game bird in the region indicated is to be laid at the door of the negro who prowls through the forests of that part of the country. There the negro is essentially a savage and a squatter, living in a primitive cabin in the timbered sections, and existing upon what these forests afford him.

The male Virginia negro there has risen but very little above his African ancestors, and still possesses all of the undesirable qualities of the latter. If one passes through this wilderness, the former home of the Wild Turkey, he will, ever and anon, meet with one of these negro men. Solitary and silent, clad in his tattered garments, and carrying a primitive, single-barrel gun with its ammunition, he roams about like a veritable savage that he essentially is, seeking to slay any living creature that may afford him food, and mitigate the pangs of his almost ever-present hunger. He barely notices you as you pass him, and later on you may hear the boom of his big-bored fowling piece, perhaps nigh a mile away, and wonder to your heart's content as to the kind of animal he has slain.

At a time when the Wild Turkeys were rapidly disappearing in this part

of Virginia and these solitary negroes roamed through her forests, they frequently passed through the better part of two or three days without a mouthful to eat. Especially was this the case in the spring-time when the few remaining birds undertook to breed. Persistent persecution at the hands of these negroes had apparently rendered the birds more and more secretive with respects to the sites they selected for nests wherein to deposit their eggs. This increased secretiveness, however, had but the effect of sharpening the wits of these negro prowlers for sustenance, and, frequently suffering from long-prolonged hunger, in every instance, sooner or latter, the much desired Wild Turkey's nest of eggs was discovered, and every one of the latter promptly consumed to appease his voracity. It goes without the saying as to what *must* happen if the eggs of any bird in nature be continually destroyed. But these negroes by no means stopped here, for if any one or more of these hen turkeys chanced to hatch out her brood, she was pretty certain to be met with by one of these merciless hunters, and fall a victim, chicks and all, to his rapacious appetite. So much for the criminality of this class of negroes and their lack of regard for the State game laws during the breeding season of the Wild Turkey.

When these fowls came to flock, or at the mating season, the ingenuity of these game destroyers,—these law-breaking negroes,—knew no limit. The places where the turkeys congregated or where they were in the habit of roosting, were easily discovered, and a most fatal design of trap was set for them in each and every locality. So simple, so inexpensive, so sure of result was the means employed to capture the birds at these times that their destruction was effected with great rapidity. They were simply baited, and baited in two ways, depending upon circumstances. For instance, let us select one of the many localities in the forest where the turkeys roosted in the trees, and where in the morning and early evening they fed and strutted and walked about on the ground, in the neighborhood. To capture them, these negroes employed only a very small fish-hook firmly attached to the end of a long piece of pliant, dark-colored twine, of sufficient strength to hold his victim. When the hook and line was set up in one of the roosting-trees it was baited with a soft piece of dough about the size of a small acorn. In the tree where the turkeys roosted, parallel limbs were selected, the one being some three or four feet above the other. Through previous observation the negro had become aware that a turkey was in the habit of roosting on the lower limb, and by running the twine over the upper one and suspending the bait where the bird could conveniently reach it, the remainder of the line was cunningly concealed through the tree and finally firmly fastened to a peg in the ground beneath. What follows is easily imagined, and hundreds of Wild Turkeys have been captured and killed by this simple affair. When the trap, if it may be termed a trap, is set on the ground the principle involved is much the same. Here, however, the bait employed is usually a grain of yellow corn made soft by soaking it in water so the barb of the hook can be readily passed into it and be at once effective after swallowing, and

resistance follows by the turkey struggling to get free. This latter attempt is invariably defeated from the fact that the cord employed is so long that it allows the hooked bird to run about, without ever thinking to pull the long twine taut with the view of making the effort to tear the hook out, — an almost impossible feat at the best, especially if the bait has been entirely swallowed. Loose corn is always sprinkled around for several yards in all directions over the ground where the hook end of the string is set. This tends to deceive the feeding birds, and, sooner or later, one of them is pretty sure to pick up and swallow the one on the hook, and is at once made fast. Later on the negro will bag him by a knock on the head with the stick carried for the purpose. There is nothing to prevent baiting several localities in this way on the same day and evening, or setting several baits in any particularly good place where, in former times, a flock of turkeys were known to assemble.

With this brief account of the Wild Turkey's destruction in Virginia I close my remarks, and pass them over to our protectors of birds in this country.

Faithfully yours,

R. W. SHUFELDT.

Washington, D. C.

31 Oct., 1910.

Concealing Coloration.

TO THE EDITORS OF 'THE AUK': —

Dear Sirs: — Now is the season for country readers of 'The Auk' to notice how the snow-covered roofs of houses match the sky, and are often all day, and generally all night, indistinguishable from the sky. Were men taller than these roofs, and were the snow confined to the roofs while the earth remained dark, they would see them against this dark ground and find them conspicuous just as they now do white birds, etc., that they commonly look *down* upon. Apparently naturalists are the only class of men who do not here recognize a principle that must of course apply to all white upward-facing surfaces seen against the sky. In England, in the Norfolk Broads, dark sails are now in use, because white ones did not show against the sky, and caused many collisions at night. (Dark sails are common in the harbors of many countries.) Yet, while these navigators thus show their knowledge of the invisibility of white against the sky, many naturalists still insist that white birds and other white or white-topped animals that need to be invisible against the sky are conspicuous from all view-points.

At the recent meeting of the A. O. U. I gave a short series of out-door demonstrations of the fact that the completeness of an animal's concealing-coloration depends upon his wearing samples of all the characteristic details of his back-ground. First I showed that a simple counter-shading conceals an object when it reproduces the one tone of a plain back-ground.



Shufeldt, Robert Wilson. 1911. "The Extermination of the Wild Turkey in the State of Virginia." *The Auk* 28, 144–146. <https://doi.org/10.2307/4071536>.

View This Item Online: <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/54988>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/4071536>

Permalink: <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/partpdf/87556>

Holding Institution

Smithsonian Libraries and Archives

Sponsored by

Smithsonian

Copyright & Reuse

Copyright Status: Public domain. The BHL considers that this work is no longer under copyright protection.

This document was created from content at the **Biodiversity Heritage Library**, the world's largest open access digital library for biodiversity literature and archives. Visit BHL at <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org>.