

BIRDS OF TIPPECANOE COUNTY

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Butler, in his birds of Indiana (Indiana State Geologist's Report for 1897), makes frequent reference to records from Tippecanoe County, but so far as the writers are aware, no attempt has ever been made to publish a complete list for the county.

The facts here recorded cover a more or less interrupted period of observations for the past forty years by one or both of the writers, the records of the Purdue Bird Club for 1903-1904 and other available data from various sources. The observations were particularly intensive during the periods 1890-1897 and 1924-1930. Bird banding was also carried on during the latter period.

Tippecanoe County lies somewhat north and west of the center of the state, is almost square, generally level and has an area of 624 square miles. Lafayette, the county seat, combined with West Lafayette is the only large town, having a population of about 30,000.

Originally, most of the county was heavily wooded with a very diversified growth of hardwoods in which oaks predominated, and often there was much underbrush. The Wea plains in the south part of the county furnish some prairie country. The Wabash river flows directly through the county and with three other streams of fair size, the Tippecanoe, Wild Cat, and Wea, all flowing into it, furnish abundant water courses. In the early days, the Erie canal passed through Lafayette and furnished an attraction for water birds. Widewater, a widening of the canal north of town, being particularly attractive.

Most of the land in the county is now cultivated, though along the water courses some of it is still heavily wooded and much broken by ravines and bluffs.

The county has no large marshes and only a few small ponds. The largest of these, situated some five miles northwest of Lafayette, is Hedley's Lake, a shallow pond with muddy bottom and little or no vegetation growing in it. The lake is perhaps three quarters of a mile long by one hundred to two hundred yards wide in a wet season and sometimes almost without water in a dry season, presenting at such times an extensive muddy shore line very attractive to a large variety of shore birds. Of the smaller ponds and marshes, Ross's pond three miles northwest of Lafayette, some two hundred yards across and overgrown at the edges with cattails and other vegetation, offers an attractive retreat for water birds, rails, etc. Whitsell's pond, a mile farther north, is somewhat similar but is in the middle of a pasture. Another small marsh some six or eight miles north of Lafayette, which we have called the "Willow Pond," is about the size of Whitsell's pond but is surrounded by willows, mostly dead. It is overgrown with spatter-dock, with rank grass and rushes at the edges. A rather heavily wooded tract of more or less swampy land used to occupy much of the county between what is now Ross's Pond and Hedley's Lake, but for the past 25 or 30 years it has been mostly cleared and cultivated. This will be referred to merely as "the swamp." Formerly, a heavily wooded tract existed on the west side of the Wabash River for some three or four miles north of Lafayette, where large trees and much undergrowth extended from the river's edge for a mile over the bluffs and ravines.

Forty years has brought extensive changes in the character of the country and some notable changes in the bird life. The old canal has disappeared, and now, only a few small ponds remain to mark its course. The extensive woods have been largely cut away, and cultivated fields and pasture lands have taken their place. Where 35 or 40 years ago one might in many places, even near Lafayette, walk for two or three miles without getting out of the woods there are now only small patches of woodlands and narrow fringes along the streams.

There were formerly extensive plantings of evergreens serving as wind-breaks on the north and west sides of the Purdue University campus, which harbored many species of birds and served as ideal nesting sites and roosting places for grackles, doves and robins. Here the American crossbill was a frequent visitor, some seasons being common for months at a time. Now, as the evergreens have been almost entirely removed, these birds are rarely seen, and none have been noted for several years.

These changes have quite naturally affected the bird life of the county, some species becoming less common or entirely lacking, while others have increased in numbers.

Forty years ago, the passenger pigeon was occasionally seen, the last record known to the writers being that of a specimen taken in the "swamp," September, 1892, the skin of which is in our collection. This same "swamp" was likewise the home of many short-eared owls and great horned owls, which now seem to have almost entirely disappeared from the county. Red-tailed hawks were abundant and their nests common, but now, though these hawks are occasionally seen, their nests are very rare. Woodcock, formerly common, nesting in the "swamp" and elsewhere in the county, are now rare and found only in a few places. Prairie chickens, now quite rare, occurring in one or two favored places, in the nineties were common on the Wea plains and were even occasionally flushed on the Purdue Campus.

On the Tippecanoe River there was, for many years, a heronry, where several pairs of great blue herons nested in the sycamores on the Van Natta farm, north of Battle Ground, but they have long since disappeared, and now, only an occasional one nests in the county, though the birds are not uncommon.

Among the smaller birds which were formerly common, lark sparrows, orchard orioles, carolina wrens, black-capped chickadees, horned larks, and cave swallows are now rare or entirely absent, though in 1926 a colony of about forty pairs of cave swallows was found nesting about six miles south of Lafayette. No lark sparrows have been seen for a number of years, and the horned larks, which were abundant and nested on the Purdue Campus, are found only in very restricted numbers in certain localities. As the orchard oriole has decreased, the Baltimore seems to have become more abundant.

The first county record known to us of the bewick wren is of a pair which nested in West Lafayette in 1890. At that time it was considered rare but has increased until now it is not uncommon, usually arriving some weeks ahead of the house wren. Cardinals have never been rare but seem to be more abundant now than formerly, especially in town. The English sparrow, which for a time increased very rapidly, now appears to be on the decrease, at least, in the city, while at the same time, the starling is making a place for itself in our bird life. First seen in the county in the spring of 1926, the starling has increased rapidly, especially in the country, and this fall large flocks came every evening with the grackles to roost in the trees of the town. The winter ranges of some of our birds seem to have

changed in the time covered by these observations, notably so in the case of the bronzed grackle, which used to be rarely seen during the winter but now is a regular winter resident in some numbers, at least, in West Lafayette. Robins and mourning doves, also, are regular winter residents in small numbers, more noticeably so in the last few years. The same is true of the flicker, while the red-headed woodpecker seems to have become a less regular winter resident as the forests have been cut away.

The total number of species reported in the county, so far as we have been able to estimate, is 216. For convenience, the birds of the county may be divided roughly into nesting birds 107, residents 32, summer residents 75, winter residents 8, transients 75, and visitors 15.

The complete list will be published later.

