

Sub Sam R. for journal
Mar 9-42
4 photos

WINTER BIRD TOURISTS IN THE SOUTH

by

William L. Finley and Ed F. Averill

The big cities of the South, especially those near the seashore, are thronged in winter by both human and bird tourists. They come for the same reason, sunshine and warmth, and also a fine food supply. City parks, many of them with little lakes and islands, trees and shrubbery, are plentiful in Los Angeles, and here the people and the birds get together and enjoy each other's company.

The benches are crowded with bare-headed visitors, people strolling with their children, babies parked in go-carts, white-haired ones eager to feed the birds. Almost every other person carries a bulging paper bag, and every bird on the lake knows a paper bag and that it carries something for him. People who work in stores and restaurants spend their off hours in the sunny, friendly parks and bring quantities of goodies for the birds. No better conservation and humanitarian agency exists than a protected park with a little lake. And here in this teeming, over-crowded, war and defense-minded metropolis, the birds, all unknowing, return many times the value of the offerings of their human friends. Almost all of the parks with lakes are Audubon refuges.

There is a gull airplane fleet that hangs out at Westlake Park in the down-town area. This flock is expert in maneuvering, twisting in air, dodging other fliers, and all of them are after the mouthfuls of bread tossed up to them. One ring-billed gull is a prize pilot. He swings in a big circle, comes around and slows down, watching a raised hand and measuring the distance to swing by and take the food on the fly. If the tosser is a little too slow, when the bird comes opposite he hangs in space, fanning his wings as if treading air, and when the bread sails out he is right there to snap it up. When a deft contact is missed, he twists in the air and spirals down to rescue the morsel from the myriads of other gulls and ducks on the water below ready to grab it. Mostly he catches his bite neatly in mid-air without slowing down or changing position, sailing on in his swing around.

Few of his fellows are as adept as this bird nor as cool-headed and accurate. Many flustered fumbles and dashings here and there by less experienced ones go on in a flock of some twenty or more birds coming around the air-track in turn.

Amusing antics in the bird colony are always coming up. Once a big western gull started a chase after a smaller ring-bill that had a chunk of bread in his bill. The smaller and quicker bird kept ahead in a big circle, climbing for dear life higher and higher. It was a mad race. Once or twice the bigger gull took a short cut and dashed at the little fellow, sure of bringing him down. Then there were some acrobatics. Ring-bill used all his flight tricks, now pointed for the clouds, now flinging himself head down to earth as if risking being dashed to pieces, only to swoop from under the bolt of lightning above him.

It was too much for the big gull and he finally broke from the race track and sailed leisurely down toward the lake as if disgusted. It resembled a contest between a lordly eagle and a slim, stream-lined hawk. The lighter feathered plane out-flew and out-foxed the more powerful, heavy one.

Lots of clashes and tanglements occur on this water air-field, but they are all clashes of temper, fights for place or advantage. Never a crack-up in flying or maneuvering in the air was seen. All was graceful, swift and smooth sailing even in crowded formation. But when idling on the water below like little, rocking corks, if they rubbed sides or one edged another out of his place, he was jabbed in the ear or had his tail feathers pulled with a spiteful yank. Otherwise, life went on in its even tenor with babblings and quackings and smooth movements. It was all in the fellowship of feathers.

That doesn't mean that any eye went to sleep, for the fleet was always alert and ready to jump into the air at the least danger signal. These fliers had learned to be tuned to action day and night. And still they live comfortable and interesting lives under the skies. They wear the satisfied air of being super pilots and sure of their own security.