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THE SMART GULL
or
FRIEND OF THE FARMER

BY
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From the studies I have made of wild birds, I believe the gull possesses a greater amount of gray matter than any of his feathered brothers. The versatility of the bird reveals his shrewdness. He is an expert flying boat, agile and swift on the wing, web-footed and equipped for water maneuvers, and besides he gets along fairly well on land.

While we were driving along in the dry desert of southern Oregon a couple of weeks ago, we noticed ahead of us a great number of gulls circling and dropping down in the sagebrush. It was a long way from water, but they were evidently picking up some kind of insect food that had suddenly become abundant in that region. Coming closer, we watched them. It seemed a competition for the best bird to win, and all were screaming and clattering in excitement.

We got out of the car and walked out into the brush. It was soon evident that there was an invasion of grasshoppers here. And it was limited to a fairly small space, for we had seen none a few miles back, nor did we see any after we left this particular spot. The grasshopper mothers must have congregated in this little area and all the young hoppers must have bloomed out at once. How did the gulls, busy with maternal matters on the lakes further up the valley, become aware of the coming out of the hoppers? Or did this hopper influx strike here at about the same date each year and the gulls had been accustomed to pouncing down on them? Was it habit, or intuition?

It is a little surprising how many different places you meet the gull on hand ready to look out for No. 1. And most of these occasions occur when there is a cooperative deal with man himself. It is an annual event that covers a good deal of territory when the gulls by hundreds can be seen waddling behind the farmers' plows, picking up the angleworms turned up in the fresh furrows. Here both gulls and blackbirds tag along together. Back at the farm and feeding time for the pigs, the gulls are there again snatching up

food almost from under the pigs' noses. And more astonishing, you will find these angelic looking birds away up in Yellowstone Park solemnly pacing back and forth on the concrete feeding platform of the grizzly bears, shrewdly snatching bits furnished by the Park to the snarling bruins. Again, you find them following the ships at sea, ready at supper time for the delectable leavings from the first tables. You would miss their eager eyes and shrill "creeings" in that sea trip if they didn't show up.

Gulls are natural born scavengers and are a great benefit in cleaning up our seashores and rivers of decaying fish and other refuse. In salmon-canning time, every cannery has its strings of gulls along the roofs and piers, and perched on the piles. When the offal is dumped out, there is immediately a noisy free-for-all scramble as the birds struggle and wallow in the bloody water gobbling up the smelly mess. On other hunts for fish food, you will find the gulls sometimes do their fishing by proxy. It is a real sight to see the brown pelicans along the California coast rising in the air, then crash-diving head first into the water, their long, sharp bills and heavy bodies disappearing with a big splash. Up they come to the surface with their fish to drain the water out of their pouches. And here is where the wily gulls come in. They descend on the helpless pelicans and snatch the booty from their bills, and are away on the wind till the next assault comes off.

Over along the coast, we rounded a point and came upon a gull in even a more clever role. We focused our field-glasses on the bird just above the shoreline. It looked as if he was playing a game to amuse himself. This turned out to be a wrong guess. The bird was rising with something in his bill. At a height of about thirty feet, he hung on the air for a moment, then dropped the small object he was carrying in his bill, and instantly with a turn of the wing shot to the ground after it. Picking it up again, he spread his wings at the proper angle and swung upward like a kite against the wind. Again he dropped the article, and now being closer to the scene, we made out through the glasses that the thing he was carrying was a clam.

It had not slipped from his bill for amusement or by accident, as we

first thought. As we watched, we saw him rise fourteen times to drop the shell-fish. He wasn't as accurate in his aim as a bomber after his target, but he had perseverance and plenty of time. On the fifteenth shot the clam struck a rock and evidently cracked. The gull planted one foot on the mollusk, tore out the meat, and swallowed it, and was away on the wings of the storm looking for more bait. It would have made a fine motion picture, but every little way perched above the sea was a little pill-box with a coast-guard watching, discouragement to camera hunters.

We argued this type of brain prowess for a bird. How did the gull learn that trick? Nature didn't give him a bill like the oyster-catcher to pry open ballusks, yet he certainly knew how to tackle a clam. It would be interesting to know how he first acquired the taste or guessed that the clamped shell hid so toothsome a morsel. The power to think out a problem is not granted to the lower animal. Was it an instinct followed from generations back in gull history, a feat originated by some super gull? Man has only recently learned the great efficacy of "laying his deadly eggs" to crack his clam.

While some gulls live along the seashore and nest on the off-shore islands, others nest entirely on inland lakes. The California gull is the most abundant breeding gull in Oregon. It has huge nesting colonies in the lakes and swamps in the eastern part of the state. The ring-billed is one of the most beautifully marked gulls. In appearance it is much like the California bird, but is a little smaller in size. The western gull, the largest and darkest backed of any of the gulls, is the only one that breeds on the Oregon coast. In the fall it travels inland to spend the winter on the rivers and about the cities, where it is joined by the glaucous-winged, the short-billed, and the California gulls.