

The Tragedy of Last Mountain Lake Sanctuary

Fred G. Bard



*Nesting Colonies, Last Mountain
—Bard.*

THE bird sanctuary at the north end of Last Mountain Lake is a favorite spot for the museum staff to field-check. Here thousands of colonial birds nest each year on the shallow islands. We visited these islands soon after the ice had gone last spring and found the colonies of Pelicans, Gulls and Cormorants already egg laying. Following the spring runoff, we visited the area again, only to find that the lake had risen a foot and already sections of the islands had flooded and wind action had eroded a section of the colony away. We again visited the colony in June to find that the water had risen another foot. This, I understand, was partly due to the unusual runoff and to the dyke breaking at Euston junction at the south end.

With the boat we circled the Pelican island now only a reef with a few tule reeds among the rocks projecting above the surface of the water. We moved on to the Gull island and found hundreds of nests washed away—nests, eggs beaked with the projecting egg tooth, and young—floating, then sinking; everything surrounded by water. The air was filled with excited screaming gulls.

This catastrophe is similar to the sorry plight of war and flood ravaged humans. We stood there unhappy amid this pitiful scene of destruction and yet were helpless

to raise a hand. Some young gulls were a moving mass of ants that were driven by the flood waters to the last dry places available. These insects covered the young gulls, the last rocks, the weed stalks and willow limbs. We never saw anything like this in our lives. We estimated that 1800 nests of Pelicans, Ring-billed Gulls, Cormorants, Ducks and Common Terns were completely destroyed.

Among a few weed stalks, a Red-winged Blackbird had woven its nest. The five blue eggs, just seven inches above the rising water, were the last to survive. Soon they also were destroyed in one of the worst years for colony birds on the lake.

Mr. Swanston and I visited these islands on November 20th, crossing the lake on foot. The falling snow, whipped into a ground blizzard, made visibility very poor. Pelican Island was completely covered by water and the last few rocks above water were covered by the expanding ice sheets. Clumps of willows were five to six feet above the water at the north and south ends of the Gull island. This island was also covered by water and only a few stones protruded above the ice. This condition, however, seemed to suit the requirements of a muskrat, for his warm house stood high above the ice.

I have learned by enquiry that the Gulls, Terns, Pelicans and Cormorants made an attempt to re-nest on the Perry point because sheep had disturbed colonies formerly established on points. We were prompted to discuss this matter with the Perrys. They have agreed to allow us to fence the point. In the spring we will round up a few Natural History Members and sportsmen to complete this project.

Nature, at times, cuts heavily into the ranks and nothing can be done to prevent this great loss. There are, however, many opportunities to lend a helping hand. I know that we can assist nature and be happier if we prove we are interested by active participation when the need arises.