In Fairness to our Competitors

No member of the wild-life community is a foe—except when judged by selfish human standards

By Alexander F. Skutch

THE neighborhood where I dwell is as full of animosities as our modern atmosphere of radio waves. It seems that a majority of the neighbors bear grudges, or worse, against the others; some have openly threatened violence, or even put this threat timidly into execution. Few of the local residents spare good words for their neighbors. It appears that of all the Ten Commandments, "Love thy neighbor as thyself" is the most difficult to obey—especially in a backwoods community of scarcely literate men.

This unfortunate network of hates is in large measure the result of each man's judging his neighbor, not according to his intrinsic worth, but according to whether his activities are beneficial, or otherwise, to the former. Juan is not valued because he is sober, hard-working and minds his own business, but hated because he will not allow his neighbor's hogs to root in his bean patch. Pablo does not admire Pedro because he is even-tempered and cheerful under misfortunes, but envies him because he owns more fertile land.

A similarly tainted moral atmosphere is certain to exist whenever our judgments of others are based upon purely selfish standards. We shall dislike the British because they compete with us for foreign markets, the Swedes because they make better safety matches than ourselves. We forget all the admirable and amiable qualities of other people, and concentrate our attention upon those particular aspects of their character that annoy us.

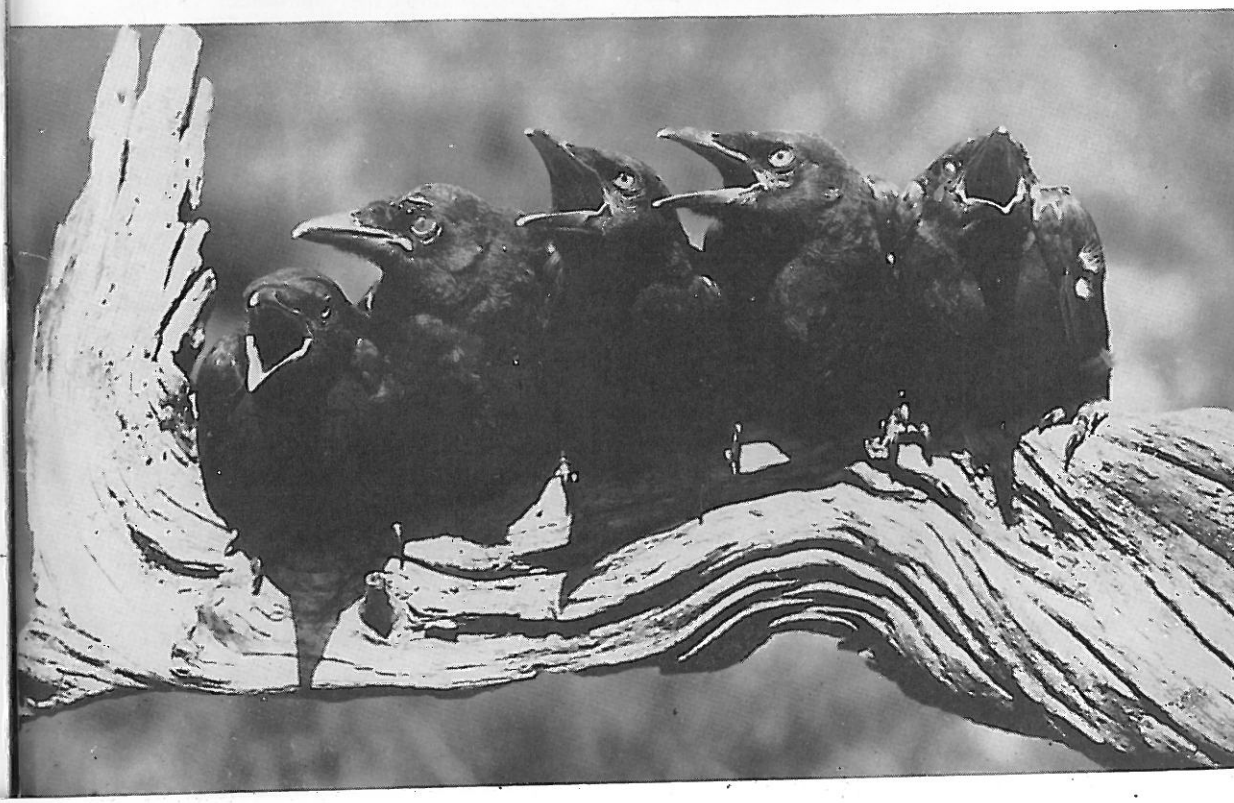
In the great community of living things, the same selfish criterion of judgment gives birth to the same misshapen brood of hatreds. Since other living beings, no less than ourselves, regulate their lives in accordance with their own vital necessities rather than to serve the needs or pleasures of another species, it follows that they often come into competition with ourselves. The birds eat our cherries; the rabbits nibble the bark from our fruit trees; the deer browse the tender sprouts of our vegetables; the robins disturb our slumber with their caroling at dawn. If we

judge all creatures merely by the loss or annoyance they may at some time or other cause us, I fear that few will escape the stigma of "vermin."

Let us take some of our real or supposed foes among wild things and compare them with our friends, in an attempt to form a fair estimate of the character of each. In the canine tribe, the coyote is almost universally condemned as a lurking thief, whereas doubtless no other four-footed creature has received such profuse eulogy as the dog, that "friend of man." But if we consider the matter dispassionately, we shall see that it is precisely those qualities which we praise in the dog that we condemn in the coyote. The dog is intelligent; the coyote, who must live by his own wits or perish, with no man to pity and succor him in his distress, is probably a shade more intelligent than the best of our dogs. The dog is a predatory animal with a nose keen to follow a trail, and because we can put these traits to our own use when we give free rein to the predatory instincts in ourself, we praise him immoderately; the coyote appears to be a much keener hunter than the dog, but because he hunts to feed himself and his family rather than to amuse ourselves, we vituperate him. The dog is faithful to us and we extol his virtue, but in his relations with his own kind he is promiscuous; those naturalists who know the coyote best believe that he is monogamous, loyal to his mate and a faithful provider for his family; but we have no word of commendation for his virtue. Finally, the coyote is free, calling no man master and yielding submission to none save the eternal forces of nature; while the dog, after all has been said in his favor, is a fawner and a cringer with the attitude of the slave—to my mind far less noble than the horse, which I have known to be most abominably abused, but never to cringe, to fawn or to whine. Kill the coyote if you must to save your lambs and chickens, but by all that is fair do not defame his character; he has never signed a pact to respect your livestock.

The crow is another wild creature with far more foes than friends among

Crows on this and opposite page photographed by Allan Cruickshank



mankind. Like the coyote, he is intelligent; he needs to be if he is to survive in a hostile world. One of the heaviest accusations which his enemies hurl against him is that he eats the eggs and young of other birds. That is very grave; I confess that it saddens me to see an egg-lying bird devour the eggs of another bird. You will recall that Darzee, the tailor-bird in "Rikki-Tikki-Tavi," held egg-eating in such abhorrence that he did not even want Rikki, the mongoose, to destroy the eggs of his arch-enemy, Nag the cobra. But at the same time, I cannot see that it is a whit more reprehensible for the crow, a bird, to eat the eggs and young of other species of birds, than for you, a mammal, to eat the young of other species of mammals; yet the crow is condemned on this very score at many a dinner table by those who are enjoying their veal or lamb or suckling pig. If anything, the comparison turns out in favor of the crow, who never fostered the nestlings he devours; while men commonly teach their livestock to look to them for food and protection, and later knock them on the head. The crow, as is well known, destroys much grain—although he is not so often given credit for destroying the insects that destroy the grain—and this, of course, is an unpardonable offense. We need the grain for bread, and much too is required for the manufacture of the hard liquors which help to destroy us. So kill the crow, if you must to preserve your crops—although afterwards you may have cause to regret this action—but admit at least that he is an enemy with some noble traits, not mere vermin.

Recently I re-read "Drake," by Alfred Noyes. It is a great poem with many epic qualities. It contains some curious errors in the natural history and geography of South America, but perhaps we should pardon them in a work of this character. But throughout the poem lurks one fault which to my mind prevents its achieving true epic greatness: it is too obviously and unfairly partisan.

Young coyote photographed by Lorene Squire

Whatever other shortcomings they had, the men who drove the Moors from Granada and in ridiculously small companies overthrew the empires of the Aztecs and the Incas, were obviously not cowardly. They were undoubtedly cruel; but then the Sixteenth Century was no less cruel than the Twentieth, with the difference that its cruelty was more consistent and unabashed; and the contemporary English were not a great deal better than the Spaniards in this respect. When we turn to an old epic like the "Iliad," we find no such partiality in the author. Achilles and the Greeks are brave, but so are Hector and the Trojans. Blind Homer was so impartial in his chronicle of the conflict that it is difficult to decide on which side, if either, his sympathies lay. In the "Aeneid," Aeneas is obviously the poet's favorite; but Vergil does not hesitate to apply the epithets "brave" and "handsome" to his hero's deadly enemies. It would be well if we could preserve this epic frame of mind in our thinking and writing about wild creatures, even when we must compete with them for daily bread.

Each year I must face the conflict between the friend of wildlife and the farmer. As the ears of corn fill out, the coatimundis emerge from the forest to

enjoy the milky grains. These long-tailed, long-muzzled cousins of the raccoon have pleasant, intelligent faces, and although like all of us they have their faults, there is apparently more to be said for than against them. When I see what hard, tasteless fruits they are reduced to eating during the dry season, I cannot begrudge them a little succulent maize. Each year the farm-hands say "kill the coatis." But long ago I decided that I would "plant for the coatis"—sow a little more than I needed with the fore-knowledge that they would come to eat it, then not grumble when they took their share. To patrol the field and shoot the coatis would entail a certain expenditure in labor and money, which could, I reasoned, be more profitably employed in sowing a little more, especially for them. After all, they roamed these woods long before I came. And each year they have taken about what I calculated, and left plenty for ourselves.

Since man, like every other animal, must struggle to exist, he needs to know which animals and plants are helpful to him and which tend to defeat his efforts to produce the food, clothing and housing that he requires. The accumulation of this knowledge is the province of the several branches of economic biology. But we may know that this animal causes so many millions of dollars of damage to our crops each year, and this bird aids the farmer by destroying insect pests, yet fail to know what the bird and animal are essentially, in themselves. If we limit our studies to the economic aspects of biology, we shall miss all the beauty and drama and pathos in the lives of wild creatures. And just as we must pardon many failings of our human neighbors if we wish to get along with them on any terms of civilized intercourse, so we must forgive many small depredations by our neighbors in feathers and fur, if we wish to preserve aught of beauty or woodland wildness in the land.