

MACALESTER COLLEGE

SAINT PAUL, MINNESOTA 55105

■ DEPARTMENT OF BIOLOGY

Ordway Bulletin No. 25

Subject: A DEATH at ORDWAY.

Ordway lost a landmark recently. It happened so quickly - although not unexpectedly - that it was almost a day before it was missed.

For years - perhaps forty - the lone Box Elder tree had stood in the grassland just 125 meters east of the building. The sight of it standing there, sentinel-like, was a focus for observers for it divided the scene stretching toward the east.

As it stood there it looked out across the woodland and River Lake toward the River and its gaunt figure with upstretched arms was a part of the entire scene as it pointed out the whole vista. At its feet ran the railroad tracks and therein lay a strong contributing factor to its ultimate demise for when the tracks were laid a deep cut had been made in the bank on which the tree grew, reaching up to the very foot of the tree, which must have been quite small at the time - perhaps only a sapling - and therefore not greatly affected by the upheaval of the soil.

As it grew, however, a portion of its spread-roots were unable to make growth into the soil, thus lessening the plant's support on about one-third of its circumference. Other things happened, too. In fact, the scar-effect upon the tree was the most obvious thing about it; it was a gnarled "character", replete with the marks of time and the caprices of Nature's elements and creatures. On its north side it was deeply charred for about one-fourth of its basal circumference, the burn scar extending at least a sixth of its diameter inward; some of the many grass-fires of the past had completely deadened the portion of the tree which depended upon that part of the cambium for nourishment. A great deal of "dry-rot", fungus-based decay, had ravaged the remainder of the tree and the holes of woodpeckers had appeared in the upper branches for visiting woodpeckers came for forage on the many insects there.

It was as a vantage-point for birds that the tree seemed most versatile and attractive. Almost every morning of the year - including the most hostile and inclement weather - the upper branches were the meeting-place for a number of Crows, who seemed to confer and then embark on their plans, always flying off in a single direction. Throughout the day - almost every day of the year - there would be a coming-and-going of the smaller birds, who seemed to use the place for a sightseeing lookout, for sunning and preening. Also, it was a favorite daytime roost for hawks, the Sparrow Hawk in particular and frequently for a larger Red-tailed Hawk which used it as a "hunting-tree". Flickers would come often to the tree, sometimes spending a long time there.

This traffic of birds sometimes led to some interesting combinations: Once a Red-tailed Hawk who often had the tranquility of his roost disturbed by smaller birds, particularly Jays and Kingbirds, sat quietly while on the same dead limb within ten centimeters of his business-like talons sat a Goldfinch and at the end of the limb,

perhaps two meters distant, was a male Baltimore Oriole, the brilliant colors of the two small birds making a memorable combination with the regal hulk of the predator. Often the tree was used as a sort of stopping-off place by birds who would fly away in the direction of the River, tarrying a moment to redirect their flight direction. There was a very fat Woodchuck who for two seasons used the shade for a mid-morning nap.

Each spring it was an interesting, breath-holding matter to watch for the emergence of foliage from the aging and ravaged trunk; each spring the amount of green was perceptibly less. Yet it clung with almost painful tenacity to the life which coursed upward through the sap-canals of the damaged growing-layer, nurturing a small south-facing branch and a few basal "suckers" along the trunk itself. In its final season the amount of shade caused by the tree was less than that of an ordinary umbrella.

Then, late morning on June 20th, the northwest skies filled ominously with dark clouds and by about 12:30 a wide stratum of pea-green clouds was eerily sandwiched between two threatening masses of coal-black nimbus. When the storm hit - at 12:45 - it brought heavy rains preceded by hailstones and high winds. Next morning there was a great emptiness in the view eastward from the building.

A walk through the meadow revealed it lying on the steep slope of the bank, the remains of this important part of the landscape, returned to the earth by the processes which had begun many years before. It will be hard to replace.

It will be missed.



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5 September 1974