

OUT WITH
THE BIRDS
BY HAMILTON M. LAING

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OUT WITH THE BIRDS



The Concourse on the Mud-bank

OUT WITH THE BIRDS

BY

HAMILTON M. LAING

Illustrated with Photographs



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“To F. J. M.”

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CHAPTER I

WHERE SPRING COMES LATE

SPRING is slow in getting up to the Northward, beyond the 50's, in the inland plains region, and though it is the first day of March, it is not yet too late to don the old snowshoes, shoulder the kodak, and sally out to see how the wild-folk are living. To a casual eye the Manitoba landscape may look as typically wintry as it did two months earlier. The fields and meadows, white and lonely as a vast, frozen sea, stretch off into the horizon; the copses appear as leaden as when December locked up their shivering nakedness. But there is a difference: the fields are now more dazzlingly bright in the ascending sun; and in the woods little thawed spots show up on the south side of stump or fallen tree. Now also the snow is much packed, not by thaws, but by its own weight, and snowshoeing is a delight. So it is good to swing out of the little town, leave the iron-hard winter

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trail, and visit the places given over to the wild-wood creatures, during the long winter silence.

Even within the town, evidences are not lacking to show that the visit is only a return call. For around the railway loading platform, and the grain elevators, in the heart of the town, are the chain-tracks of the sharp-tailed grouse, and here before the last house on the outskirts, are some twenty-five of the birds themselves. The owner being of a charitable turn, has scattered grain in front of the house, and the birds are having their afternoon meal. Some satisfied fellows, fluffed up and apparently half asleep, are perched on the fence palings, a few feet from his door. However wild and knowing this grand game bird is in October, the stern mid-winter reduces him to another frame of mind. Not that he needs to be dependent, for there are bushels of hawthorn apples, rose hips, snowberry fruit, and tree buds for him, even during winters of deepest snow. He just knows that he is protected now, and so gratifies his taste for grain.

Twice a day, before sunrise and in mid-afternoon, they come thus to the spread provided for them. They now seem to have almost forgotten the twenty-day open season during October,

WHERE SPRING COMES LATE 15

when khaki-colored gun men flushed them from thickets—then as a rule very much more remote from town. With the first big spring thaw they will become mad wild again and be pensioners no longer.

A quarter of a mile out from town, are found the sharp-tail dormitories, located in a hollow in the scrubby sand-hills. Like the other grouse, these birds work themselves down into the soft, dry snow and keep hidden below the surface. Judging by the tracks, they use both wings and feet in the burrowing operations. They always hide thus for the night, if the snow is dry and light, and usually also during the early afternoon. Probably the sharp-tail thus bedded sleeps much warmer on a cold night than when roosting on the surface during a warmer spell. For very obvious reasons they never burrow into the soggy snow during mild spells. A whole flock will burrow in the same little hollow, but unlike their quail cousins, no two of them will sit together.

The prudent sharp-tail never comes out where he enters—always gets in at one side of the bed and out at the other. When going to bed, he gets himself covered and then tunnels ahead

horizontally, pulling the hole in after him by filling the space behind him. This has several advantages: foxes, coyotes, weasels, etc., have sharp noses, but not keen enough to locate often the exact spot occupied by the sleeping grouse, hidden in the snow, without prematurely disturbing him and causing him to burst out explosively. Owls, too, are thus prevented from pouncing upon the sleeper. Doubtless, also, the bed is much warmer than if the bird was sitting at the end of a long, open tunnel, with a large airspace. The larger illustration shows a bed with a very short tunnel. The bird entered at x and emerged at y. At z is a tiny peep-hole, for some reason burst out through the snow.

But the sharp-tails are not the only denizens of the sand-hills. Here, scudding up the side of a knoll between two bluffs, are the tracks of a little hare, heading for cover, and nearby, around the side of the same knoll, are the prints of his larger cousin of the plains, the so-called jack-rabbit. The little fellow stopped a moment on the hillside to listen. Note how differently the big hare sets down his feet. The prints are really smaller, but show a much greater spread between them. This big chap



He Knows That He Is Protected

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PHOTO BY R. ALFORD

There Were More on the Water

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has a peculiar habit of putting his left hind foot ahead for a few hops, and then changing off by promoting his right foot to that position. When he runs hard, his feet are spread out very much in a straight line.

How interesting to follow the prints about, and read the story of how these little chaps spend the night. Their likes and dislikes of food, their little frights, sometimes even their deaths, stand revealed plainly to one who takes time and pains to read. It is interesting to collect samples of the cuttings of the smaller hare. Oak, cherry, birch, willow, bitter poplar, and prickly rose twigs all go into his little pulp mill, in large quantities. In his lumbering operations, he reaches up, cuts off the twig with a clean bite, and then munches it down endwise. He has an iron jaw; his chisel-teeth, driven by his bulging jaw muscles, can be sent through frozen oak scrub saplings, thicker than a lead-pencil, with a clean, effortless bite. Strange that a creature armed with so terrible a bite has never learned to defend himself by using his chisel.

The tracks of the larger hare lead back and forth on the more open places, and do not enter the scrub. He is the most cold-proof creature

on the plains and no landscape is too bleak and wind-swept for him. One does not need to follow his shapely, pattern tracks far to note that he is not such a pruning-knife as the bush hare, but that he prefers rather to nibble the grasses and weeds. He does, however, consume a good quantity of twigs. Here he has visited the silver berry thicket on the knoll and cut off a number of twigs, and next he has called at the dwarfish, half-buried, snow-berry clumps, and nibbled off the bunches of sweetish, frost-ripened berries.

Here—but slow, twenty yards away on the south side of a scrubby knoll, is something that might be Jack himself. It is just a small rounded mound, even whiter than the snow, and a hundred snow-shoers might pass it, but the two round black eyes and the black ear-tips, pulled down tight along his back, give him away. He knows, too, that he has been spotted, and having no faith in a visitor with such large feet, he makes off with that flip-skip-run combination gait which none but a Mark Twain can fittingly describe. And the best that the kodak can do is to picture the oval, half-melted form where he has been sitting since morning.

Next is found the trail of one of Jack's great-

est foes: the coyote or prairie wolf. The latter's tireless, unending trot, trot, trot is shown well by the directness with which he travels. He very knowingly avoids the woods where the snow is deep and unpacked. As the trail is heading south it is probable that he has spent the night hunting for mice around the stacks in the fields out on the flats, to the northward, and then returned to the hills for safety during the day—safety from the only thing that can put the fear of death into the coyote heart and keep it there—the wolf hounds that so many farmers now keep. Slave to habit, as are all creatures, this wolf crosses as usual along the same little flat. Probably in his nightly prowlings, he has passed this same clump of snowberry, hundreds of times. Here he went aside and, at the foot of a ridge, dug out an ant-hill, though what he got for his pains must remain a mystery.

A few hundred yards farther on, a thawed spot amid some foot-prints, on the point of a hill, shows up plainly and invites investigation. It proves to be the fresh bed of the wolf. He has lain curled up on the southern side of the hill, where the sun could beam kindly upon him, and where also he had a good view of his surround-

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ings. A closer inspection shows that he has lain thus for several hours and has just been routed; for the snow in the bed is yet melted soft, and his out-going, loping tracks have no frost in them. Ever on the *qui vive*, he has seen the approach of his arch foe and cunningly made a clean get-away.

Next are found the tiny, precisely-grouped tracks of a field mouse. He has traversed a dozen times a short space on top of the snow, and the path leads to a clump of scrub oaks. Somewhere down below the snow is the home-nest that helps to keep the heat and life in his midget body through the coldest of weather. If the motive behind his coming and going was ferreted out, it would be found probably that down under the snow covering, at the end of some of these paths, lies a broad sand-hill cactus. Often in the spring when the snow is gone, the remains of such an unfortunate cactus may be seen—just a handful of prickles; all else has been eaten.

In a little tree clump the work of a woodpecker is noteworthy. About four square yards of snow are sprinkled thickly with chips and fragments of dead wood that have been pounded

out of a big slit in a half-decayed poplar. It may be the work of downy, but more probably that of the larger, stronger cousin, the hairy woodpecker. The workman is not around, but here comes chickadee to bid his visitor good-day. What thing is so typical of the cheery optimistic spirit of the North as this little bird—the spirit of the loyal hearts, who say, “Oh, yes; it’s cold; but we like it! The air is dry, you know, and you don’t feel the frost.”

But enough of the hills, and the snow-shoes are turned northward toward the river valley and its great tributary ravines—the home of the black-tailed buck and the beaver. Little is noted on the open stubble-fields; even the Arctic owl has taken himself off to other hunting-grounds; and after about a mile the way leads along an old wood-road, down the sharp slope on the west side of a deep ravine, and signs of woods life are met again in plenty. Soon the junction of two such gullies is reached, and it is time to pause. Across the wide cleft, a blackish, spindle-shaped object at once takes the eye. It appears to be something added to a post of an old fence; but there is only one thing can answer to the color and upright shape, and that

is a golden eagle. Soon he leans forward, lifts his great wings, and launches off slowly down the ravine toward the river, doubtless putting a cold chill into the heart of every hare below him, along the way.

The ravine is deep and well wooded, a veritable stronghold for the winter creatures, and it is good to stand and listen for sound to break in upon that dull, impressive, winter silence of the North woods. Comes the prolonged "Chirrrrr" of a red squirrel from near the nest in the oak, the sudden whutter of a ruffed grouse wing from the poplars, or from a distance, the sweetly musical three-note song of the pine grosbeak, then again utter silence. Hello!—across the ravine in the oak scrub is a gray-brown shape with a whitish spot in the center of it—the rump of a black-tailed deer. He is feeding on the twigs of the oak scrub, the motion of his head as he bites and nods upward—always upward—being discernible.

It is a difficult way down that ravine side, through the scrub on snow-shoes; it is ten times more difficult getting up the other and steeper side, especially as it is faced with a thorny hedge of buffalo-berry bushes, just where quietness is

most desired, but a deer stalk, even with the kodak, is worth the effort. It is fully half an hour before the feat is accomplished, and the desired spot down wind is reached; but where is the black-tail? It is necessary now, to look against the scrub, rather than into it as from the former view, across the ravine; and Nature has designed black-tail coats to harmonize with just such scrubby surroundings. Slowly, quietly the hillside is traversed up wind, right out to the more open scrub, and nothing is seen other than some fresh tracks, till with a bound, the deer, a big doe, bounces out of somewhere, at a scant thirty paces distant.

One bounce—what word can just describe the start of a mule deer—and she stops, turns her high head, and flicks her big ears. Then, oh! for a lens that in such weak light could see through that dim scrub, and—from almost at her side another, a yearling, clears the scrub, and together they go off down hill, with that effortless, stifflegged, bouncing gait, possessed by no other animal. They bounce high, seem to hover in the air a moment before they sink, and appear to be rising and falling in their tracks—until you measure the jumps. Twice

they stop and look back from afar; then fade into the dull woods and are lost.

The sun is now low, and there is just time to go back down the ravine side again and visit the beaver-dam. It lies there as it has lain for three months, ice-sealed, snow-clad, and without sign of life. Yet that great mound against the bank, with the brush-tops protruding thickly from the ice in a strip in front of it, show respectively the bunk-house and larder of a thriving beaver family; and the conical, snow-covered mound heaved up in the willows, five feet above the ice, out in the deeper water, is the upper story of another house. But winter is not a good season for studying beavers—especially law-protected beavers—so the snowshoes are pointed downward again. And while crossing the flat, a small voice floats down from the upper air, only a faint lispings bird-note, but how welcome is that first chirrup of our first harbinger of returning spring—the prairie horned lark.



Night Roost of a Sharp-tail

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A Little Red Sparrow Hawk

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CHAPTER II

AN APRIL HIKE

I STOOD it till the fifteenth of the month; then a farmer who drove into town from the westward said that the geese were going up the Pipestone, and I shouldered my kodak and hiked. The spring feeling had reached the seventh stage of acuteness; there was no remedy but to go, to get out, away from the abodes of men, out into the lonely places, where the wild yell of the snow goose is music at day-dawn, and the coyote sings to you at your little camp-fire, through the night. For the great prairie had awakened—that wonderful awakening from winter's silent, white expanse of death, to a glad place of teeming life and song—and it was calling, "Come! Oh, come!"

Winter dies hard to the Northward, and the northwest breeze—the last breath of a three-day blow—still had a brisk edge to it, though the sun was very bright, when at eleven o'clock I

left the town behind, and the sand-hills off to the southwestward began to loom up more distinctly. Just behind the ridge of hills, on the meadow-flat beside the fields, lay a little slough—a spot of pleasant memories—and the place just had to be visited. In October, many a plump green-head, glutted with wheat or barley gleaned from the nearby stubble, meets his doom there, and——

Two hundred yards ahead, peering over a slight rise on the mowed meadow-land, were a dozen big, black heads—honkers'; none other could own such top-stories. No use to unlimber the kodak and make adjustments; off they went with much loud-voiced protest and settled in the slough. It was very evident from the manner in which they set their wings and dropped that more of their kind were on the water; and so it soon proved. Here in fact was a little goose-rendezvous—one of those out-of-the-way spots that in spring, wily Wawa seeks out for close hiding. A better place scarce could have been found by the wisest old black-neck of the clan. No frequented roads ran by; the nearest house was two miles distant; the slough, though small, was unapproachable; and close at hand was

wheat-stubble with its fat eating. The popularity of the resort was attested by the presence of seven or eight flocks of these big gray fellows. Though it was noon-day, a half dozen, in company with a few pairs of mallards, were still in the stubble and seemed loth to leave it.

It is not as easy in the spring to pick out the snug married couples among the geese, as with the ducks. When the drake—whether mallard, spoonbill, pintail, or teal—takes unto himself a wife, he immediately cuts the company of the flock, and for a few weeks, is the most devoted masher alive. But his period of married life never lasts longer than the honeymoon. At the expiration of this supposedly joyful time, he finds somehow that matrimony is not what he thought it, and then divorce follows quick and sure. But he never sues to secure the custody of his youngsters, and invariably the little wife is left in sole charge of them. Among the geese, however, wife desertion and divorce seem to be unknown. The gander sticks to his mate, not only during the summer, but through the winter as well, and the pact with them is evidently “till death do us part.”

It was really worth while now to turn aside

a little and climb a high point of the scrubby sand-hills to get a view of the prairie stretching off below. Bleak, uninteresting, God-forsaken, some would call it; but not those who know the plainland. The broad expanse of whiteness, fading off into the horizon to the southward, marked the lake, still ice-bound; westward from it, and glimmering through a haze, lay a far-off range of sand-hills; in the foreground was spread out a map of farms, with cozy buildings rising here and there;—all making a composition, grand but somber, a print of low tones—the dull grays, cool browns, faint blues—one that is not comprehended at a glance, nor seen at all by a careless eye.

Very little water was lying on the prairie now, except in the regular pond-holes; and the cross-country tramping was a pleasure. Not all of the spring things were back to give greeting; yet the place was athrob with life. Meadow lark ditties drifted up from every quarter; a gray-clad marsh hawk and his big brown wife went beating over the grass and weed patches; a black, rough-legged cousin wheeled slowly aloft, ever northward; a little, red sparrow hawk bobbed his head from the top of a post; a pair of kill-

deers shouted from a bare pasture knoll; a sharp-shin hawk, skimming the ground on fierce wing, dashed with murderous intent into a willow clump, where a dozen tree sparrows had been trilling their sweet whistle; and back of it all was the sweet-voiced chorus of the Lapland longspurs—a tinkling, fairy melody that hovered in the air over almost every field along the way. It was good to tramp, tramp, tramp among it all, to feel really alive and a part of this out-door scheme of things.

Neighbors of the ground, too, were not absent. On the grassy road-sides, and in every pasture lot, many prairie “gophers” were perked up, and others dodged around spasmodically. In the spring, their coats have a yellowish tinge, and the little fellows show more plainly than at any other time. In a remote plot, I disturbed another plains dweller, this time, a prairie hare. His white winter coat had not yet all been cast off, though much of it had evidently fallen out. His face, ears, and back were patched with brown, and as he crouched low, and hugged himself tight in his grass form, thus hoping to escape detection, he appeared to be sort of a misfit in the usual clever color-scheme of Na-

ture. He held himself down till he saw the kodak aimed at him; then he got out of there as suddenly as if he had been kicked, and by the time the shutter clicked, he was just a vanishing white whiz.

Four o'clock, and the willow-fringed creek was crossed; and the road swung around west of the lake, then turned south toward the sand-hills—the same that had been shimmering on the horizon, a few short hours earlier. Now it was evident that the farmer spoke truth, for far ahead some three miles, just above the hill-tops, a dark thread hung in the air and moved westward: the gray geese had started for their feeding-grounds. Soon came another and another flock, some near, others far distant, till over a dozen flocks were in sight, all stringing out westward against the breeze.

It was good now to put down the pack and lie on the sunny side of a sand-hill top, and watch them come—tittering laughers, whose black-mottled breasts shone grandly in the sunlight; black-necked grays and glistening waveys whose wild yells stir the blood, just as they quickened the heart of the dusky-skinned hunter, who a hundred generations ago crouched

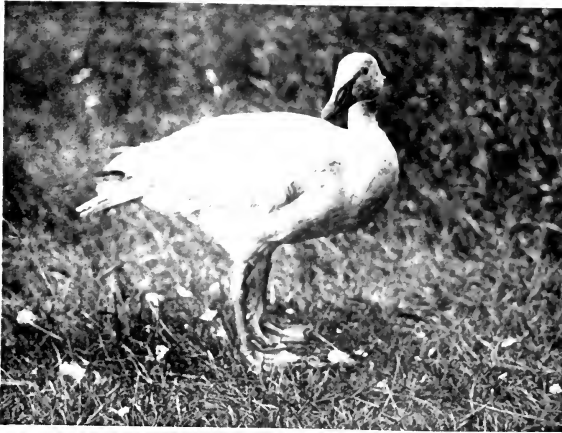
on that selfsame hill and also admired in his own savage way. It was good to see and hear them all again: these wanderers of a mighty continent, back again to their beloved Northland. This has been the most impelling motive behind the day's sixteen-mile tramp; for this I had come.

Down at the east end of the hills is a little spot where in days gone by—so say the flints and pottery in the sand—stood many tepees of the red-man; and it was here that I intended to camp. To the eastward stretched a mile of rush-trimmed marshes, and beyond this the white, wintry lake; southward lay a prairie flat with blue ponds of snow-water glistening in the hollows; to the westward stretched the sand-hills; altogether it was a lonely spot, speaking of the romance of the plainland on every side. What scenes were here but forty years gone by, when the skin lodges of the Crees stood plentifully in the hills; what buffalo herds crossed that flat below, to slake their thirst down at the lake-shore; what carcasses, arrow-pierced, dotted the same flat, after the fierce onset from the hills; what flocks of water-fowl—hundreds and thousands, where now are pitiable tens and scores—inhabited the marshes!

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The story of such a past here was being whispered from the ground. The half-buried buffalo skulls along the lake rim, or slough margin, and the crumbling elk antlers in the hills told it; but even more eloquently spoke the blown-out sand pockets along the base of the slopes. For here in the hollows lay handfuls of crude pottery fragments, flint flakes and chips, arrowheads made of a dozen different kinds of stone, ranging from white quartz to black, glassy obsidian—the latter transported thither hundreds of miles—grooved pemican-stones of granite, gaudy pebbles, quantities of burned and broken bones and masses of fire-crumbled granite, all in mute appeal adding their quota to the tale of days ago.

It was almost sunset when the last of the geese went westward. They caught my eye away off to the southeastward, first a dark mist, then as they circled, they glinted in the sunlight, like a host of tiny silver sparks; and finally they approached and struck out over the same course as the others, this great throng of hundreds of waveys passing across the flat close to the hills; and those long sinuous lines, black-tipped wings and snowy forms shimmering in the light of the



Lesser Snow Goose



Hutchin's Goose

low sun, made a sight that will linger very long in my memory.

The organization of these hosts of snow geese is truly marvelous and far surpasses that of most gregarious creatures. "In unity there is strength," seems to be their rule of life and guiding proverb. Unlike the gray geese, that "dribble" out to the fields in small companies, there to be cut down by the gunner over his decoys,—a small number of birds always decoy better than a large flock—the white fellows usually go massed in a few great detachments. In this way they always have the gun-man at their mercy, as the first flock refuses to decoy to anything less than an acre or two of their kind, and those coming later seem to know exactly what they are looking for. At best, the shooter can get only a volley into each detachment; and it is seldom that he takes heavy toll from a flight. Thus the yell of the wavey will still be a familiar sound on the plains, long after the gray brothers have become but a memory.

At sundown I built my little fire and had supper, in that same labor of love, transferring a wondrous portion from the knapsack to the inside man; for bacon and bread, crinkled and

toasted on a cherry fork over the willow coals of an open fire, have a flavor all their own. Then I banked the fire well with buffalo chips—in this case the same had been left by the ranch cattle of the previous season, but they were just as good fuel as the original, and probably more plentiful—then I made my bed. This consisted of two poles, placed about two feet apart, with a thick layer of snowberry browse, soft and spongy, laid across them, tops in and butts out, the matting thickest at hip and shoulder. The kodak case was added for a pillow, and it was ready.

While I had been engaged thus, four big hares, with their white breeches and gray coats appearing most uncanny in the darkness, visited me, stood high on their hind feet, and ogled wonderingly. In the dusk, and long after it, the geese in many flocks returned with loud clamor and dropped into the ponds in various parts of the marsh. About nine o'clock I lay down by my fire—not with any anticipation of sleeping much; for it was freezing stiffly, and I had no blanket—but to listen to the night sounds, to get first hand the night story of the life in the lonely places, be a sentient part of it, live it.

Through every hour of the night a little of that story was told. The continuous yells of the geese, as a dozen encampments shouted to each other through the darkness, was a mighty orchestra, strange, barbaric, almost unearthly. The waveys' treble shriek never ceased for a moment, through the hours; the Canadas honked deep an all's-well sentry call at intervals; and the laughs at times teeheed mirthfully. The pinnated grouse out on the flat, that had hummed softly till long after dark, finally became hushed; the moon rose at ten and slowly mounted to the southward; several times from the upper air there drifted down the call notes of migrants hurrying northward through the moonlight—a Lapland longspur's voice, also that of a tree sparrow, being distinctly recognized—the sharp whiffle of a duck-wing often came from overhead; and a coyote's call and a horned owl's hoot livened the silence of the sand-hills. Thus passed the night; then the love-mad grouse took up his song, and dawn was near.

The morning awakening of the birds is a wonderful and interesting thing—provided one can get out early enough to be present; and here this difficulty was solved for me. The grouse be-

gan it. He simply couldn't suppress his booming to wait for daylight, and took up his tune again where he dropped it the night before. It would be a safe guess that the little company to which he belonged did not move at all from their stamping-ground during the night. I believe that these love-lorn fellows, at such times, provide many a meal for their enemies, for by nature they are not a night bird, and when an infatuated male has swelled himself out to a second diameter, tilted his head to an impossible angle, bloated out his neck-pouches, and begun to emit his long-drawn "Poooooommm," and this, too, all in the dark, he surely cannot be keeping his usual sharp lookout for his foes.

At the first sign of light in the east, the little horned lark, true to the traditions of his kin, mounted high in air and lisped his best effort. It was weak and creaky no doubt, but what would the prairie do without him? A tree sparrow chirped from the shrubbery; a dozen crow voices shouted from the hills; the ducks redoubled their clamor in the marsh; then a meadow lark sang his dawn song of morning praise, and the prairie world was awake. When the sun peeped over

the horizon and slanted across the flat, it lighted up a picture which alone would have repaid the long thirty-mile tramp. For in and around the blue pond-hole, a quarter of a mile distant, on the bare pasture, several hundred waveys were sitting, their glistening masses, whiter than any snow, glinting most wondrously in the sharp morning light. But soon they rose in a seething, clamorous assemblage, and quickly stringing out in order, went westward.

As the end of the line passed the hills, the kodak clicked; then I shouldered my traps and struck off again. In order to carry out my intention of circling the lake, it was necessary now to go down to the shore and follow it that I might escape the sloughs that flanked it for many miles. On account of being so warmly sheltered, these sloughs were all free of ice and all astir with the hardier members of the duck tribe. The steady, half-musical jabber of their voices arose on every side, for all were filled with the vivacious spirit of the spring-time. They were a gay throng, these gaudy drakes—mallard, spoonbill, pintail, whistler, and American merganser—and every heart-storming masher

among them was seeking a wife, or already had sought and been successful in the quest. Judging by what I saw on several occasions, this wife-getting was sometimes a strenuous game; and a frequent sight over the marsh was that of two showy green-head or pintail drakes cutting and slashing at each other, so to speak, as they pursued a sober little duck, that coyly flew straight away, and intimated—dreadful untruth—that she wanted neither of them. And after all she doubtless married the most insistent fellow.

Down at the southeast corner of the lake, a small sluggish creek connects the great chain of sloughs with the main water. I waded it bare-footed; and when on the other side, I sat down on a matting of rushes to get the sand off my toes before putting on my shoes, I suddenly noted that I had a visitor. Winging down the creek, just a little higher than the rushes, was a Canada goose, a huge fellow, and I slowly flattened down. But he had seen me first; at least he said so in a few deep-toned honks; and it was very evident that he was coming deliberately to ascertain the nature of my business here. He swerved around me, just about a long gun-shot off, and I could see his black head twisting as he

eyed me curiously; then he coolly lit on the lake-shore and stood and watched me.

It was all very plain. The previous summer, a honker pair had nested on a little island in a slough just up the creek. I saw the family in August when the brood of five were grown, just before the shooters from the lodge nearby turned loose in the marsh, and, as the keeper assured me, "got them all but two before they went south." And here doubtless was this shot-scarred, old veteran of a gander, with either his former wife, or a new one, willing to take up again the unequal struggle. His anxious attitude and warning honk told plainly that he was on guard and that, even at this early date, the mate was on her nest, probably on the old site.

Five miles around the lake shore, I struck the timber—grand old oaks and elms, that, hemmed in between the sloughs and the lake, have escaped the fires of the past and grown to stature befitting their race. Here in a little opening where the sod was warm, I lay down to rest and listen to the "widdy widdy widdy" of a junco company just returned, playing, as it were, an alto accompaniment to the tree sparrows' quaint musical airs; to the first spring "Cheer-up" of a

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hearty robin; to the continuous discordant cawing of a score of crows; to the nasal "Keow" of a lonely ring-billed gull out over the lake; to the first notes from a junto of male red-wings, just arrived; and then—to fall asleep.



They Were a Gay Throng

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Canada Geese—Gander on Guard

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CHAPTER III

WHERE SPRING AND SUMMER MEET

IT should have been summer, but it looked and felt like spring. Though it was May 25th, the season was one of the latest and coldest on record in western Canada, and as yet the green-tinted knolls were the only promise of better things. The woods and thickets had little more advanced to show the Rambler than catkins and sleek, warm-coated buds or pollen-tassels, and the landscape was almost as dull and forbidding as in November.

As is usual during such seasons, the birds were a little late. Cool, stiff breezes from the northward are not conducive to pleasant journeying and early arrivals in the North; and in consequence of such weather, many of the migrants arrived somewhat behind schedule time. But they were only a little late; and it must be admitted that they did exceedingly well in the face of adversity. Indeed, many of them, as though

to show that they were independent of wind or weather, actually came up strictly on time. The hardy horned lark, gray goose, and rough-legged hawk had reached us as usual in March; and following them as best they could, the others had straggled along, till now in spite of the inclemency of the season, many of the summer birds had come.

We were out early; for we had planned a little expedition to the woods of the Assiniboine valley. The easterly breeze, which had held forth all the previous day, was still blowing strongly; yet strange to tell it brought no rain, even though the sky had been long overcast as if in preparation. As we tramped off along the trail in the direction of the valley, there was in the out-door world the impress of early spring, much rather than any hint of summer; and we could not help but feel that if the birds governed their migratory movements by the changes of the season, they would have been at this date somewhere about the Middle States.

Just as we left the farm-house, a familiar note came from far off to the westward, and there dotted above the sky-line was a flock of gray geese. Their small size, the rapid beating of

their steady wings, and their shrill voices pronounced them cacklers,—a diminutive edition of the big Canada gray. After them at intervals of half a mile came three similar juntos. They had at last turned their backs upon the wheat-fields of the plains, and now were striking off straight into the Northland, where in a few days' time doubtless they would be hatching. Plainly they were the last of the season; and as they faded from view across the valley, it seemed that the last link in the bird-chain of the spring-time had been drawn away into the North, and henceforth we might hope to greet our friends of the summer.

Soon we met one of them by the roadside. He seemed very much out of place, too, as he flitted about, for he was in most unusual environment. He had a soft yellow coat and a black mask drawn across his face like any highwayman; but in spite of his thug-like visage, he was a retiring little warbler,—a northern yellow-throat. He is in fact, one of the shyest of his clan, and except during migration time when he may be found creeping around through the shrubbery, his interviewer must penetrate the wet, grassy, wood tangles, or the reedy jungles along the sloughs

and lakes—strange environment for a warbler.

The present specimen seemed rather ill at ease as he flitted around in the grass; but when he darted up and perched upon the single telephone wire that was strung along the road, he quite put the finishing touch to his misfit picture. He did not favor us with a single note of his “Witchety witchety witchety” song, which soon he would be voicing from some lonely tangle—a magical ditty, always seeming to come from nowhere in particular, and thrice welcome that it continues through the sultry July and August afternoons when almost all the other singers are silent.

We had just started along the winter trail through the oak scrub on the side of the ravine, when we encountered another fair weather chap. An oven bird emerged from the shrubbery and, running along quite close ahead of us with his strange wooden-legged gait, displayed plainly his olive-green coat, black-streaked vest, and gaudy orange cap. His confidence was much appreciated, for it is seldom indeed that one of these shy fellows grants an interview with any degree of familiarity. Indeed, his voice or song, of “Teacher teacher teacher,” is known to hun-

dreds of out-door people who have never met the author. Like the poet's cuckoo, he still remains "a voice, a mystery."

The Assiniboine valley here is a low, winding depression some two hundred feet below the level of the prairie. The confines of the valley are much cut up by deep ravines, and all are well clad with poplar thickets; and on the snug flat below, the tortuous stream, twisting back and forth in endless loops, is fringed with grand old elms and flanked by strips of other timber. It is a natural refuge of the migrants in time of their journeying; and also of course the home of the woods birds that summer here. When safely entrenched in these sheltered thickets in the bottom-lands, the storms of spring and autumn which sweep the plains can reach them but little. Sometimes during an April snow-storm, even the gray goose and the mallard slip down into the river and cuddle up close in the lee of the mud banks; there they weather the severest storms, while on the flat above, some wise head is telling his neighbor that they are driven back again to the southward. Here, thanks to a wise and respected game law, the noble mule deer yet may be found, and the great dam of the

beaver chokes some of the ravines as it did in days long gone by.

We saw little of note as we passed down the steep wood-road, but when we slipped up to the small slough on the river-flat, we found bird life in plenty. A mother pintail duck fluttered up from the marsh grass right at our feet and left exposed to our gaze her nine greenish treasures, with their downy bedding thrown back. It is unusual for this duck to nest so close to the water; and evidently she was convinced that the dry spring weather was going to continue. Out on the water, among a number of other relatives, her big, dandified, spike-tailed husband awaited her. A pair of much-attached blue-winged teal and two pairs of green-winged were there close at hand, and at a greater distance two gaudy greenheaded drakes watched us warily. Somewhere out in the shrubbery or in the heavy woods—for a mallard will nest almost anywhere—were their spouses, each covering a hatful of eggs, but the teal, being later nesters, had not yet begun to keep house.

Several red-winged blackbirds were observed to have their mates with them this morning. Red-wing always arrives in the North long ahead

of his wife, and these were the first females of the spring. A spotted sandpiper disturbed on shore went peep-peeping over the water to circle in on another roost; a lone cormorant came from somewhere and whiffled off up the valley; and just as we turned away from the water we encountered a small flock of swamp sparrows. These little reddish fellows can run about through the marsh grass with the alacrity of mice; and during the time that we watched them, they showed us how well they are equipped for a life in such places. The ease with which they could disappear and appear again from nowhere had in it something almost savoring of a sleight of hand performance. Though most of the birds have more or less of a protective color scheme in their coats, few are so well endowed naturally as this marsh-loving sparrow.

It was during the return journey about mid-day, that we came upon the real bird feature of the day, when in a bend in a warm, wooded ravine, we stumbled into a veritable bird rendezvous. It seemed that all the feathered folks of the wood had collected in this one spot. Congregations of this sort are a fairly common thing in the spring, for there are many companionships,

even between different species, formed on the northward journey; but it is not often given to the bird student to discover a trysting-place for as many species as we found here. Some were migrants evidently just arrived. Many of them were singing; the others were conversing, one with another; but each in his own way was lifting up his voice in glad thanks for a safe return to the Northland, the land of home, of mates and young.

A lovely rose-breasted grosbeak warbled his very best,—a strong rich lyric unsurpassed by that of any bird in the northern woods,—and two turtle doves, perched on the horizontal limb of a big white poplar, sent their soft love-notes floating down the valley, while a magnificent oriole, probing with his needle-pointed bill among the catkins of a poplar tip, ceased every moment to pipe out his short joyous ditty.

From all around there came the voices of smaller and less imposing musicians; and there were some who, probably out of respect to their betters, declined to sing at all. A bright little redstart glowed here and there in the sunlight, among half a dozen myrtle warblers. A black and white creeping warbler was observed dart-



Whirr and Grand Right and Left

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At the First Peep of Day

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ing about or bobbing up and down the tree-trunks in his own peculiar giddy way. This fellow must be found by the eye, as usually he is too busy to even chirp; but no one who has once identified him will ever mistake his black and white-streaked coat and topsy turvy movements for those of any other bird. Another warbler was at hand and as though to atone for the silence of his relatives, how he did sing! This was the Tennessee warbler, busily engaged in the tops of the trees,—his constant habitat—but never too much engrossed to burst out explosively every few moments with “Wi-ché wi-ché wi-ché wit chit it it it ttttt!” What this tiny green songster lacked in melody, he made up a hundred-fold in vivacity.

Over in the tall poplars on the hillside, some other tiny visitors invited closer inspection. Though no larger than the diminutive Tennessee warbler, it was very plain from the stolid way in which they moved in the branches that they denied all claim to kinship with the warblers. When we got close in below them it was evident from the busy manner in which they tore the catkins, also from their streaked breasts and general sparrowy appearance, that the pine

finches had arrived. Not one of them offered a song while we remained near. This was a pity, for though it is seldom heard, this finch has a tiny, rippling song well known to the woods of the North.

Quite well represented in this rendezvous were the woodpeckers. Some flickers were shouting almost continually, and two were flirting and bobbing noisily around a dead poplar bole. At no time very dignified, this fellow usually makes a sad fool of himself when he goes courting. A downy's sharp, nickering call came from somewhere near; and a yellow-bellied sapsucker—silent and morose as usual—was observed. He had his eye open for a sleek-skinned, juicy young tree and probably had already tapped several in the vicinity. In the Manitoba woods this fellow usually preys on the willow, birch, and poplar, but best of all he dearly loves a basswood, and if there is one in the vicinity he will find it. It is almost impossible to find one of these trees free from the numerous scars—rectangular pits laid regularly in rings and rows—made by the beak of this woodpecker. Even in the little parks in the heart of the city, the basswoods meet the same treatment as elsewhere

and carry many girdling scars, received during the spring migration of the sapsuckers.

A catbird and a thrasher were in the shrubbery, but neither lent his services to the entertainment, and so both were in the capacity of listeners. They seemed rather out of their element in these bare woods, for it is seldom that they reach the northern woods before the bursting out of the foliage. Leaves and green things seem as necessary to these chaps as water to a fish. This is especially true of the catbird; he comes flitting into the shadows of the thickets just when the first gum-scented leaves of the poplar begin to whisper in the May breezes—no sooner and no later—and he delays his departure in the autumn till those leaves come whispering down and the woods are bare. So now neither of these rival songsters had the heart to tune up. The catbird had no shady thicket from which to entertain, and the thrasher, no green mound of verdure beneath his song-tree, into which to dart downward at the end of each number; so both of them remained silent.

It was with reluctance that we turned away from the rendezvous and slipped along up an old wood-road. Here a rustle on the leaves at-

tracted attention, and a big, ruddy cock ruffed grouse walked slowly off into the deeper woods. Little schooled in the ways of man, he had no fear, and quit-quit and flirted his great bronze tail proudly as he moved away. Ten yards distant was a log that seemed to bear on the case. It was hollow, bare of bark and smooth, and the droppings about it showed that it was a drumming-log. What soft muffled thunderings had been started off down the valley, from this old fallen poplar, we could only guess. Without a doubt the mate of this handsome fellow was covering her eggs somewhere in the wood nearby.

As we neared the top of the hill, suddenly a new and delightful bird note greeted us. From a tree-top above us up the slope, came the "Sweet bird sing!" of a towhee; and what sound could be more welcome? That three-note call—it can scarcely be called a song—is to me one of the most impressive of the woods. Like the song of the veery thrush, it is rather an expression of feeling than a melody; but how much soul is expressed in those two notes and the ending, vibrant trill! Bird songs mean much or little to the human listener, according as his

bond of sympathy is strong or weak, but somehow the song of the towhee stirs me as few bird-notes can. It is sweetly plaintive; it is happily sad, or sadly happy; it is lonely, yet contented; it is indescribable; and it is all expressed in "Sweet bird si-n n n n g!"

A flock of a dozen sprightly tree swallows, just arrived, completed our observations at the valley, and then we set off for home. We chose a round-about way, and shortly before returning to the farm-house, we visited a little pond in a hay-meadow. We were soon made exceedingly glad that we called here, for we met a migrant stranger of note—one to go down in the notebook with his name spelled in capitals and underlined. There were two of these worthies, handsome Hudsonian godwits, and they were in company with a pair of the commoner marbled species. They were much occupied with each other and allowed a close enough approach for us to observe them well. It is this meeting with rarities that lends to ornithological field work one of its greatest charms and incentives.

But though these big snipe occupied the center of the stage, they were not the only waders of interest at the pond. Several beautiful Wil-

son phalaropes were present, the big important females much in evidence and grunting peevishly at our intrusion. Here also were half a dozen midget least sandpipers. They were employing their short stop-over in feeding in the green grass shooting from the moist sod, and also in making love. One little chap apparently had been successful at the latter occupation, pastime, or duty—whatever you will—for he had an inseparable, and the two held quite aloof from the rest of the flock and plainly were the only sandpipers in the whole wide world.

CHAPTER IV

ON THE STAMPING-GROUND

AS usual, the sharp-tails were there long before me. This must not be taken to imply a tardiness on my part, for the alarm clock had rattled at three A. M., and now after a sharp walk of a mile and a half, the sun had not yet peeped over the hazy rim of the prairie. Even thus early the dance was going on merrily, and as I climbed the railway fence and started across the mowed hay-land, I could plainly see the dancers half a mile ahead on a bare knoll, spinning back and forth over the sod like so many self-propelled bowling-balls. "Cock-a-luk, koo, poom!"—their voices drifted out into the morning world—a mystical call, which, like the hoot of the owl, the cooing of a dove, or the thunder of the wing of the ruffed grouse, seems to defy all physical laws and to be increased rather than diminished by distance.

They had been dancing thus in the darkness

long after sunset the previous evening, and now at the first peep of day they were at it again. All through April the same daily program had been followed, and now at the 20th of May, not one of the dancers showed symptoms of lagging. For twenty-five years at least they had held their spring carnival upon this knoll; and probably centuries before the first prairie schooner had ventured this far to the westward, uncounted generations of sharp-tails had danced there.

On closer approach, a new noise became very audible—a strong, vibrant whirring like the rapid beating of many wings. This was not a continuous rumble, but rose in intermittent waves, now a roll from a dozen pairs of quivering, drooping wings, then quiet for a moment. Now at a hundred yards the actions of each of the mad revellers could be followed. With heads down, white tails erect and spread, and wings adroop, they bowed in pairs and circled and whirred and dashed dizzily about, and “gobbled,” till when I came too close, they ceased their grand right and left, and sank slowly upon the ground, and remained crouched there till routed.

This dancing of the sharp-tailed grouse, a performance analagous to the booming of the pin-



Young Long-Ear—Just a Little Stretched

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Burrowing Owls—Persuaded to Smile

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nated and the drumming of the ruffed grouse, and also to the strutting of a turkey, has always been a matter of wonderment to the out-of-doors people on the plains. The earliest explorers marveled at it as they slipped up to empty a murderous muzzle-loader at the preoccupied birds; they called it dancing then, and the apt term has stuck. Early in March these grouse repair to some selected knoll, and on sunny mornings give a hint of the performance to follow later. By the first of April usually the knoll is bare and the dance going in full swing. At that time these revels often occupy a goodly part of the day; and from this date till late in June, but depending somewhat on the season, the birds never are far from their club-roost or dance-hall.

At noonday they may be found sleeping in the grass or willow-clumps nearby, and during the morning and evening hours are unfailingly on their stamping-ground. What that long daily "hoe-down" means to the birds I am unable to state. At one time I thought that I knew. That was before I had learned to get right among the revelers; now after many hours spent with them, I am much wiser but still mystified.

Soon I had the kodak focused upon the little

tuft of grass beside a particularly bald spot—due to the sod being worn down—and then I crawled into my little grass and willow blind to await results. This interruption, in the eyes of the grouse, was a sad waste of time, and they were soon back. They were getting rather accustomed to me now also, as already I had been an uninvited guest more than a dozen times, and each time disturbed them in the same manner. So one or two of the boldest soon fluttered down upon the knoll and immediately began to edge up longingly toward the blind, to be followed in a few moments by the remainder of the club-members. It seemed strange that even in spite of misgivings—it was impossible to conceal the kodak entirely—they had to return to the exact spot to resume the dance. Any other place in the forty acres seemed to me as fitting an assembly hall, but it was evident that in the eyes of the sharp-tails, there was but one spot would answer.

It is not often that the opportunity to get among these birds and see them at the closest quarters is given to a bird-student. Yet here they surrounded me; a pair of them “cut their capers” in front of my nose, where I could have touched them with a long straw, and one fellow

mounted the blind and whirred just a few inches above my head. The temptation to pinch his toes was almost irresistible; and then as if discerning my thought, he hopped up on the kodak itself! His toe-nails clinked upon the metal of the finder and speed scale, and I feared every moment that his feet might catch in the string and thus make an ill-chosen exposure. When I jerked the string and the focal plane shutter banged under his feet, I think he fell over himself a time or two before getting under way in his frantic leave-taking.

To lie in the blind at the breaking of a late May morning and listen to the glad voices from the bird world upon the prairie is an experience a thousand times worth while. And here as I lay alone now, waiting for the return of the startled revelers, I had entertainment of another sort,—the wonderful bird orchestra of the plainland in spring. It was an orchestra of twenty or more parts, and innumerable performers; a composition without end; a melody that rose from every quarter of the plain and filled earth and air with a gentle, fairy-like humming and sweet murmuring. It was the love-lyric of all the birds within the circle of the horizon, more deeply magical

and full of the inner meaning of things than that of the wood birds whose songs are so much better known.

While I lay and listened, I scrawled with a stub of pencil upon a discarded film paper the names of the birds whose voices reached me, and soon found that they totaled a score. On every hand, near and far, rose the hearty notes of the lusty meadow larks; from a mound close by, a vesper sparrow rippled away tenderly; and in a grassy hollow below the knoll, two savanna cousins lisped out their peculiar "Tsip, tsip, zeeee" song. From the marshy bottom of the ravine at the edge of the field came the sweet "Konkereeee" of several red-wings; and beyond them in the clump of poplars, two flickers were winnowing boisterously. Out from the distant lake came a noisy host of belated snow geese, that worked away to the northward to return no more till autumn. They were followed shortly after by a small knot of grays; and then after them but very low, came the undulating, loose companies of the little black-headed Franklin gulls, shouting "Kic-kic, ki-e-a!"

Over in the sandhills at no great distance, another dance was in progress, and the "Poom,

poom!" of the sharp-tails arose at intervals. From there also the mournful, rolling whistle of the Bartram sandpiper sounded clear and faded away; and the strident voices of the crows—the one discordant note in the composition—broke forth all too commonly. But it was from overhead that there came the greatest number of bird-notes, some of them sounding this morning for the first time of the season. Great numbers of Lapland longspurs in company with a few tardy snowflakes, passing northward high in the heavens, continuously sang their rollicking songs. For even the snowflake is a musician on such mornings. Several chestnut-collared longspurs went squeaking overhead; he reserves his song while journeying, to sing it later as he hovers over some bare knoll.

Numbers of gay bobolinks drifted over, and sang as they traveled. Like the Lapland longspur, Bob does not believe in keeping his music till he reaches his summer home, but dispenses it lavishly along the way. The sweet, plaintive whistle of a black-breasted plover floated down as a flock of these handsome chaps sped onward toward distant marshes; and then came a breath of early summer, when with musical twittering a

small flock of barn swallows swept by, to be followed in a few minutes by a larger company of tiny, sober-clad bank swallows. In all this bird-world, each after his kind was twittering or singing aloud the thing that was in his heart; and back of it all was a steady accompaniment that rose and fell in half rhythmical cadence like a distant organ symphony. This was the tuneful mooing of the pinnated grouse, that out on the flat among the meadows were holding their wondrous spring carnivals.

Just about the time that the vesper sparrow perched upon the roof of my blind and sang his lovely little hymn into my ear, there was a succession of thunderous descents upon the knoll around me, and a dozen sharp-tails had returned.

The wildest period of their revelry was always just after they began; and soon the quadrille was whirling along at its best. They danced usually in pairs, which is quite the approved custom elsewhere; and the performance of the two hovering about by little focusing-mark served as a sample of what the others were doing on other parts of the ground. Sometimes for the space of several minutes they sat quite still, beak to beak, or occasionally they made hostile little passes, as

though to peck each other. Then of a sudden they would spring up, and thrusting their heads down and their tails up, would whirl with drooping wings, and as they whirred, spin around in mincing circles.

Often either of the birds would break away and take a spin across the knoll to bow and whirl to some other bird; but always in a moment he would return to his own partner and his allotted portion of the stamping-ground.

That each two kept to a certain section of the hall was assured; for I could distinguish one or two of the birds, and always noted them on the same spot. This was particularly noticeable of one threadbare, dilapidated old chap, with a bright yellow eyebrow and a mighty "Poom!" who always stamped on a small plot a few feet from my shelter. After each spasm, when the couples were seated tête-a-tête, they emitted a variety of half-suppressed, whining calls that are never heard elsewhere; and it is safe to say that no one who has not spent a morning or two on a stamping-ground knows more than half of a sharp-tail's vocabulary.

The fun had reached its frenzy pitch when suddenly I noted that something other than

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dancing was taking place. It very much resembled a fight; and soon I realized that such it really was, though it had a most absurdly comic side to it. The fray was a three-cornered affair. The first fellow fled in circles; the second followed him; and the third brought up the rear. I decided that it was two cocks fighting, and that the cause at issue, and root of the trouble, was merely following the contestants. They whirled about the hill at lightning speed, running on legs that fairly spun, or dashing short snatches on the wing, through the set or over the dancers. The second fellow had blood in his eye, and the first—evidently an interloper, who was not wanted—lacked the courage or fiber to turn and fight it out. Yet when the pursuer caught him, they bit and held on with a grip like bull-dogs, and rolled over, and beat each other with their wings, and shed each other's feathers. The interloper always got thumped, but not until he was properly mauled would he retreat. Then he came in front of my blind and stood with drooping wings and beak agape, and for a time panted weakly and dejectedly. When he regained his wind, he was ready for the next round of fighting and running—and he always got it. He lasted for three fast



Her Green-headed Mate Was at the Slough

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Rewarded for Her Long Vigil

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Drowsing in Their One-Legged Way

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rounds. At the end of the third, he rested close to my focus mark, and I pulled the string and again cleared the hill. Just what the termination of the struggle would have been, had I not disturbed the contestants, is hard to imagine; but it is probable that the weaker of the two finally must have acknowledged defeat for the reason that he must have lacked the necessary wind and stamina to get back on the forbidden ground.

Again the birds returned; but now as the morning advanced, they seemed to have lost much of their early craze. As usual, though, they did not fail to have at least one quadrille immediately after getting back to this strangely attractive hill; but it lasted a shorter time than usual, and soon they were sitting in couples, or at least twos, beak to beak; and so quiet did they become that at times not a whisper of a sound arose from the hill. One chap very close to the blind was observed plainly to attempt a nap. His eye closed dreamily, stayed shut a few moments, opened and took a survey of the world, then closed again for a short while. His naps were even more abbreviated than the proverbial forty winks, but doubtless were refreshing to such a dance-worn roisterer.

Suddenly one couple sprang up and whirred, and instantly all the company were up and at it. But this set-to was brief and tame, and evidently the equivalent of the Home, Sweet Home waltz, for though I waited for half an hour after it, they showed no inclination to resume the ball; so I crawled out, picked up my outfit, and left the ground.

Twenty yards down the side of the knoll, along the edge of the stubble-field, I came upon evidences of tragedy. Many feathers were scattered around, and as it was certain that two fighting cocks could not loosen so much plumage in one spot, it seemed that here a sharp-tail had met violence. A week earlier the same tell-tale signs of violent death had been written on another part of the ground; so now I scouted closely.

It was the thumb-prints of the murderer that revealed him to me. A few feet from the first feathers was another tuft, that evidently had been knocked out by a blow, and beside them two fresh parallel marks scratched in the moist earth. They terminated in paw-marks; and a few more foot-prints were also visible. The streaks showed where the coyote had thrust out his front feet to break his rush as he dashed upon, and snatched up

his victim. Either in the dusk of morning or of evening, when his neutral-tinted coat faded into the shadowy grays of the dead grass on the knoll, he had stalked up to the birds, now so dance-crazy and reckless, and two sharp-tails had paid the price.

Now to go a little ahead of my story—on this particular morning I had no further reason to think again of the coyote and his relations to the grouse; but it was a matter of but a few days till it was all forcibly brought to mind, when a neighbor lad told me that he and his father had dug out a coyote den right in front of my blind on the stamping-ground. When I returned to the place I found that he spoke truth to the letter, for there, a hundred paces from the spot where I had lain for hours, and also in the direction in which I always faced, was the remains of the ravaged den.

For several years this mother coyote had nested in the sandhills; and each time, her pups had drawn bounty money; so now with the daring and strategy of a reasoning head, she had chosen the field for her den. The despoiler assured me that it was by the merest chance that he had found it; and so skillfully had she kept

her secret from me, that only once during the many mornings and evenings that I visited the hill, did I get a glimpse of her. So after all it was scarcely a disgrace for a sharp-tail to be stalked and eaten by such a wise old coyote mother.

CHAPTER V

MOTHER SHRIKE—THE STOLID ONE

THOUGH I met mother shrike many times after her arrival on April 2d, it was not till the 29th of the month that I called on her, at home. Between these dates I never passed along the railroad-track on a visit to the drumming-ground of the sharp-tailed grouse that I did not find her perched upon the telegraph wires, or occasionally on the fence; and when one day she had a mate, I felt sure that they were going to be neighbors during the summer. The two resembled each other so closely that I was quite unable to distinguish them, and, as many male birds precede the females of their kind, on the north-going journey, it is very probable that in reality it was father shrike that I met first.

That I called on the lady at home was something of an accident. I had been down at a slough in the neighborhood, inspecting a black

marsh tern colony, and when I got tired frogging in the mud and water, trying to find bottom where there was none, I left the noisy place and slipped up through the sand-hills. I chose a roundabout way so that I might call on a hatching sharp-tail grouse to see how she and her fifteen eggs, hidden away in the grass on a silver-berry knoll, were faring. When I found that all was well with her, I stole away without making any disturbance and, leaving the hills, followed along the edge of an old deserted field. Here while peering into the willow clumps I spied a nest, and on it was mother shrike.

The nest was built of silvery weeds and other coarse material and was placed about seven feet from the ground in a dead willow clump on the northwest corner of the little thicket. When I noticed it, the old bird's burglar-visage was peering over the rim, but not till I stood right below her did she deign to notice me. Then she vacated the nest, and in a strangely unconcerned sort of way eyed me stolidly from a distance of three or four feet. Not a sound did she or her mate utter even when I gently slipped my fingers into the nest to count the gray-specked treasures—six of them. With some birds this would have been a

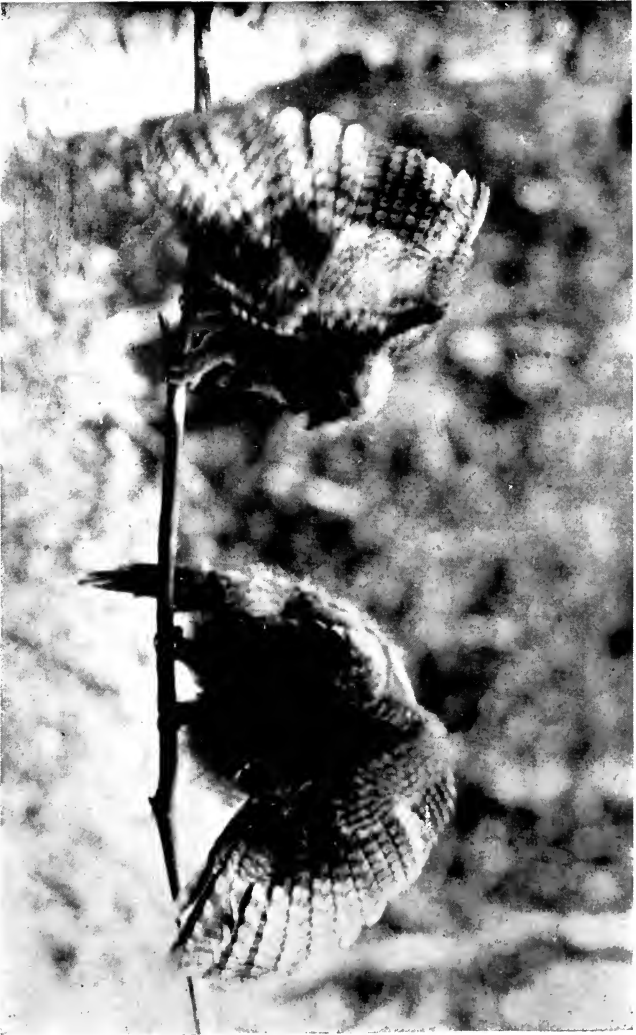
great indiscretion, but not with the shrikes; they do not seem to have any touchy susceptibilities in this respect.

I often wonder why Nature has stamped the shrikes with such a brigand-like visage,—why that black mask, so typical of the evil-doer? From the scientific point of view it is probably merely to break up the outline of the head and give the owner greater opportunities for hiding himself in the shrubbery or on elevated perches; but still it is hard not to see in it something sinister. The notched beak with its wicked hook, suggesting the predatory habits of the owner, doubtless aids in establishing this impression. Given a new head, he might be transformed into a rather handsome perching bird, but as he is he seems to be a combination of the hawks and perchers.

This shrike pair were of the white-rumped species, and though very similar in appearance, must not be confused with the northern brother. The latter is a winter visitor. He haunts the stacks or farm buildings on the plains, or keeps to the edges of the woods during the winter months; and hawk-like he preys on mice, English sparrows, and other small birds that he can catch. He is veritably a hawk in dove's clothing. Hawk-

like he will hover and swoop, and following the same example, he will sometimes carry off his prey clutched in his feet. He is a dangerous foe to every bird smaller than himself, and from his well-known habit of impaling the bodies of his victims on thorns and twigs well merits the name of butcher-bird. But this cannot be said of the pair that owned the nest in the dead willow-clump, for after visiting them very often and spending hours in their company, I could not find that they preyed on anything larger than the insects of the surrounding fields.

These birds were provided with a very complete equipment for securing this sort of prey. Their notched beaks were special instruments for getting through the armor-plate of beetles and grasshoppers and their eyes were marvels of acuteness. Their favorite perch was the telegraph wire—the railroad ran by within a hundred and fifty yards—and from this vantage point they seemed to be able to detect an insect at an almost incredible distance. Sometimes, too, they plucked their prey out of the air, after the fashion of the flycatchers. But evidently it was only the straight-ahead flyers of the beetle tribe that they could catch thus, for the birds usually



They Flew at Each Other

made a straight dart up in the air and met their blundering victims.

During the two weeks after I found the nest I saw a great deal of the shrike pair. I had been waiting for an opportunity to get a picture of this bird, and I felt that now it had arrived. This tame, unconcerned creature I fancied was an easy victim, but I reckoned without my host. Though she seemed to have no fear of me at all, she did display a strange dread of the kodak. The first time I tried to get her she refused to come back to the nest at all. However, it was a warm evening, and I knew that the eggs would not chill—mother shrike did, also—so I fixed up my platform of posts and prepared for a grand coup next time.

When I had a cool, bright afternoon with a northwest breeze I tried again. The antics of the little mother now were half comical, half pathetic. Quite well she knew that her eggs had now to be covered, and back she came. Yet only for a moment or two would she remain on the nest. On and off, off and on, hopping but a foot or two away, then quickly returning, she kept up a continuous movement for a while before finally settling down. When the noisy focal-plane shutter

went off with a bang, she was gone like lightning, but in a few minutes was quite ready to return again. I thus made several exposures, and went away confidently, to learn a few hours later that there was not a trace of mother shrike on any of those negatives. The nest was there, but it was empty. I tried several times again before I succeeded in making even an exposure. Then as the day favored me, I speeded the shutter to a five-hundredth part of a second, sat down at the foot of the tripod and tapped it incessantly with a stick till the bird got accustomed to the noise, and in this way made several exposures. On one of these I secured a picture, on another an extended wing; the rest were blanks.

Such dexterity at kodak dodging seemed marvelous. A scientific friend who rather doubted my story figured that it was impossible for a bird to beat such speed; the makers of the machine backed him; but I had spoiled a dozen plates. Probably we were both right; and the real explanation was that the bird could hear the curtain shutters starting to roll before the actual exposure was made; or her marvelous eye may have detected the little swinging arm as it moved to release the shutter. Acting lightning-like on her

first impulse from some source, she was able to exit too quickly to be stopped by even the kodak.

I think I never see a pair of nesting shrikes that I do not recall an experience with them of earlier days. A pair—I think they were white-rumps, but a shrike was a shrike in those days, and there is a bare possibility that they may have been the Northern species—nested in the trees about the garden and we watched them for a season. This pair quarreled with everything in sight; they even baited the robins, and it was decided by the owner of the garden—never again. The next spring when they returned and began to build, we immediately gave them a hint of future relations by poking down the nest. The owners looked on stolidly and then began a new one.

After two or three nests had been demolished, it was decided that the shot-gun would be more effective; so the next nest with Mrs. Shrike in it was blown sky-high. We considered that one such drastic lesson would end the matter, but we did not know this shrike. In an hour he was perched on the tip of a spruce, and singing! singing a musical medley, a continuous effort, that while it suggested a borrowing from several

sources, flowed gaily, and rippled on and on—strange requiem for a martyred widow. We were somewhat at a loss to understand the purport of that song till next morning revealed two nest-building shrikes in the garden. That musical effort had evidently served a double purpose. When the new wife was hastened off over the same route as that taken by the first, the twice-widowed survivor again sought his elevated perch and whistled. He was rewarded by getting a third wife.

Attempts were now made on the life of the seductive whistler himself, but he had grown wary and kept out of range, so the war of extermination was continued against his wives. As quickly as he lost one, he whistled up another; and he never required more than a day or two to get her. On the day that the fifth wife suffered, the Bluebeard himself was shot also, and the series of cruelties came to an end. Where he got these unmated females must always remain mysterious. It is almost inconceivable that there could be so many spinsters in the neighborhood, and it is improbable that he could be guilty of stealing his neighbors' wives. But they came to him from somewhere; that fact remains.

However, the silent pair in the willow-clump showed nothing of the pugnacious tenacity of the former Bluebeard; and never once did I hear the male offer up the suggestion of a song. That the youngsters that came into the world on the 12th of June later became as noisy as is usual with these rasp-voiced little beggars, I have not a doubt. I had not the pleasure of watching them grow, for work called me elsewhere, and when on the 12th of July I returned and visited the willows by the old field, I found only a flattened nest in the thicket to remind me of the stolid one.

CHAPTER VI

THE DUCK-MOTHERS

FOR several seasons it had been one of my kodaking ambitions to get a picture of a wild duck on her nest, so when my friend and kindred spirit, Andy, informed me that he had found a very good subject, I was not slow in accepting his invitation to go out to try my chances with Madame Spoonbill. Accordingly next morning I shouldered the kodak pack and struck out along the road in the direction of the farm-house.

It was June 19th, it was early in the morning, and I was afield. The morning world was full of sound, sweet and harmonious, as befitted this month of the greatest of the passions. From the sand-hills came the rippling whistle of the upland plover and the worshipful song-service of the vesper sparrow; from the meadow flat, the exuberance of Robert of Lincoln, punctuated by a hundred meadow lark ditties; on a grassy knoll,

a score of sharp-tailed grouse “poom-pooming” identically where a hundred generations of their forefathers danced before them; on the distant marsh, the soft “mooming” of the pinnated grouse; red-wing’s happy, homely strains from the rushes along the little stream in the ravine—these were some of the familiar voices that greeted me as I tramped along, glad that I had a kodak hobby to lure me afield.

The four-horse team was just being hitched to the breaking-plow when I arrived, and I went out behind it to the field where Madame Spoonbill was said to dwell. She had chosen as a site for her nest a flat piece of grassy prairie, situated about a hundred yards from a small slough. It was within a few feet of the fence, or the plow would have played sad havoc with it; as it was, she had almost been trodden upon before fluttering out from among the horses’ feet. The nest structure was the usual Spoonbill affair,—a blanket woven of down and soft grass fibers, lining a slight hollow in the ground and holding the ten greenish treasures. There was not one spear of grass or weed unlike another to serve as a landmark; and doubtless if we had allowed Madame time enough to adjust the coverlet and arrange

the grass blades in her artful way, the nest would have been practically invisible.

To me, a wild duck's nest is always something of a mystery. The strange thing about it is that the little mother ever succeeds at all in bringing any progeny into the world. It is surely a tribute to her wonderful cleverness that the big hawks, the great horned owls, the foxes, coyotes, weasels, minks, skunks, badgers, and perhaps worse than any of these, the crows, also the devastating plows and prairie-fires of man,—her worst foe—all combined and working by day and by night, cannot prevent her from hatching; though, alas, some one of this pernicious combination sacks the nest all too often. If the first hatching is destroyed, she bravely begins all over again. It is probably this duck trait that has been instrumental largely in keeping the species in existence in the face of such terrible odds. My note-book holds two records, which I regard as authentic, of a duck found hatching in September—the gunning season. She must have a courage beyond our understanding, or be endowed naturally with a callousness to dread and danger.

That she is a mighty cunning and ingenious mother is shown by the diversity in kind of site



A Tempting Pot-Shot for the Lens



chosen. Thus a mallard may locate in the thick woods, in a horse-track in the stubble field, in an old crow's nest, on the top of a haystack, or as one Manitoba pioneer assured me, on the sod roof of his first stable. Another part of the mystery is how the tender little peepers reach the water. The mallard and pin-tail are both prone to nest far from that apparently necessary factor in a duck's existence. On two or three occasions I have seen a mallard's nest more than half a mile from any pond or stream; once I discovered one in a hollow on the top of the highest hill in a range of sand-hills, where there was not a drop of water within a mile or more. The nest was hidden in a thick matting of ground cedar, at the foot of a clump of dwarf birch, and thirty feet distant, and a little above it, on the side of the hill, was a much-used coyote hole. I had no means, however, of ascertaining the ultimate fate of the venture.

When I set up the machine and attempted to focus upon the nest of the subject in hand, I realized that I had met difficulty. Not only did the steep angle of the kodak give the nest a tilted appearance, but what was worse, the subject itself was so well hidden and blended so well with the

dead grass that it was scarcely discernible on the ground-glass. This meant that the grass must be parted and the downy bed-clothes pushed back, and I hesitated long and looked around well before doing so. No; it would not do to thus expose the eggs, and again I softly replaced the down-covering and hoped that when the bird returned upon her nest, she would show up plainly enough. After making adjustments, I attached a long string and laid it back along the fence several yards; then I picked up the gun and slipped away.

The gun was not to be used on the owner of the nest, if the kodak failed to score, but to be directed toward her enemies, the crows. Andy had assured me that a number of the black rascals were sure to be around, and I figured that as soon as one of them got his eye on the kodak, he would most probably indulge his bump of curiosity by going in close to investigate and then most likely see the nest which had escaped him previously. Once seen, I knew that it would mean an end to this nestful of prospective ducklings, and I felt that to be directly accountable for such a thing would be a crime. And crow doings shortly proved my ap-

prehensions well founded. Scarcely had I taken up a position with Andy, back about a hundred paces, when two black scalawags settled on the fence-posts and curiously eyed the kodak. It required very little play of imagination to interpret their conversation and gestures. After considerable talk on the subject, one of them slipped over to get a better view, then saw us lying on the ground and turned to interview us; this proved his one big mistake in life, for Andy handled the gun. Two more followed over the same route, shortly after; then the survivors learned their lesson—the crow is always an apt scholar—and henceforth they gave the field a wide berth.

We expected that the duck mother would return in an hour at most; but one, two, three hours slipped by and she remained away. There was nothing we could do except await her pleasure. However, waiting for almost anything short of execution was a pleasure on such a day, and we lay in the warm sunshine and traded experiences and renewed old ones. A few days previously Andy had discovered in the same field a nest of five new-born prairie hares—a rare find—and he recounted the tragic ending

of a pintail duck that had been nesting close at hand. She had built her nest on the side of the C. P. R. grade, not three feet from the rail, and had been in the habit of letting the trains thunder by without moving from her eggs—surely a noteworthy achievement for a timid, little mother. But one morning her mangled body was found lying between the rails. For some cause, probably a blast from the whistle, she had fluttered off during the night, evidently toward the great glare of the headlight, and met a tragic end. I have met no example of a more stout-hearted, nesting mother than this duck. It displays even more courage than that possessed by the English sparrow pair I once saw rearing a chirruping brood in the cab of a steamshovel, while the machine was in operation, digging, grinding, and shaking at its labors, all day long. I feel that the duck's exhibition of courage was the greater, because the sparrow is a student of man's civilized ways, whereas it must be admitted that the duck meets him usually under other circumstances.

About noon we took another peep at the nest, but there was no sign of our would-be victim. To make doubly sure, I mounted the fence,

balanced on the top of a post, and looked down upon the nest, but without any better result. Fearful lest the eggs should chill, I went over to the test them, and when I reached the kodak, away went Madam Spoonbill! We had no means of knowing how long she had been on her nest. But she had so skilfully arranged the grass-blades in their original positions as to effectively break up with their light and shade all trace of the outline of her dusky form, and we had been completely deceived.

During the afternoon, the hours wore away, but the little duck mother seemed in no mood to return to her eggs. We made no mistake about it now; she was off the nest. Doubtless she knew as well as we did that the hot afternoon sun was incubating the eggs sufficiently, and she had set out to beat the kodak man. It was five o'clock before a peep at the nest showed that again the grass-blades had been moved, and I judged—for I could not see—that Madam was on her eggs. To make her raise her head a little we tried an old trick. For some time we lay flat on the ground, then peeped up. As we had hoped, she had raised her head a few inches that she might watch us, and bang went the

shutter, and it was all over. But I have a strong suspicion that if the victim had seen a print of the picture from that negative, she would have felt that she had beaten the kodak man after all.

On the 29th of the month, the little duck was rewarded for her long vigil, for on that day, ten tiny, spoonbill peepers emerged from their prisons. I was not there to see, but Andy happened to look into the nest, just when about half of the brood had arrived, and he ran off for the kodak and took a picture of the little family. In a few hours they were all gone. A duck always lays the full complement of eggs before beginning to hatch them, and thus the peepers all arrive and also leave the nest together—a most necessary thing in their start along life's rough pathway. And when the spoonbill mother left the downy hollow for the last time, she did not put the place in order as before, but left the bedding pushed back and the empty half-shells plain to view—a sort of triumphal souvenir for her foes, to remind them that she had won.

It was almost a year later that I had another kodaking skirmish with a duck mother. One day early in June, I noticed a heavy pall of

white grass-smoke rising above the prairie, a few miles distant from the town; knowing that it meant sad tragedy to the nesters, I took my first opportunity to go out and investigate. I found that the fire had burned off a small two-acre patch of heavy, wild grass in a field close to a farmer's buildings, and a turn over the ground showed that at least three nesters had suffered. The first encountered was the remains of a clay-colored sparrow's little domicile; next on a mound, I came upon a half-burned duck nest. The broken shells were scattered around, and it was evident that the crows had put the final touch to the demolition of this hatching. Then I found a tragic thing. On the top of a burned "nigger-head" mound, was a mother pintail. She was flat on the ground, with her neck and head stretched out before her to escape detection, and her little sober-clad body seemed shrunk by fright to barely half her usual size. I approached slowly till I was within three feet of her, and I almost felt that her bright little eye, which was the only thing about her that that I would go by. But I did not do so, and seemed really living, was praying beseechingly when she fluttered off, she revealed a pitiable

spectacle. The nest, which had been half burned, was remodelled around the rim with fresh down from her breast, but within it were six eggs, cruelly fire-blasted and brown.

The number of duck and grouse mothers that have their nests despoiled in this manner, every spring, is sad to contemplate. Doubtless there are countless thousands of eggs destroyed thus by the farmers of the northwest, during every nesting season. In the work of destruction, the prairie fire is aided by the plow. The farmer can do little, usually, to save the eggs from the plow, but he cannot be readily pardoned for burning his grass-lands in the nesting season. Indeed, many nests on the stubble may be saved, too, and I have seen right-minded plowmen leave a little patch of stubble rather than plow the setting under; or carefully pick up the nest and transplant it on the plowing. Many nests so dealt with will be forsaken by their owners, but if the parent bird has been hatching some time, she will often return. In districts where crows are plentiful, this precaution is usually a waste of time, as it is apt to be only a matter of hours till some sharp-eyed marauder finds the unprotected nest,



Turtle or Mourning Dove on Her Nest



Franklin's Gulls Following the Plow

This poor pintail was scarce a fitting kodak subject, it seemed, but the owner of the field assured me that not more than half a mile away, a mallard was holding down a claim on another piece of burned ground, and had good eggs in the nest. By following his directions I found her. She had located in the grassy strip between a plowed field and a little willow bluff, not more than ten feet from either, and as in the other case, the fire had burned over the nest. For some reason, the eggs had escaped damage; and the duck having made ample repairs, was bent on staying with the game. I was much struck by the manner in which her color aided her in keeping hidden. Though she was right on the top of a small mound, without a blade of vegetation, other than some charred weed stalks, to screen her, she was not easily seen, even at a distance of a few feet. How she had escaped a visit from her crow neighbors, nesting but fifty yards distant in the willows, was a puzzle. As there was no prospect of getting a picture now, due to its being late in the day, I decided to help her in her one-sided struggle, so got a gun and put most of her black neighbors of the tribe of Caw out of commission.

A week later, June 11th, I returned early in the forenoon, and found the old duck still holding down the bare knoll. I focused the kodak, took a picture of the pale-blue beauties, then attached the string and drew it back through the bluff. As the day promised to be hot, I tied a screen of branches over the kodak, and then slipped away. For a hiding-place I chose the corner of a little poplar clump, situated a short distance across the field.

I had been in hiding about an hour when the sharp whiffle of a duck-wing came to my ear, and there passing overhead was the mallard. She circled around the kodak in a lazy, contented sort of way, and then went back to the slough. When another hour had slipped by, she did the same thing; then repeated the manœuvre a third time, and I began to realize that my duck meant real opposition. It was the satisfied manner in which she carried herself around over the machine that impressed me. We are told by the knowing ones who are experts on the working of the mental machinery in craniums that animals cannot reason, but this bird evidently knew that her eggs were in no danger of chilling during her absence;

and I believe that if the day had been cold, she would have returned much more quickly.

The monotony of waiting finally became unbearable. So did the mosquitoes and black flies, and I went off and wandered around in the bluffs at the foot of the sand-hills. For a couple of hours I amused myself thus, but found little other than a nesting pair of morose, white-rumped shrikes. The lady of this household sat within a few feet of the nest and uttered not a sign of protest, even when I put my fingers upon her six, speckled eggs; and it was then I wished that I had brought the kodak.

My hopes were high when I returned and peeped around the corner of the little bluff. Alas, there was no sign of Dame Mallard. However, I had come with a negative-or-night determination, and there yet remained several hours of afternoon sunlight. But these same hours wore away; the mosquitoes grew larger; the black flies' campaign became more aggressive; the sun beat down hotter through the scant leaf-canopy; a crow visited me at regular intervals, and because I had no gun, he sauced me and called me a fool for waiting so long; till

finally I gave it up and went up to visit my friends at the farm-house. But I left the kodak, with its great eye glowering wearily upon the duck-nest.

It was nine o'clock next morning when again I visited the place, for the hospitality of my friends prevented me getting away earlier, and I took a chance on the weather harming my kodak. To my joy—but I could not see how it could be otherwise—the duck was on her nest. The moment for which I had waited twenty-four hours had come; and I slipped around into the willows, ever so quietly, and pulled the string. But when a few hours later, in the gloom of my cellar darkroom, I eagerly held the negative up to the ruby light and beheld my duck enveloped in a halo of fog and half obscured by light-streaks, I sadly tossed it into the scrap-box, then sat down on my stool and wondered if after all it was worth while being a kodak man.

CHAPTER VII

SOME LITTLE OWLS

THE owl family were all at home. At least I judged that they all were, for as I came trudging along the prairie road I counted seven heads perked up around the door, and close at hand, a parent, presumably the father, was perched upon a fence-post. When I came within forty yards of this parent sentinel, he bobbed his head and emitted a warning call, and instantly the juveniles scurried down cellar. Strange manner of exit, indeed, for an owl family; but these were the little burrowing owls that live in a hole in the ground out on the western prairies.

There was something un-owl-like about the whole scene. Though the little fellow on the post was dumpy in the body and big of head like most of his kin, there the similarity stopped, for his legs were abnormally long, and he did not sit

erect after the fashion of his relatives; his voice was shrill and metallic, and he talked both while on the wing and while perching; also, his flight was swift and quite hawk-like. The little fellows on the ground in front of the door were much more like a family of prairie "gophers" (Richardson's spermophiles) than like birds; for they sat up very straight and slim, and their yellowish gray coats gave them the exact appearance of these little animals. The latter had their homes scattered around in the same knoll; and possibly it is part of Nature's plan that they should look alike. The likeness was intensified when each youngster lowered his body and ran for the hole. They went quickly, as burrowing owls have long legs for a purpose.

The door of the home was rather small, and evidently the hole had been dug and owned originally by one of the gophers. Scattered around the mouth and also in it was a quantity of dry horse-manure which had been transported thither by the birds, and very probably the nest far in at the end of the tunnel was floored with this material. How such a large family—sometimes they lay as many as ten eggs—could be accommodated in this small home was rather a

puzzle. But at the time I was much more concerned with the problem of getting the birds to show themselves voluntarily than in finding what was at the end of the tunnel by destroying it, so I set up the machine, wrapped it well with tufts of wormwood, that grew plentifully about the knoll, then attached a long string and went back and lay down.

The old fellow, looking on from a nearby mound, protested a good deal at my impudence; and at short intervals he raised a shout which I interpreted as a command to his spouse and youngsters to lie low and keep shady. My notebook does not record the exact number of hours that I waited for something to appear at that hole, but I waited in vain. Several "gophers" scurried about, and one big chap insisted on biting at the string attached to my kodak, returning to the mischief even after he had been pelted away. Whatever the owls may be able to do to the young gophers, it is evident that they cannot handle the old ones. These little neighbors furnished amusement for a time, but that July sun had a blister in every square inch of it, so I gave it up at length and went away firm in the belief that before I would reach the cross-road

half a mile distant, the owl family would again be out on their verandah taking the sun.

A year passed away before I was able to meet some little ground owls face to face. A young friend had discovered a nesting pair early in the season and had kept in touch with their house-keeping. To facilitate matters he dug out the nest; and then having satisfied his thirst for research in that line, he placed two stove-pipe lengths in the original tunnel and covered it with earth again. The parents took kindly to the new style of domestic architecture and soon their ten youngsters filled the home. As they grew, they became kindly disposed little fellows, and he used to visit them often and set them up in a wondering row and take pictures of them. So when one day, early in July, I found opportunity to call upon them, they were quite well accustomed to being interviewed. There were but three of the ten left.

As in the case of most of the birds of prey, the young mature unevenly; those left behind were the belated members of the large family. This does not mean that they were runts or weaklings, or that they had been neglected; they were merely the products of the last eggs of the



The Mouth of the Creek Was Well Peopled

batch to be laid. Some of their brothers and sisters had several days' start of them; and a few days mean much in the development of a fledgling. When they were drawn out through their sheet-iron tunnel, one escaped and flew off two hundred yards or more across the prairie and then hid in the grass; but after a little fondling, the other two were persuaded to sit up and even smile sweetly as they posed.

Close relative to the burrowing is the prairie, or short-eared owl. He also loves the plains, but especially the marshes and meadows upon them, where the field mice live in plenty and the hunting is good. Like the burrowing, also, he deserts the northland plains in the winter, to seek more congenial hunting to the southward; and in the spring or late autumn he may be seen occasionally in the dusk of evening, setting out on his travels. Ordinarily he is met during the morning or evening, flopping about over the meadows. His wings are huge for a little fellow, they have a spread of about forty inches, are broad and rounded at the tips, and thus appear to give their owner a jerky, awkward flight. One must see him whirl into the grass upon a victim, or meet him at really close

quarters, to have that notion dispelled, and realize half the magic of that flight.

This little owl with his great silent wings must be the one constant dread in the heart of the field-mouse. Nature seems to have designed this bird as a check to these destructive rodents. He has the usual owl eye, the steely claws, the powerful, swift, and perfectly noiseless flight, and the magic ear, but in him these things seem carried a little farther and nearer perfection than in most of his kin. His small, yellow eyes are surrounded by circles of black, possibly serving the purpose of shading these organs—for this owl is always in the open and is something of a hunter by daylight—his toes, when closing in a grip, point their talons inward, making escape from their points impossible; he has a greater wing-spread in proportion to his bulk than his relatives; and his ear is a marvel of fitness. About the region of the latter is a space over two inches wide, entirely devoid of feathers, and in the center of this huge bald spot is the auditory canal into the head—an opening which is almost three-eighths of an inch in diameter. Small wonder that the squeak of a mouse reaches him from afar.

On account of his propensity for instantly investigating every call that resembles a mouse-squeak, it is the easiest thing in the world to play tricks on him. The squeak produced by chirping sharply with tight lips will decoy him always, if he is within hearing range, and in the calm of evening on the prairie this magnetic effect may be produced at a most uncanny distance. I have called him up to me while walking and driving along the road; and one evening while bicycling I coaxed one fellow to follow me for about half a mile. He would come bobbing up without hesitation and eye me with his yellow stare, at a distance of a few feet, then turn and jog off in search of smaller game. I always kept quiet when he was close, so that the deception would not be too palpable, but when he had gone off a little distance, a few chirps always brought him back again. Several times during the shooting-season I have called him while I was hidden in my blind. His sense of direction often seemed marvelous. Even though he might be hunting in the opposite direction, he would whirl about and usually make a very clever guess as to the location of the "mouse."

One evening while I was hidden in a big

wheat-shock in a grain-field, waiting to get a shot at some sandhill cranes that were feeding nearby, I had more fun than usual with these little owls. Noting two hunting around, a short distance off, I squeaked and called them in. Up they came till their bright little eyes looked into mine, at a distance of three or four feet, then they passed over my head. When I repeated the call they returned instantly, and then apparently out of curiosity lit on the nearest shock and sat and worked their heads in a most interested manner. Soon another, and another came—the evening was so calm that they had heard my call at a great distance—till five of the little hunters were lighted around me or undulating about awing.

I cuddled down low in the sheaves and when next I called I rustled a straw, after the manner of a mouse. Instantly they were all awing again, and in their anxiety to find their victim, several times almost brushed my cap, yet in no case could I detect the slightest sound of a feather. Suddenly one chap shouted, "Meouse"! and one or two of the others took it up and repeated it several times. There was something decidedly ludicrous about the tone and distinct enunciation

of the word as uttered by the birds. I never heard it before or since, but it must be owned that if this little owl has only one word in his vocabulary, he has certainly chosen one popular with his kin.

A neighbor and close relative to the foregoing owls is the long-eared owl of the prairie bluffs and willow thickets. It may be said of the first two species that they are rather incorrectly named, for the burrowing does not dig, and the short-eared has scarcely any ear-tufts at all. But the long-ear deserves his title, for he has a pair of "horns" that stick up well beyond his head and lend their owner something of that satanical leer and "Who-Who-I'll get-you" expression possessed by his fierce big brother, the great horned owl.

The memory of the first nest of the long-ear that I found is very firmly planted in mind. I was slipping through a swampy willow thicket, in quest of a water thrush whose voice was sounding there at intervals, and when I passed beneath an old crow's nest, placed low in a clump, something prompted me to straighten up and look over the rim. In so doing I found myself face to face with the most demoniacal

villain-physiognomy it has ever been my fortune to meet. But one bird was in the nest, the rest apparently having just gone. He was long and thin and fuzzy and sat up as straight as a picket. His two downy horns were very stiff, as the occasion demanded, and his eyes—it was very dark in the place—glowered into mine with a tremendously ferocious stare. No stage-villain ever had such a make-up.

But I soon found that after all he was a harmless little chap whose only defensive trick, other than his looks, was to scratch a bit; and I found also that his picket-posture, like his stage-face, was put on for the occasion. He had elongated himself thus for a purpose. I did not understand it then, but after visiting many long-ear youngsters at home, and on one occasion seeing two little fellows in a scrub oak, the object served by this attenuating process became plain. The baby grouse flattens himself among the yellow leaves; the bittern sticks his beak in the air and thrusts up his neck like a stick; and for the same reason the long-ear stretches himself, for in so doing he resembles a slender tree bole, or the tip of a stub. At a very little distance the success of the ruse is apparent.

The parents of the first little chap, mentioned above, seemed not at all concerned over my intrusion and did not put in an appearance at all, but it was not so with the old folks at another nest visited. Here the mother remained in the nest—an old crow's, as usual, in a small poplar—till I shook the tree. When I climbed up to it and looked upon the five newly-hatched young, the owners raised a great commotion. They threw themselves on the ground and hurtled around with broken wings; they fluttered through the shrubbery and cried distressfully and angrily; and created such a general rumpus that all the crows in the neighborhood were attracted to the spot, to circle overhead and jeer and scold.

I had determined to get some pictures of this family, but they outgrew my plans, and when I returned at what I thought was the proper time, there was but one youngster left in the nest. As the bluff was small and cut off by prairie and wheat-field from other woods, I decided to find the rest of the family. But though I searched for hours and literally combed the place, I could find not a trace of either parent or young. Most birds distribute the

fledglings just as soon as they can be induced to leave the nest, and doubtless the long-ears do the same. There is not the slightest danger of the hungry dependents getting lost or neglected, for when dusk creeps over the woods, their noisy, plaintive squealing can be heard at a great distance.

Two well-grown young long-ears one day showed me a glimpse of that selfishness which, much as we would like it otherwise, is really the dominant note in the life of all the creatures. While passing a willow thicket, I noted the two in a poplar tree, a few feet above the ever-present, dilapidated nest; and as usual they were peering down and stretching themselves mightily. When I dislodged them, they flew weakly off in different directions, but not into the bluff, so I marked the spots where they came to earth and went after them. It was very evident that they had never flown from the tree, but each of them made a seventy-yard flight on this, their first trial. Their flight, it must be admitted, was much more to their credit than their manner of affecting a landing, for like all the fledglings they found flight a natural, un-

taught thing, but stopping and alighting quite different.

I found them in the grass where they had tumbled and brought them back; then tied each to a sapling while I rigged up the machine and a suitable perch. When all was ready I liberated them and attempted to make them pose. I expected resistance, but scarcely of the sort I found, for not only did they refuse to sit side by side, but actually flew at each other, scratching and grabbing with their wicked talons and hissing wrathfully as they tussled. I had seen the bully of the flicker nestful sitting upon the shoulders of his weaker brothers and sisters and displaying his fraternal love by pecking them on the heads to keep them down below him, that he might stay at the door where chances for food and fresh air were best, and I was not unaware of like selfishness among other wild-wood youngsters, but still this tooth and nail set-to of the long-ear youngsters, but a day from the same nest, was a display of brotherly love for which I was scarcely prepared.

CHAPTER VIII

SPYING FROM THE ELM-CLUMP

THE day was complete, perfect: a warm August sun, a sky of the bluest, an atmosphere racy with the tincture of autumn—for the preceding night had brought the first frost-touch of the season—the auditory world ahum with lusty, full-voiced crickets, and everywhere the sense of completeness and the fulfillment of mature, ripened summer. As we slipped through the oaks in the big wooded pasture, there was something about the day and the place that caused us to step on and on without a word, or if we spoke at all, to converse softly. Even the noisy kingbird had ceased his boisterous clatter and activity, and a redtailed hawk perched on the dry tip of an old oak at the edge of the clearing seemed to have so far fallen under the spell of the day that he forgot to scream as usual, when we appeared.

Our destination was an elm-clump standing

upon the shore of the big pasture slough. This little grove lay back up the sloping sod, some sixty yards from the water, and it was a favorite spot with us from which to watch the slough inhabitants. It was necessary to use a great deal of caution in getting into the place, as these water-birds possessed a discerning eye and could differentiate wonderfully well between a cow and a human—even when the latter tried to trick them by walking on all fours. Also they always seemed to figure that what went into the clump had to come out again before the coast was a safe place of refuge; so it was imperative that when we reached the edge of the main woods we should get down on our stomachs and “snake” along through the snowberry tufts until we reached the desired shelter.

I never visited this place that I did not wonder at the origin of such an isolated little wood. It was not more than twenty yards in diameter, yet in it were several elms, an oak or two, some scrubby Manitoba maples; and all were flanked by thickets of hawthorn, choke cherry, and saskatoon. The cattle loved the grove at noon-day, as did also their buffalo predecessors on the plains before them, and the

flints and bones along the shore at low water told that it was not unknown to the red hunters of earlier times. Now we knew it as the home of some ground squirrels and a retreat for many birds, but it was not till we spent an afternoon in it that we realized its charms.

Out on the mud and in the shallows reposed the usual noon-time collection of the web-foot tribe. Mallards, teal, spoonbills, and pintails were there sleeping, preening their moulting coats, or tipping up, each to his own habit or inclination. Many waders swelled the ranks of the motley crowd, and a lone bittern, with his eye fastened apparently upon the water, posed like a sentry. For this recluse who loves the shadows of the marsh grass and rushes to come out with the crowd is unusual, but doubtless he had a reason for it.

But it was not the webbed-footed ones that on this occasion were of most interest to us. Just across a few yards of mud in another arm of the slough was a congregation of less familiar neighbors. These were big, brown marbled godwits. For some reason these birds had made this slough their autumn trysting-place, and now several flocks containing large numbers

could be found nearby. Here, fifty or sixty of them with a number of yellowleg satellites were drowsing in their one-legged way. Why a wader cannot rest as well on two legs as one is a mystery. These fellows were just resting up for their noisy activity in the evening, for their voices are in keeping with their size, and while feeding, a large flock of them make a jabbering row, which at a distance is almost goose-like.

How gregarious migrants come to choose certain localities in preference to others, as a fall rendezvous, is hard to determine fully. Usually it is a matter of comfort, and the place that best suits the purpose from a food and shelter standpoint is selected. But this does not seem to apply to the waders that pick one pond from a dozen similar, or to the ducks and geese that pass twenty fields to feed on another with no better gleanings, or to the blackbird host that roosts in one certain corner of the marsh, etc. There seems to be a great deal of go-with-the-crowd spirit in such birds, a few individuals early in the season leading the small numbers, and thus shaping the future course of the host that follows later.

Almost the first thing of note close at hand

was a humming and buzzing that announced the presence of a ruby-throat. A closer inspection of the sober habit of the author of the noise revealed that the midget visitor was a female; and as she hummed and hovered over a cluster of big, bright thistles and glinted in the bright sun as she flashed here and there, she showed herself at her best. She prodded and stabbed the big thistle blooms to the heart and darted up up to an elm, only to return again; though we watched very intently we could discover no motive for her mission to the tree. That she had not a nest we made sure, but though she stayed with us a large part of the time we were in the grove, we learned little about her.

Several kingbirds, a catbird, a thrasher, and several yellow warblers visited us, and how well and truly each of them revealed his nature! The kingbirds, bold and blunt, perched upon the topmost twigs overhead and smote down unwary insect prey that ventured near; the catbird and thrasher, timid and retiring, clung to the shadows of the cherry and thorn thickets; while the warblers darted in the sunshine about the outskirts of the shrubbery. Because we kept very quiet and scarcely stirred at all, they did

not seem to fear us. The catbird even made it his business to come out where he could get a more intimate view of us. It took him a long time and cost many efforts, but at each trial he came a foot or two nearer before darting back, and finally he was only five or six feet distant.

In spite of his timidity the catbird is one of the most companionable birds the camper meets. His bump of curiosity always finally rules his action, that is, if he is not in the slightest manner shooed away; when once assured of safety, he soon becomes bold enough to peck about the fire-place, bathe in the basin, drink from the water-pail, or even to eat the butter at meal-time right before the eyes of the owner. This can be said of very few of the woods birds that always partly make friends and become a pleasant factor of camp life.

By and by a strangeer appeared. His nervous gait and wagging tail, so noticeable as he moved about on the ground, indicated one of two birds: an oven bird or a water thrush. When he tripped jerkily into better view, his streaked, yellow throat and dark eye-marking pronounced him a water thrush even before he announced the fact himself in his characteristic

“Cheenk!” His presence in the grove indicated that he was on his southward journey. He walked about for a time, snapped up some tiny prey, deliberately turned over a few leaves in quest of more eatables, then somehow disappeared.

Out on the mud about mid-afternoon, when all the company seemed in the last stage of drowsiness, there came of a sudden a hasty waking-up. Jauntily winging across the wide slough from the northward was a big blue goshawk. The news had spread in a flash, and instantly every duck prepared for a scurry into the deeper water, while the yellowlegs and godwits sprang up and went swirling around in circles high in air, as though seeking ample sea room in which to ride out the gale, in case they were set upon by the foe. But having dined previously, he made not a single threatening move and passed on lazily to the southward.

This fierce fellow is seldom seen on the plains in August, but late in the fall and in the bitter winter weather, the grouse and rabbits know him well—so fierce and strong awing and so relentless in pursuit that there is small chance of escape from him, when once he has marked a victim for



A Helter-Skelter Departure from the Creek Mouth

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Getting Away in a Hurry

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Yellow-legs Were Probing in the Shallows

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the killing. Nearly all the depredations upon the farmer's poultry, in the fall, to the northward, are committed by these birds. When the young emerge from the northern woods, they have all the ferocity of their elders, but lack the discretion necessary to keep them out of the farm-yard; as a result many hens and ducks, also happily a few hawks, meet an untimely end. Thus a farmer once showed me the remains of five goshawks that he had shot during one autumn in his yard.

Then, apparently to prove the old saying that ills do not come singly, another evil genius of the hawk clan came along. He also arrived from the north, but came along the shore; and as he drew near, two kingbirds gave chase and drove him full tilt into the elm-clump, where he lit almost over our heads. His bluish coat, light underparts, and blackish throat-patches, and his speedy flight, pronounced him a duck hawk. A smaller edition of the goshawk, he has all the latter's bad qualities, and in addition a few original touches of his very own. His strength and speed are terrible; his tenacity and deadliness of purpose make him dreaded by almost every non-raptorial bird. Unlike the gos-

hawk, he goes south with the birds and returns with them, and perpetrates his outrages along the way. Our present villainous visitor stayed but a moment, and made off before the .22 rifle could be brought into action; so the pleasure of sending a leaden pill through him had to be postponed.

I have seen two stern chases by this bird. He has a deceiving swiftness that brings him up with anything on wings and a cruel determination that seems to wear down the resistance of his terrified quarry. Yet in both these chases that I witnessed, he failed. In the first he was after a Wilson snipe. The latter was more than a hundred yards in the lead, when first I noted that the duck hawk was giving chase, but the manner in which the pursuer cut down the handicap made it appear that the snipe was merely hovering. Swoop—he came down like a dart, but the snipe dodged him. Swoop, swoop—again and again he darted; and though he missed, it was plain that the quarry was weakening and that it was only a matter of moments till he must be struck by a grip of the pursuer's talons. Then came an unexpected climax: the snipe plummeted earthwards and

disappeared from sight. He had but twenty or thirty feet to fall and evidently got into the rushes along the creek. The hawk missed his last drive; then he returned and hovered long over the spot, as though loth to admit defeat.

In the second chase, the victim marked for death was a marbled godwit. Having often seen these birds swirling about at a dizzy pace and listened to the roar of their long knife-wings as they smote the air in a playful descent, I felt assured that when the hawk started after them he would be very much outclassed. Yet in less than half a mile he was among them, had singled a victim, and was stooping wickedly. Each time the godwit dodged, he emitted an angry or terrified cry, but the silent pursuer, with never a sign of fatigue, swooped and swooped and wore him down. Each time now the hawk overshot his mark a little less in the turnings. The last resort of the godwit was exactly that of the other snipe, but the former being over the big slough, dropped into the water. I saw the hairbreadth escape and the splash, but whether or not the godwit dived to get away, I could not tell. Some of the sandpipers can dive well, and probably the godwit escaped thus.

He evidently must have been in sight a good deal, as for a long time the hawk continued to dash down vengefully upon the water in no uncertain manner. It seems certain that if the god-wit had merely rested upon the water, his foe would have picked him up and carried him off. But he did not get him, and after a time he went off and perched on a nearby mud-bar, as though still determined to get his victim when he came ashore.

The present representative of his evil kind gave us nothing more spectacular than a very hasty departure. He was escorted off again by the kingbirds. But it was quite easy to see that he did not take their warlike demonstrations very seriously; and doubtless they knew better than to strike him, or to attempt to sit on his back and tweak feathers out of his crown.

The little four-footed ones that visited us during the afternoon must not be slighted. A gray ground squirrel that had his hole in the thicket several times came nosing through the underbrush in his inquisitive, half-timid way, and satisfied himself that we meant no harm. A chipmunk that had braved the terrors of crossing the strip of open ground in getting across

from the main woods spent much time and energy in trying to determine the cause of our long, silent vigil. Another little neighbor—we never could have known about him if we had not been very quiet—was observed several times to scurry across a bit of bare ground and instantly disappear. He was a little black shrew, very round, very sleek, and very much in a hurry. He always came out of one hole, dashed five or six feet, and popped into another. Somewhere down among the elm-roots he had a little world all his own, but it was sealed and locked from our prying eyes.

Just about the time we were thinking of stealing away, we had another caller. There was a glimpse of yellow-brown out in the grass toward the slough, and a big weasel was coming. With that indescribable, sneaking, darting gait, now up picket-like to reconnoiter, now down shadow-like to glide through impossible places, he slipped among the grass and weeds and headed for our clump. His coat was rich brown, his underparts yellow, his long, thin tail, black-tipped; and when he reared himself, lank and sinewy, straight up, and peered ahead with his fierce little eyes, he was a sight to freeze the

heart of every little creature in the place. He saw or smelled us at thirty feet, and his tail gave a twitch of fear as he rose and glared at us while his fierce little muzzle worked wickedly. Then the rifle snapped and he went down with a horrid little shriek. Up again he got to fight madly for a last moment, but the leaden pill had torn through his chest and his throat-cutting career was ended.

And now that we had revealed ourselves and cleared the shore-line, we rose and slipped off homeward through the oaks.

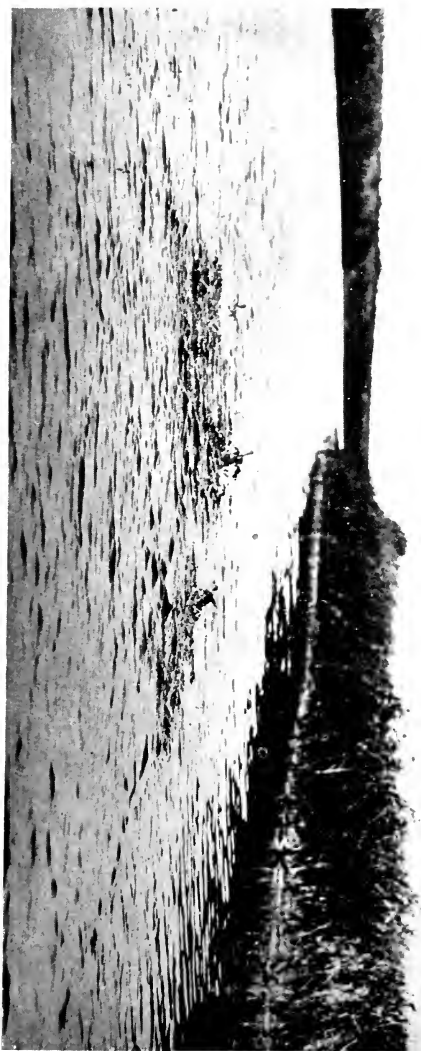
CHAPTER IX

HOBNOBBING WITH THE THICKET BIRDS

THE oriole did it. A flame-coated fellow, just arrived from the Southland, glinted from the greening top of the big poplar, then sang his sweet, lusty song, and after hastily prodding his needle-tipped beak into a mass of catkins and tearing them boisterously, he flitted to another tree and sang again—sang that it was summer once more, or at least it ought to have been. And if the signs of the season spoke truly, he was not far adrift. For on the poplars, the staminate catkins, their duty ended, were withered and falling, and the green seed-tassels were twinkling airily; the pale soft tints of budding foliage glimmered here and there, and the air was pungent with the tangy smell of the gummy buds of the black poplar, while along the edge of the thicket, the saskatoon and red cherry blossoms were bursting out in fragrant mounds of whiteness.

The oriole's was not by any means the first bird-song of the season to resound from the poplars, for now that it had turned warm during the day, and he had become mellowed all through, a tiny Tennessee warbler had been rippling away most vehemently; for days an amorous turtle dove had almost been cooing his head off; white-throat and Harris sparrows had sung a hundred sweet minor duets and trios and quartettes; several cock robins had been singing heartily on every comfortable evening for three weeks; and lately even the wren and the thrasher had arrived in the place and tuned up with the company. But the oriole somehow was the cause of it, and that evening the poplar wood on the outskirts of the little town had another occupant, for a little tent was pitched among the trees, and the new-comer had come to stay.

What a time of tense movement for the birds, are the May days to the northward; and what a time of joy, then, is the wake-up chorus at day-peep! Here the nights are so short that the dawn seems to slip in almost on the heels of the midnight twilight; and this is all to the liking of the birds—busy little creatures that merely cease from their tireless activity of the day be-



They Employed Both Wings and Legs

cause they must, and sleep because they have nothing else to do. Yet it should not be said that they cease activity with the darkness, for the May nights also are times of much stirring. To slip out then into the hushed moonlight and sense the rustle of the night zephyrs stealing up from the southward is to feel and realize that the casual little bird-voices lispings from the heavens tell of but a few of the million little pilgrims hastening northward through the night—tiny mariners without chart or compass, and in a vast expanse of unknown sea, but wise in the wisdom of their race and guided by an impulse that leads aright.

Through the night, whisperings stole down through the canvas roof, telling of these tenants of the upper air; and then somewhere between three and four A. M., the early light peeped through the thinly-clad wood, and with it came the song-riot of the morning. The robins were the chief sopranos; there were several of them singing so joyously that they kept up a continuous melody, supplying body to it all. The turtle dove "ah-cooed" so frantically from his dead limb perch that often he was forced to quit from sheer want of breath, and so stopped

short after the preliminary "Ah." The white-throats and their ever-present Harris cousins put in the little professional touches—minor notes of wondrous sweetness—while the fox sparrow, always so sparing with his gifts, tuned up but a time or two.

Two wrens exploded vociferously every few moments, apparently as often as they could get the necessary breath in their diminutive bodies; and then not to be entirely outdone, the thrasher mounted to the poplar-tip and poured forth his wonderful song. But for some reason, he sang but once. Perhaps it was that he thought there were no lady thrashers at hand to hear, or perhaps—but who could know? And underneath it all was a pleasing alto part played by the booming of the pinnated grouse. They were out on the meadows a mile distant, but wonderful sound! Its soft and swelling crescendos were as much a part of the thicket chorus as if the singers had been at the margin of the wood.

A time of greetings are the mid-May days—days of bright sun and growing things, and coming of bird friends; a time when woods and thickets again resound with voices which have been silent for long, long months. By day and

night come the feathered kin in legions, waves of migration, and the migrant noted in field or wood is but the representative of his myriad brothers, hurrying, hastening into the Northland. A vast multitude embracing a mighty continent from coast to coast, all moved by the same guiding motive stirring within each feathered breast, they advance steadily. They come—a vast invading army of sprite soldiers that may be checked but never stayed until the goal is reached.

Thus the morning paeans that awakened the wood were not only a song-thanksgiving for a safe return to the Northland and a perfect morning, but also were promises for the future, soon to be fulfilled. Just as the sun glowed warm, a yellow warbler sang from a catkin-laden willow-clump—it is almost impossible to think of this little fellow dissociated from yellow-pollened pussy willows, yellow-green foliage, and yellow sunlight;—and soon a catbird came rustling over the leaves with an air of occupancy and sprang to a low perch and flirted himself a time or two as he surveyed the tent. Other new-comers were not lacking; for soon a tiny flycatcher sounded “Pet-tic pet-tic!” from

his favorite spot high in a poplar, and gave just a glimpse of himself as he darted down upon some passing insect prey; next came a cowbird pair—or rather male and female, for these chaps are exceedingly loose in their ways and do not pair as do most other birds—and the proud male in his spring coat of steel-blue pouched his chest, thrust his beak skywards, and sidled to his tune of “Liquidillee”—all of which seemed extremely silly, but doubtless in the eye of the little brown female was quite gratifying. Soon two more visitors gave it out that they had arrived, though neither of them came into the poplars nor allowed a glimpse of himself. A white-rumped shrike, raspy and petulant of voice, ground out his call from somewhere on the outskirts of the wood, and as if in answer to him, a grasshopper sparrow called his insect-like thrill—a fair promise of sleepy summer days, soon to follow.

“May 14. Sunday. Lazed in camp all day.” So says the note-book. And what better way to spend the day than thus?—to read from the wonderful book of the out-of-doors; to sit for a few hours with eye and ear alert, and heart atune to the vibrant music of the world of

living things. To him who reads thus, Nature gives up easily many of her secrets, and it was on this day that was revealed the mystery of the robin, how his bright little eye sees so well.

It was a water-thrush that started the give-away. He came dodging along the crooked path leading up to the tent; and though at first glance he might have passed for an oven bird, his wagging tail and quick, erratic movements proclaimed his real identity. At the end of each turn in his course, he picked up a leaf with a quick but deliberate motion, turned it over and went on, stopping a time or two to seize and stow away some insect morsel so suddenly turned up to the light. Then over the leaves came a big cock robin. He bobbed along in his characteristic way, three hops and a pose, and he also turned over some leaves. But he did not flip every promising-looking or gamey-appearing leaf as did the water-thrush. Instead, he turned over but very few; though when he did so, he found something worth while.

He was heading right toward the fire-place, and because the figure lounging in the camp-chair did not move, he came straight along till

he was distant but a scant six feet. Then after a pose, he suddenly turned his head a little and next moment began to dig. One, two, three leaves down he went, dragged out some luckless insect thing, and gulped it down. Then after pecking a moment at the crispy fat on a bacon-rind, he went on at his business; but forthwith it went down in the note-book that after all the robin did not so much see things with his sharp eye as he heard them with his sharp ear.

All afternoon the south wind hummed through the poplars and the withered catkins showered down apace; borne along on the favoring breeze came the migrant visitors. A bright, rose-breasted grosbeak, warm-weather chap and sure harbinger of summer, "Cheeked!" a few times from close at hand, and then went on his way without a song. Next, a veery thrush was noted. He came from somewhere in the shadows of the saskatoon thicket, and after taking a low perch and gazing with his white-rimmed eye stolidly at his human neighbor, he also went off without testing his vocal powers. Then came a kingbird, and though he had no song, he was as noisy as ever and announced at once that he was in possession

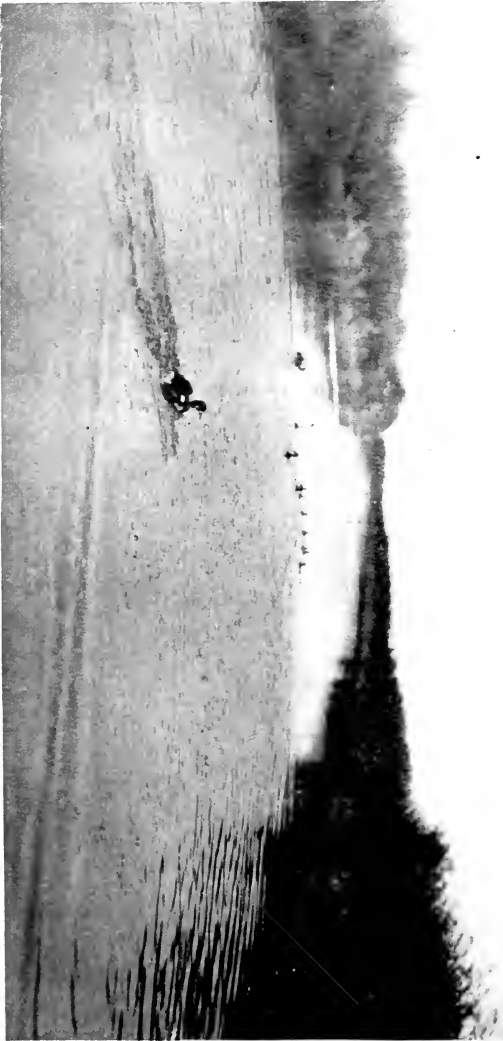
of the wood and any trespasser would receive short shrift.

A tiny redstart and a warbling vireo were the last of the arrivals. The little fire-brand warbler made never a sound as he flitted here and there in the sun-flecked shadows, but the vireo, doubtless knowing that he had one of the least conspicuous coats in the bird world and thus stood a heavy chance of being missed, tuned up his pipes and rippled a short song—that song so characteristically summery that it is the very embodiment of the dreamy, summer spirit.

In the bird world as elsewhere, these later May days were days of transition, warm spring merging into early summer. Sometimes it was one, sometimes the other. Early in the morning when a bobolink went rollicking overhead northward, and the clicking calls of some belated Lapland longspurs came from the same quarter, or a string of orderly black-breasted plover went by, their jetty breasts all in line, or the last straggling line of snow geese passed over, calling loudly, it was spring-time. But then when the day was warm and sunny, and a veery song drifted prayerfully out of the shadows, or an oven bird, somewhere out of

sight, started vociferating about the "Teacher," and half a dozen bright goldfinches chattered among the dandelions in the sod at the wood's edge, and several yellow warblers sang with scarce a cessation, from the hazel and cherry thickets, and the night hawk rasped away complainingly as he sought his meal high in the air, then for a certainty it was summer.

Soon came the building days and then the brooding days; for the songs of the mornings had been rewarded, and now every cock robin about the place had a wife. By the beginning of the last week of the month, three lady robins were sitting close on their eggs, and a bronzed grackle pair had also taken up house-keeping. Next an oriole pair gave up their secret. The male first disclosed his intentions when he was caught dragging threads from the towel that hung above the basin on a convenient limb, but it remained for a sneaking female cowbird to reveal the whereabouts of the nest. At breakfast-time she was seen skulking nervously in the poplar-top, over the fire-place, and a close scrutiny of the fresh leaves revealed the new nest. What a time this sneak thief must have waiting around for a chance to get on the nest to deposit



Freely Would Her Life Have Been Given

(Page 162)

her spurious egg! Soon another grackle pair completed their big domicile; and next a turtle dove was found sitting close upon a shapeless last year's robin's nest, up in a crotch of the big black poplar, just back of the tent. For it must be admitted that the dove, though gentle and devoted, is a slattern at nest-building and is content to lay her eggs and rear her young upon the most rickety of twig-platforms, or on a stump, or even on the ground.

But there was another nest somewhere near that was not so easily located. It was a moral certainty that within a radius of fifty yards, Madam Thrasher was brooding also. But where? True, her spouse never sang very near; but that is a characteristic trick of these shy birds; and the fact that the big ruddy male is pouring out his song from a tree-top here or there never means very much as a clue to the location of the nest. Never the slightest hint was given, and when the nest was discovered—a boy scout stumbled upon it—Madame was already sitting tight upon her treasures. The nest was located but thirty yards from the tent. It was along the edge of the wood, in the heart of a thick clump of willows, and built not more

than two feet from the ground. Madame's yellow eye gleamed timidly from the shadows, but she did not stir or display the fear that was pulsating in her breast; and it seemed right and good to slip away and leave the little mother undisturbed.

May, the month of marriages—among the thicket birds—slipped away and June, the time of younglings, came in; and the ways of the feathered folk changed with the season. There was less song, less honeymooning, and much more of the serious struggle of life—the struggle for the preservation of the helpless ones. For with these birds, as with most other wild things, the young and tender and helpless are not allowed to survive on tolerance, but live by right of the might and hardihood and cunning of their parents. By the time the roses were blooming in fragrant banks along the sunny edge of the woods, and the cedar waxwings, tardy migrants, were lisping about the place daily, it seemed that all the couples of the grove were settled down comfortably at the task of caring for a family.

But it was not so, for soon another dove was found hatching on a frail little nest of her own

constructing, in the willows at the east side of the wood; next day another oriole nest came to light. The grackles were responsible for this discovery. In the morning a terrible rumpus broke out in the tops of some poplars near at hand, and there two black villains were found with a pair of irate orioles attacking them. The bright little warriors fairly shrieked with anger or fear as they stormed one black interloper, for beside him was the cause of it all—a gray pocket-nest. The would-be robber was helped out of there with a brickbat, and the dove of peace once more came into the place, but another nesting secret had been given up.

The foregoing incident was but one of many such squabbles. The grackles were bad neighbors; in fact, had they known it, they had been allowed to stay in the wood just on condition of their good behavior. However, though their conduct was not always just what might have been desired, when four pairs of them were hatching, it seemed too cruel a slaughter to oust them, and they were allowed to remain. Also it appeared to be a rare opportunity to study these black-listed chaps at their best or worst. From the very first, it was plain that their bird

neighbors hated them; and probably the stigma attached to them as egg-eaters is well deserved.

Even the tiny warbling vireos were noted one day, holding a black fellow at bay, and darting and striking wickedly at the crown of his head, and almost daily, one or other of the robins fought a round or two with these dusky foes. But there was a ludicrous side to these latter bickerings. It was observed that if the encounter took place near the robin's nest, the grackle turned tail, whereas if the meeting took place in the vicinity of the grackle's nest, the robin was routed ignominiously. They never fought it out, doubtless for the reason that a victory for either would have been too costly.

A pair of these big crow blackbeards afforded other entertainment. On the evening of the third, while supper was cooking on the little fire, they hung about close and watched and called in an anxious, interested way, and still remained around while the meal was being disposed of. When bits of food were tossed to them, they accepted the donation, but with a rather preoccupied air; and it was plain that there was something interesting them more than the mere sight of much good living. Then it seemed that they

were demanding retribution on account of their drinking-cup having been knocked down by some boys. But this erroneous view of things—a mighty easy thing in nature work—was dispelled next morning, when the real cause of the trouble was sighted—the foundation of a new nest. It was in a leafy saskatoon bush, scant twelve feet from the fire-place.

For three days the grackles worked at the structure, and while doing so showed quite another side of their lives. They did most of their work in the morning, and both birds assisted, though it seemed that the female did the greater share of the actual constructing. She pulled and pushed and breasted the material, and then always sat on it a little time, either to hold it in position or because she liked the feel of it, or probably both. When it rained one day, they mudded away industriously—a case of making hay while the sun didn't shine; and one whole afternoon while there were visitors in camp, they did not do a turn. Possibly it was merely a coincidence, but for some reason they absented themselves from the place, and nesting operations ceased for the time.

It was on the afternoon of the fourth that

Madam Thrasher first allowed her five grayish eggs to be exposed to the gaze of the visitor. Apparently she knew now that her secret was out; and instead of sitting close as before, she dashed out angrily at the intruder, screamed shrilly—a most peculiar threat, entreaty; and whistle all in one—bit savagely at a finger extended toward her, and then hopped about a few feet above the nest, with tail drooping, beak held high, yellow eye ablaze, rusty coat arumple, and altogether much more a picture of anger than of timidity. Her mate had joined her at the first call, but he was a comparatively mild-mannered chap and merely scolded a bit from a safer distance.

Perhaps it was this contagious fury of the thrasher that animated a robin mother close by, for when she was disturbed from her three, newly hatched, pink young,—the nest was in the top of a fallen poplar—she also darted upon her visitor and David-like smote the foe on the forehead. The inclination to dodge such an onslaught was quite irresistible, and though the shock of battle was but a bunt from her sturdy little breast, it was a pretty good bump for a little robin mother.

The early June days stole by, and for the thicket-dwellers each day was a time of moment, and the note-book grew bulky. The visiting of a blackpoll warbler—last of the migrants noted—the marvellous growth of the youngster robins—they left the nest on the eleventh day—the leisurely manner in which the grackle laid her eggs—every second day—the discovery of the song sparrow's nestful of five young dependents out in the grass-plot just beyond the trees; the catbird that sang so beautifully to the moon at midnight; the hatching of the thrasher family—four of them, one egg proving infertile—the grackle that hanged himself when he attempted to carry some strong white thread through the willows; the turtle dove's nest that was blown down in the night, the young perishing cruelly on the ground; the wren that built in the fruit tin stuck up in the tree and frayed out the cotton rope to get lining for the twig-structure;—these and many more things worth while went down in the log of the thicket birds.

The one turtle dove mother was almost a puzzle. From the day on which she was discovered upon the old robin's nest, she seemed

never to leave her charge. Whether or not she and the male changed places, or the male fed her while she kept her long vigil, could not be learned; but for eighteen days the nest could not once be detected unoccupied. It was on the morning of the fifteenth of the month that a little youngster dove's head was seen poking out from beneath the parent; and by noon that day the nest was empty. When at that time an investigation was begun, a youngster ridiculously bob-tailed and immature, rose from the ground near the foot of the poplar, and shot off like a batted ball over the shrubbery, to remain incognito thenceforth.

The third week of June was fledgling week. Little robins, almost tailless and very streaked of coat, had left their nests and each brood was scattered. It proved a serious indiscretion to catch one of these youngsters, even for the purpose of getting his portrait; for at his first startled twitter the parents came instantly, and aided by three or four grackles, set up a tremendous din. There was no refuge from it even in the tent, as they stormed and bombarded the place, and their invective was most scathing. They soon won; the youngster was liberated

and struck off hippity-ippity through the shrubbery; but it took fully two hours for the irate parents and their sympathizers to recover even a shadow of their ordinary tranquility. They never forgot or forgave the kidnapper, either; and when next day two young grackles were forced to sit up and face the kodak, the feud opened afresh, and the din broke out fourfold. This time the leading part was taken by the grackles, with the robins as interested helpers; but they needed no assistance, for though the alleged crime was committed in the morning, their hysterical rage kept them chirping away hoarsely most of the day.

This act, in their eyes, was evidently the last straw. Henceforth there could be no friendly relations. But it mattered little now, for though the catbird was still brooding her five eggs, the other tenants of the poplars whose nests had been discovered—there were a number that kept their secrets well—all had their families ready for flight. The first robin brood scattered on the 15th; one grackle nestful went on the 16th and another next day—they were mighty immature youngsters, but they could fly well—and the thrashers followed on the 21st.

The latter were noted at noon, all sitting up high in the nest and gazing wonderingly out into the big green world, but in the evening they were all gone, and no trace of either old or young could be found near the empty nest.

The first crop of the thicket juveniles was gone, but others were coming along apace. Five little catbirds opened their gaping mouths on the 17th, and on the 23rd the belated grackles at the fire-place were heard peeping. Also it was evident that some of the other parents were bent on raising a second brood just as soon as they could be relieved of some of the responsibility of caring closely for the first. Thus the robins were again singing with almost the zest of a month earlier. The dove was cooing away dreamily every day. Even the thrasher tuned up again after his long silence, and these chaps were not wasting song on the desert air. But all this was not to be entered more in the log of the thicket, for on the evening of the 22nd, a wagon pulled into the trees, and next morning when the day-peep chorus rang through the rustling poplars, the little square with its trampled leaves, where the tent had stood, was vacant.

CHAPTER X

SOME HARMLESS HUNTING

FOR the man who has within him that perennial yearning to go afield and kill something, who in short, really loves to hunt, yet withal nourishes somewhere in his conscience the counter conviction that no longer should the creatures of the woods and fields be killed for fun, there is no hobby quite so good as the speed kodak. And of all the numerous kinds of game that he may bring to bag, at all times of the year—for there are no game-laws for the kodak—he will find no more worthy foeman for his lens than the clan of Web-foot. To enjoy himself to the full, he must stalk his quarry, and this is very real hunting. For a hunter to stalk a flock of birds and get within forty yards—fairly murderous gun-range—is one thing, but to get within forty feet is quite another. Be-

tween thirty and forty feet is good range for the speed, non-telephoto lenses, and a mallard has a wonderfully penetrating eye and receptive ear toward all things within that distance of him.

Of course pictures of wild ducks, and good ones too, may be secured in other and easier ways. The hunter may crouch in a blind, battery, or pit, with decoys scattered around him, just as if he were a gunner, and click off the incoming birds, a score or more at a time. But in so doing he has missed one of the biggest factors in the game—the pitting of himself, his own wit and fiber against that of the birds. He achieves much of the result without the struggle, which of course woefully minimizes the result, for with the real hunter nothing is worth while pursuing that does not lead a stiff chase. Just this sort of chase is furnished to the stalker by the wily members of the clan of Quack.

For this sport, especially in the inland prairie region to the northward, the latter part of the month of August is about the best time to go afield. The young birds then are awing, and the well-mixed flocks are well-centralized in chosen localities. The birds are not yet terrified and scattered by the shooting season, and in

a slight measure have forgotten the things they learned during the previous fall and winter, on their shot-swept journey to the Gulf and back. The days are now bright and hot, and the birds have a habit of assembling in masses on the mud-bars and the bare shore-line to sun themselves, thus offering tempting pot-shots for the lens. Also in August the members of the wader tribe are collecting and often share the bars and mud-line with their duck neighbors, so that a camera-shot at this time of the year is very apt to include some of the snipe family. It is true that in the spring the ducks are much more highly colored, and give opportunity for more contrasty negatives, but to offset this advantage the birds then are paired and much scattered and very unapproachable. Also the grass and rushes along the sloughs and ponds have been pounded down by the storms of winter so that the stalker finds it difficult to conceal himself, and to make matters worse for him, the ground with which he must cultivate a very close and clinging acquaintance is usually cold and wet.

The concourse of things on a mud-bar in the marshes during an August afternoon is an assembly with which any kodak-man or bird-

lover must delight in getting acquainted. Suppose you steal into the rushes along the shoreline, part them ever so little, and peer through for a moment. There sleep—but always with eyes and ears wide open—mallards, pintails, spoonbills, blue-winged and green-winged teal, and gadwalls, with possibly a few canvasbacks or blue bills close at hand in the shallows—the open water ducks never quite make up their minds to come ashore. “Puddling” in the warm water all around the bar are the waders—lesser yellowlegs, big godwits or willets, and any one of a dozen other smaller species, from the midget least sandpiper to the black-bellied plover.

The plover and snipe members of the gathering are mostly busy; they feed their plump little bodies by day and rest at night, whereas the ducks do the reverse. Out at the end of the bar in an unfrequented pool stands the sentinel of the assembly, on guard—a great blue heron. Silent, morose, uncanny in his stolid immobility and eery in the snakey movements of his reptilian neck and head, he poses by himself. For tittering yellowlegs, noisy willet, and gabbling ducks he apparently regards with contempt,

and if he knew where there was an unoccupied bar just as good, he would flop off to it and enjoy himself alone.

There is something satisfying to the nature-student in succeeding thus in getting right among the wild things and catching them all unconscious. In fact no one has really seen a wild creature till he has caught him unafraid and in his natural surroundings. It is only thus that he learns the true character—if one may call it such—of the creatures—of mallard, the wary, always the first to shout, of pintail, ever timid and afraid, of yellowlegs, the simple, yet who on occasion scraps with his neighbor, in a weak imitation of a hen-yard fray, of bluebill, the rattle brained, who when scared in the shallows, never seems to know whether to fly or dive and usually tries them both alternately, and of night heron, the swaggerer, who when he stalks across the bar through the throng has a ready lane opened up before him.

To learn to stalk successfully, one must first learn to crawl. By this I do not mean merely to lower the body forward from the hips and go on tiptoe, nor even to walk on fours,—hands and knees—but to crawl as the snake crawls,

flat on the ground. Cover that is ten or twelve inches high will suffice to shelter one who knows how to hide; otherwise a poplar bluff is insufficient. The novice at the game usually gets on his fours, lowers his head and shoulders till that part of him is supported on his elbows, and then shuffles forward with the seat of his trousers hoisted in the air at least two feet. Such tactics usually are not conducive to success, for the ducks have an unerring eye for trousers in that pose and always take it for granted that the owner is there somewhere.

Getting rid of the hips is the big problem. If the cover is fair, the stalker may roll from side to side as he lurches forward, propelled by his elbows, but in tight places this will not do, as it not only throws part of the body too high, but also disturbs too much grass or other cover. Here the best way is to lie flat, face down, and using hands and elbows, drag all the body forward a few inches at a time. This is strenuous. I have often felt that it is about as easy to walk ten miles as thus to crawl two hundred yards. But negatives justify almost any sort of effort, for where is the sportsman who would rank his case of dusty, mounted trophies the equal of



Young Red-tail—The Cause of the Trouble in the Oaks

the same number of good enlargements of the wild things photographed while alive?

My first experience at duck-stalking with a kodak was at a slough in the Assiniboine valley. It was one of those long, horse-shoe shallow ponds, an overflow channel, nestling below the hills in an out of the way spot, and I judged that it would be a good place to try the new speed shutter. Fortune was with me that time. The birds were there, the sun was bright, the wind was blowing hard enough to rustle the sedgy grasses along the water's edge and hide my creeping movements; also, the grass had been mowed close up to the fringe of rushes. Most though not all of my exposures that day were presentable negatives; and as if to verify the saying that the tyro always scores, I secured then one of my best pictures. Conditions were so favorable that once I actually got too close to my subjects, for when I rose in the rushes with the dead drop on a family of teal, they burst out of there far too quickly to be stopped by a mere thousandth part of a second. On the negative, they were almost wingless.

Ducks or other birds getting up and away in a dreadful hurry, always show something lu-

dicious on the film that cannot be detected by the eye. The mighty back stroke of the wings, that seem almost to meet across the shoulders, the apparent standing on their tails on the water, the twists and desperate wiggles, the kicking legs, the twisted head peering back at the foe, and other fright spasms that escape the eye, are all caught in the act by the speed shutter. It is this characteristic of speed pictures that causes the man who knows birds but not kodaks, to maintain that such and such a bird is not "got" right, and that it is not natural. The trouble, of course, is with himself. He never sees what the lens can, as his eye is too slow. Artists also have aided the illusion by drawing birds in flight with shortened pinions and a reduced wing-stroke. They are both correct in their way; for the artist represents what he sees, and so does the kodak.

The same sloughs, mentioned above, furnished me with some tough-luck stalking later in the season. During the last week in October and the first in November, long strings of mallards had been crossing town at earliest day-dawn and at dusk each evening returning toward the distant lake. Sportsmen at the shoot-

ing-lodges at the lake reported empty bags as there were no daylight flights, and so Greenhead's cunning plan of things became apparent. I decided that the birds were stubble feeding to the northward and spending the day in the sloughs in the river-valley. In detail their plan of living was to leave the lake in the darkness preceding the first peep of day, flight out high to their feeding-grounds on the wheat-lands across the river, fifteen miles distant, return a few miles to the valley, and spend the day in seclusion, then in the evening, after another gorge of plump wheat, slip off through the dusk for the lake. All this, of course, was but a theory with me till I got an opportunity to go down and prove it.

There were but a dozen mallards in the horse-shoe slough in the meadow, when about 2 P. M. I peeped into it, but from the manner in which these dropped down into the old river-bed in the timber, after I had incautiously routed them, I felt confident that there were others there decoying hem. This "bogan" was right in the woods, and a few minutes later I stole through the strip of leafless elms and peeped down into the water. [What a sight! Packed in the shal-

low bay were mallards, a hundred or more of them, and nearly all gaudy greenheads. Some were napping on the shore, others taking their siesta on the water, and numbers of the drakes were gracefully tipping-up as they probed in the mud. It was a picture to remember. The blue-tinted mirror-pond framed in the dull, leaden woods, and with its surface rich with inverted shadows, and a color scheme composed of the blue and green, rich brown, and black and white patches of the birds, made a canvas that is not found hung in a gallery.

In a few moments I had the machine set and started working down the slope along a slightly-defined cow-trail that angled toward the birds. The first twenty yards were fairly easy, then I encountered the willows, and the cow-trail vanished. The sight of these birds filled me with a determination to get a picture if it could be done; and inch by inch I dragged myself after the machine. Dry twigs and leaves had to be removed from my path; some green shoots had to be cut with my knife and gently pushed aside, but always I gained a little ground. At length I had to turn around a clump and work through under a heavy, arched willow. Once clear of

it, I felt that victory was mine, but—ten yards in front of my face, and now with scarce a weed-stalk intervening, were a pair of sleeping green-heads, and one villain seemed to have his wise little eye focused upon the point of my nose. Every instant I felt that he must shout an alarm; but not until I was half out from under that diabolical willow did he recognize me. His head shot up several inches, remained there a fraction of a second, then with a warning quack he was in the air, followed by a splash and a roar as the whole concourse took wing. I had failed that time by just a few inches.

The birds circled inquisitively twice above me, but as I did not move, they seemed to conclude that it was a false alarm and most of them dropped down again in the next bend. Here I tried once more, and stalked them by following another trail that led within twenty yards of the water. Then I sprinted for them. I think they were on the wing with the first move I made in my crashing progress, and I'm almost ready to swear that I heard them laughing at me, but the shutter caught up to some sixty of them. Back on whiffing wings they came in a few moments, and circled overhead, twisting

their green heads and eyeing me, wondering doubtless what fool thing had got loose in the woods.

When I slipped around the next bend I found a dozen old drakes idling close in to shore, where the bank was higher. They were so close, in fact, and so busily engaged in standing on their heads, that I was almost beside them before they were aware of my presence. It was good to see them go quack-splashing out of there, and almost tying knots in themselves in their eagerness to put distance between themselves and the foe. A man with a gun they knew, but this—!

Yet when these films were developed, the birds still had the best of me; for the weak November light was insufficient for the high speeds with which I had to make the exposures. It was strong enough, however, to show that on the last negative every member of the little flock was a drake. This exclusiveness of these selfish fellows is very noticeable in the North late in the fall. Entire flocks of dandified drakes may then be noted, but whether it is just a social club, or a condition arising from the fact that the females are packed off southward earlier is rather hard to prove.

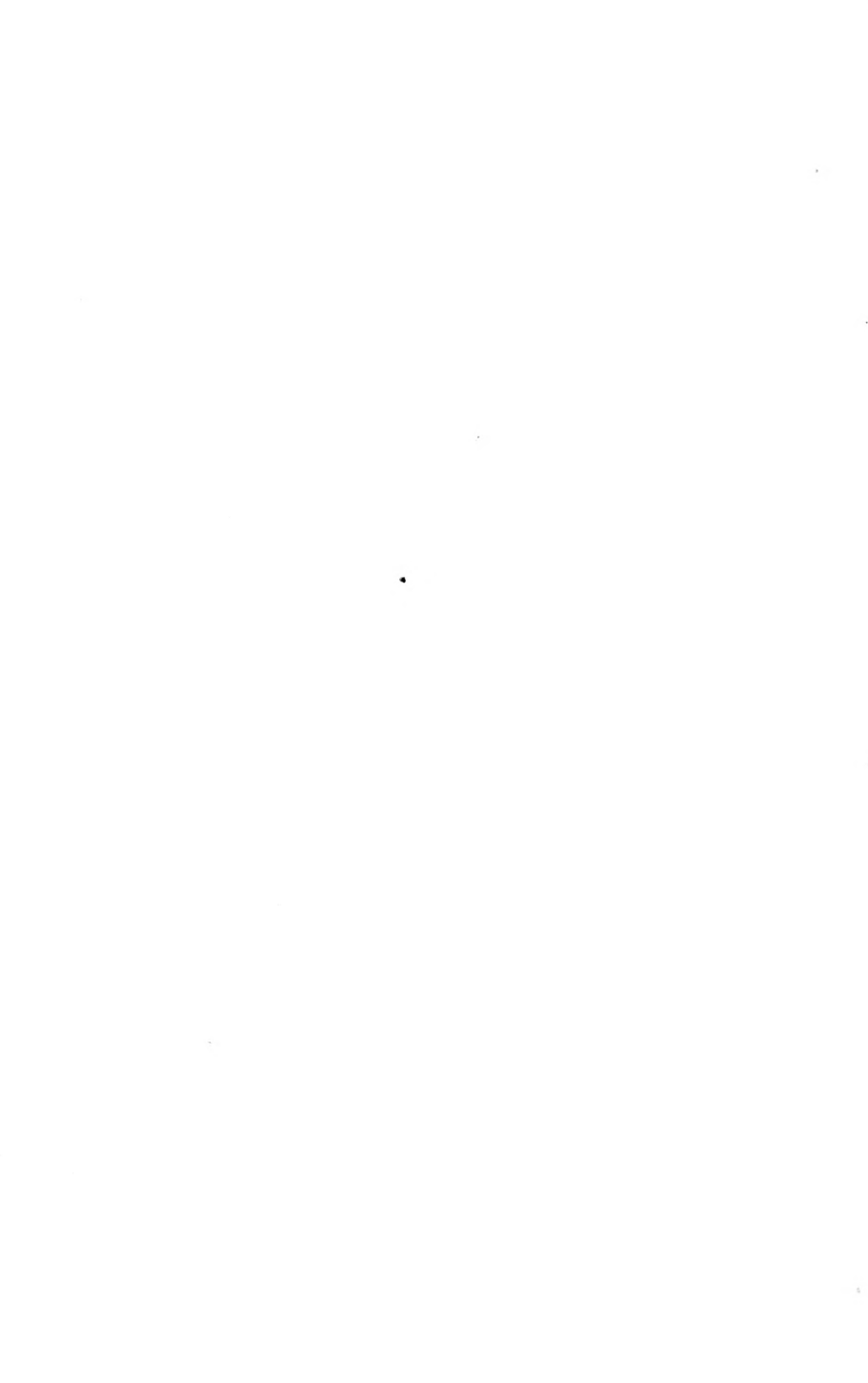
Though the quality of patience in one of the most valuable assets of a hunter, I found one day the next autumn that everything positively does not come to him who waits—with a kodak. I had the fond notion though that it did, when one August mid-afternoon I sallied out of camp, and I was indiscreet enough to tell my chum so too. I had waited a week for the proper afternoon to interview a duck host that I had marked for slaughter. The day had come, with its northwest breeze and bright sun, and when I reached the point of the woods and climbed my look-out tree, there they were, as many as I could desire, packed in the narrow neck connecting the two sloughs.

I will not state just how far I crawled to get into position, nor how long it took to get through and over those yards and yards of noisy, dead-bottom marsh grass, nor how many brads I afterwards extracted from tender parts of myself. Let it suffice that I took at least one minute too long and when I finally paused to wipe the dust from my lens, before springing my grand climax, I noted that the sun had suddenly hidden his face. There in the west was a hog-back wall of clouds with the upper rim just

reaching across the benign face of Sol! One lingering, but very canny survey of that lovely congregation of several hundred ducks was all I dared; then I lay and waited. But when at six o'clock, and still cloudy, I stood up among the throng—I was not in the right frame of mind to crawl away again without disturbing them, as I did once before—and scared those Webfeet so that they fell over themselves in their haste to get under way, then turned and lugged my outfit homeward, I was fully convinced that at least one old proverb positively lied!



The Undulating, Loose Companies of the Little Black-Headed Franklin's Gulls



CHAPTER XI

IN THE OOZY PLACES

MUCH has been written of expeditions into the great northern hinterland, that lone, silent land of the sombre spruces, of the crystal streams where lie unconquered finny warriors, of mighty rapids, of the giant wild kind that pose in the shallows, of the red-man and his inseparable, the canoe. Also much has been told—and it never stales—of the wondrous mountainland of the West, with its eternal god-like peaks, its dream-valleys of color, its sentinel timbers that pierce the blue, and its ice-born streams of living crystal. Yet after having stood within those valleys, breathed the rainbow spray from the falls, lured the fighting denizens of the swirling waters to their death, or loitered out miles from nowhere, among those hushed pines and cedars, where the deer-trails are worn deep across the park-like openings, and the sacked nest of the yellow-jackets, fresh

dug from the beaten game-trail, warns that a big black neighbor is near, still after it all, I can turn to the sluggish, meandering streams of the plainland and find there each season something that woos and wins me anew.

For the woods of these mountain valleys seem filled with a brooding hush, and to break it is an intrusion. They seem weighted down by the sacred silence of bygone centuries, which holds over the stranger a warning hand, the sign of which is "Violate not!" Scant wonder that the mountaineer is a man of few words. But how different is the reed-fringed prairie stream that meanders through the marsh flat. It is a place of teeming noisy life. In spring it is a musical bedlam, but even in the autumn when most birds are still, the marsh wren scolds and the rails and blackbirds chatter from the rushes, the coots and ducks set up their glad gabble, and the air is never still. Such a meandering noisy stream is the Pipestone, with which this chapter is concerned.

It was on a typically August morning, and the 14th of the month, that we pushed off our canoe from the tepee landing and set out for a trip into the oozy places. Scout Henry was in

the stern. Though claiming a span of but twelve summers, his straight back and sturdy shoulders that bulged in his light sweater were those of a voyageur. Our cargo consisted of a blanket, frying-pan, kettle, some grub, and the kodak, all wrapped in a canvas sheet. We did not start early—it always seems something of a mistake to hurry on such a day—and instead of cutting directly across the lake for the gap in the distant sand-hills marking the mouth of the creek we slipped off southward along the shoreline.

Game in sight! Half a mile ahead in a shallow bay, a white, irregular mass resolved itself into twelve or fifteen big, white pelicans. Our plans were quickly laid. Henry was to move about with the canoe to hold their attention, while I stalked them with the kodak. About half an hour later I reached the desired willow-fringe along the shore—I had marked the spot by a scrub elm—and then began to work my way through the thicket. It was now that I found the slip—between the bird and the negative. That innocent-looking willow-fringe was really a tropical jungle. It was a growth of reeds and willows, currant bushes and osiers all bound to-

gether with morning-glory and hop-vines. When finally I got through it and dared a peep out over the water, I was more chagrined than surprised to see that I had the bay all to myself, and that my trusty had all but reached me with the canoe. He informed me that "They went right over those willows long ago," so I had to find my comfort in the fact that for some time I had been stalking the bay. Doubtless my own rumpus in the thicket quite drowned the noise of the get-away of the wary birds.

About five miles from home we came to the mouth of Plum Creek, a sluggish channel connecting several miles of slough and marsh land with the main lake. In seasons of high water the stream is several feet deep and is well known to the fishermen of the locality, but now it was almost dry.

It was taken for granted that the mouth of the creek would be well-peopled by the denizens of the marsh, and we were not disappointed. Yellowlegs were probing in the shallows, and a squad of sleepy ducks of different lineage were sunning themselves on the low mud-banks. Inch by inch, under Henry's deft hand the canoe stole toward them, till the click of the shutter caused

a helter-skelter pattering departure and cleared out the place. Then we went ashore to stretch our legs and gather a small bundle of willow sticks to boil our kettle at the next stop.

Just to renew old times I cut a rod, attached a troll, and tried a few casts for a pike. But I was unsuccessful, and anyhow it was easier to lounge on the warm sand, bask in the genial sun, and tell I've-seen-the-day stories to Scout Henry. The landing of a ten-pound pike on a willow rod; the attempted landing of one a shade larger by a rather unskilled friend who after hooking the fish pounced upon it, and in a frantic endeavor to hold the slimy monster, embraced and actually hugged it, and in so doing lost it; the mysterious yellowlegs that once insisted on following a fisherman around at heel like a well-trained dog; the pike that ate the little ducklings; these and many more remembrances of the place were recounted.

It was not hard to understand why in times of high water, the place was a favorite resort of big pike. The channel then was really lost among the big sloughs flanking it, and here lived hundreds of ducks, coots, grebes, and other marsh birds whose peepers make dainty morsels

for pike. For an unsuspecting duck mother to lead her train of downy dependents across the perilous passage was the most natural thing in the world; and for a big voracious pike to follow in her wake and seize her tiny peepers and gulp them down, one, two, three, was quite as natural for him. I never really witnessed such a tragedy, but it requires only a slight play of the imagination to see the swirl of the water as the fish strikes, the hurrying mother leading her pattering young; or perhaps turning back and flapping and beating around on the surface of the water, while the youngsters scurry for the rushes.

This time-worn game of setting up a counter excitement, which she works on the hawk and other foes, would seem to be her only defense against this foe of the water. However, her success or failure at the game may be judged somewhat from a post-mortem examination of the stomachs of two pike caught here previously. One rascal had in his maw three young ducks all of the same size and species, and evidently snapped from the same brood; the other held a single but much larger duckling, so bulky, in fact, that it must have given the murderer a hard

tussle to swallow it. The friend with whom I was fishing that day informed me that a few days previously he had examined the stomachs of a number of pike caught across the lake and found that the chief item on their bill of fare had been coots, fairly well-grown.

While cutting across a wide bay toward our next calling-place, we ran into a duck kindergarten. At least to all intents and purposes it appeared to be such, for before us were some sixty youngsters of the Quack clan, accompanied by only three old birds. One of the latter plainly was a bluebill, and just as plainly her business there was the care of her own brood. As the rest of the young were in evenly-sized detachments of a dozen or so each, with the size differing in the various groups, it was evident that maternal responsibility had been shirked somewhere. The other two old birds present were white-winged scoters, and as their charges were all blackish and big-headed and rather ugly, it was a fairly safe guess that we had disturbed a scoter kindergarten.

It was noon when we turned into the mouth of the Pipestone. Like the Plum, this part of the stream is also flanked by lagoons, with little over-

flow channels joining it here and there. The low edges of the stream—they cannot be called banks—support a thick wall of plumed yellow reeds that rise ten and twelve feet above the water and shut out completely everything beyond the creek. These brakes are the home of the marsh wrens and the Carolina rails. The former chattered at us saucily and peered out and perked their tails as we stole by; and the rails, surprised not more than six inches from their reedy fortress, just faded back into the shallows. Once one fellow fluttered clear across the stream, with such a ludicrous flight that it seemed that the twenty yards was going to prove too much for him. At the neck of a lagoon a lone bittern was standing, and when he saw us his beak slowly stole skyward, and he posed thus, without another movement, as we went by. He was probably fishing—which as applied to a bittern is rather a broad term, embracing the pursuit of water-insects, minnows, tadpoles, snakes, and salamanders. All are fish when he is hunting.

Three or four bends up from the mouth of the creek is a strip of solid bank, and here we pulled ashore and boiled the kettle. Then we slipped into the shade of the tall reeds, threw down the



Black Marsh Terns

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Along the Shore-line

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Marsh Terns and Sand-pipers

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canvas, and proceeded to enjoy ourselves. We did not have a fish for dinner as intended, even though we had spun a troll over some of the best spots. But no matter. We were playing Indian; and to-morrow we would be hungrier and fish more successfully.

It was good to lie there after dinner and watch the white Franklin gulls, with their black-tipped wings, and the dusky terns go by, clear-cut against the blue heavens or fleecy cloud-drift, and to listen to the marsh noises. Chief of the noise-makers of the marsh were the coots. Their voices drowned the best effort of the ducks, black-birds, rails, and waders all combined. "Good-drink good-drink," repeated *ad infinitum*, always seems to me the burden of their song, and they make up in repetition what they lack in repertoire. Once, early in the month of May, I spent a night out, camped beside a long chain of sloughs, and by morning I was about willing to swear that not once during the entire night did those creatures cease from their infernal "Good-drinking" long enough to even take breath. However, their vocal performances grow less as the season advances, and by August they are only unreasonably noisy.

We did not rest very long; that would have been an impossible feat for Scout Henry while on a real exploring expedition, and I figured that energy that just had to be spent might as well go into a paddle, so we put off again. Soon rounding one of the bends, we came upon a mother bluebill and her brood of well-grown young. For some time they swam ahead of the canoe; then when it gained upon them they rose, and though quite unable to fly, pattered along on the surface of the water. They employed both wings and legs—screw propeller and side-wheeler combined in one—and this was by far their speediest means of locomotion. It always gave them a lead, though it plainly tired them. Then the little mother came back at us heroically, threw herself frantically in front of the canoe, cried distressfully, and flapped around lamely in circles on the water. It was the only way she knew of trying to stop us, and her own safety was of no account when measured by that of her precious toddlers ahead. A hungry Indian might have struck her low with his paddle, but such is the way of the wild mothers that her life would have been given freely.

As the weaker ones became fagged, they

dived; and then to spare them further fright and if possible end the agony, we rushed them and passed right over them. Splash! Splash! Splash! A jet of water, kicked from each pair of black feet, shot up into the air, even after the accompanying abbreviated tail had disappeared. Up and down again, right under the paddles they came; then we were ahead of them; but when we looked back from a safe distance, they were headed down stream and still frantically diving as quickly as they could get a fresh breath.

We regarded this mother duck somewhat as an old friend. The previous August we had rowed up the creek, and found a similar bluebill with a brood that all acted as though they had been taught in the same school. The performance of both the mother and young ones in each case was repeated to the letter, and as they were at almost the selfsame spot in the creek, we felt sure that it was the same little mother in her summer home. Long may she live!

Before long we came upon more creek inhabitants; this time it was a squad of blue-winged teal. They were of three sizes. Some of the oldest brood were able to fly ten or twelve feet, but the youngest fellows were much belated and still

little more than half-grown downies. But they all acted the same, and swam and pattered and peep-peeped in distress. The big ones hydro-aeroplaned till their poor wings were tired, then gave it up. Some of them showed a trick seemingly unknown to the bluebills. They dived and came up at the shore and crawled out on the weedy mud, or slipped into rat-holes, or under the overhanging banks, and let us go by. But this was only the last resort of the smaller and feebler; the strongest kept together ahead till we rushed them and speeded over their heads as they bobbed and kicked in the weed-tangled stream.

I could not help noting the cork-like way in which the youngsters popped up after a dive. For some reason none of them seemed able to do the trick of the adult birds, that of submerging the body, or at least getting the back level with the surface, and swimming with the head and neck outstretched. All the ducks can do it, the grebes, of course, are masters at it, and even the big Canada goose can sink himself till he shows little more than a snaky head at the surface of the water. But for some reason, possibly the excessive airiness of their downy coats, or the light-

ness of their bodies in proportion to their bulk, the youngsters, it would seem, must either be under the water or right up on top of it.

Throughout the afternoon we slowly slipped along, never in a hurry, but always unraveling a little of the watery scroll; and all along the way we met the folks of the prairie and marsh—the muskrat that eyed us stupidly, then dived kerchug almost under the bow; the two big mallards standing on the mud, that when they saw us ran ashore and hid in the grass; when we landed and failed to find a sign of the cunning rascals, we had to conclude that they were old birds helplessly moulted, as described in some of the books; the little striped “gopher” (spermophile) that watched us from the reeds, and when we had passed, struck out and swam across the stream—what he, of all things, was doing in a marsh, must ever remain a mystery; the great flock of thirsty crows, and the red-wing host, with a goodly number of their bobolink cousins, all fresh from the oat-field, that came to drink and then rest in the willows; the solitary sandpipers that bobbed their heads knowingly at us from the mud; and the greater yellowlegs that surprised us by appearing so early in the season.

By and by we left the marshes behind us; the solid banks rose three or four feet above the water, and on turning a bend we reached the ford where a dozen phlegmatic cows, standing more than half-submerged in the cool stream, blocked our way. A few vigorous pokes with a paddle and a real, full-grown war-whoop from Henry cleared the stream; then we passed between willow-trimmed banks and soon reached the wooden trestle-bridge. Here we went ashore to stretch our limbs and climb the bridge to get a view of the great plainland in her golden dress of August, stretching off for miles around us.

When we put off again we entered a new sort of world. The banks were high and overgrown with a jungle of willows that in many places reached out over the shaded stream. The course now became even more crooked. Deep dark mirror-pools awaited us around the sharp turns; here and there the channel divided and formed a network among small islands, and it was only by watching the direction of the aquatic vegetation in the shallows that we could determine whether we were going upstream or down. Now, too, we were greeted by an entirely different bird life. This woods-oasis on the plains

in fact was a haven for the birds that usually are found in more extensive woods. Several black-crowned night herons with noisy "squawk-wauk" flopped out of the willows at our approach; two young long-eared owls stared at us from a willow within a few feet; a nighthawk on his branch awoke and flitted off upstream; and bronzed grackles, robins, kingbirds, song sparrows, and even waxwings were all there at home to callers.

About an hour before sundown we entered a strip of real woods. The thickets of willows and osiers were backed by elms, ash-leafed maples, and poplars; and here we pulled the canoe ashore and made camp. As soon as the kettle could be persuaded to bubble, we had supper; then we made preparation for the night. This consisted of throwing a matting of grass upon the dry, sandy ground and arranging the canvas upon it. As the latter was a long strip, it was turned up at the head of the bed, brought forward over a horizontal pole placed between two tree-clumps, and the corners then tied to two saplings driven into the ground. Thus we had a bed, one wall, and a roof. When the blanket was spread, it was ready. Then we idled around our little fire,

and somehow spoke low or in whispers as we listened to the evening noises of the woods.

It was what I set down in my notes as a bird evening, so dead calm and the woods so still that the faintest whisper of a warbler or the "chink" of a song sparrow could be heard plainly at a wonderful distance. From every hand came the lispings of the yellow warblers. As it was their time of migration, doubtless many families had taken shelter here for the day. Once, also, a yellow-throat cousin tuned up and let go with his "Wichety-wichety-wichety" from somewhere low in the shrubbery. The "Cheenk" of a water thrush sounded occasionally from the margin of a dark pool where the little fellow solemnly wagged his tail as he worked around after his supper. Very probably he also was on his southward way. Kingbird families in the dry willow-tops, the youngsters all begging in chorus for a final dragon-fly night-cap before retiring, chattered noisily and almost incessantly; the members of a catbird family mewed to each other from the willows, while a song sparrow sang a time or two and chinked away afterwards that all had his approval and was well with the world.

Not so, however, with a young red-tailed hawk, nearby, that evidently had been raised in the place and resented our intrusion. From a dead elm-tip a hundred yards distant, he screamed shrilly every few moments. One of his parents circled overhead and added his or her voice to the unseemly din. We were hardly prepared for the youngster, though, when he winged over and with much flapping steadied himself in the tree right over our heads. He stayed only a few moments before striking off again followed by the anxious parent, and we were glad to be rid of their outrageous clamor. From the whitish underparts of both old and young, I judged them to be Krider's variety of the red-tail; but whatever their kind, they seemed an unholy blight upon the peacefulness of the little place.

Just at dusk the blackbirds flocked in by scores till hundreds of them were hidden in the willows. Then the raucous voices of the night herons came out of the darkness; the squealing of the family of long-eared owls rose intermittently as the scattered young called for food; a Bartram's sandpiper, striking off southward, sent down his liquid ripple; the small birds of the thicket were hushed; somewhere out on the prai-

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rie a coyote howled once, clear, penetrating, and the night had come upon us. Then we turned from the embers and followed the example of all the other creatures of the day.

CHAPTER XII

THE BIRD-DIARY OF LONE TEPEE

LONE TEPEE was really a little tent, pitched amid the elms bordering a lake in western Manitoba, and it sheltered a lone, though not a lonely, camper. From the standpoint of the social camper—the afternoon-tea-and-calls sort—the thing was a rank failure, but for the study and companionship of the wild-woods creatures it was ideal. If we would really know these creatures, how necessary it is to keep quiet, while near them, leaving the .22 rifle, the dog, even your chum, sometimes, elsewhere,—unless he has learned the golden value of holding his tongue.

Oak Lake is circular and holds five and six-mile stretches of water. On three sides there is prairie; on the fourth and east, a large strip containing several hundred acres is well wooded with ash-leaved maple, poplar, and grand old

oaks and elms, the latter two being in their primeval best, along the water-front. The elm clump that sheltered the tepee is a detached grove standing off a short distance from the main woods. Back of the woods and encircling the entire stretch lies a chain of sloughs, making these woods an isolated spot. In former days it must have been a favorite with the redman—as evidenced by his old pottery, flint arrow-heads, and buffalo-bones, etc., about the place—during present summer days it is the retreat of the campers who have found and love the spot.

Aug. 1. Went down to the point of woods, jutting out into the pasture, to make my first call upon some old friends,—the Arkansas kingbirds,—but though I searched the oaks well, not a trace of the pair could I find. For the previous three years, at least, this pair had returned to the same spot, though so far beyond the ordinary range of their kind—the Arkansas being a Southern kingbird,—but now their place was vacant.

Exactly a year ago when I came down to find them, I had not far to seek. There was a noise of battle in the oaks, the shrill voice of a kingbird, and the intermittent scream of a red-tailed hawk.

Approaching cautiously, I found a young red-tail, just able to fly, sitting in the branches of a big oak, vainly trying to ward off the well-timed strokes of Mr. or Mrs. Kingbird. He was not succeeding very well, either, for I watched the fray several minutes and saw him hit viciously many times, before he launched out awkwardly and flopped away through the tree-tops, with his tormentor still helping him onward. The hawk's nest was in the tree, ten feet above where the youngster was sitting, but whether or not this was his first flight away from the home-nest, and also probably his daily drubbing-ground, I am unable to say. In a big oak close by, I found the kingbird's nest, but though I climbed to it, the parents made no noise whatever. In it were two youngsters, not half grown, showing that this kingbird is a late nester, at least so at the extreme northern end of his range.

Aug. 2. In early morning, off afoot for town, nine miles distant. It was August in reality today. Whether the eye ranged over the flower-decked roadsides, or upon the fields and meadows, or even in the upper air, it was August. The long day, clear, dead calm, and hot; the limpid blueness of the sky; the upper air peopled

with myriad silver sparks of insect life, pursued listlessly by high-flying legions of terns and gulls, all said that it was so. The crows in family sixes among the windrows on the hay-meadow; the blackening choke-cherries in the thickets; the yellow, flowery aspect of the verdant prairie, now abloom on every hand with golden-rod, yellow bur, prairie clover, blazing star, and staminating grasses; the gold and green tints from the fields of turning wheat, now filling and doughy in the kernel; the huge dragon-flies darting by; and above all, the myriad-voiced cricket orchestra, all—all proclaimed it August.

The only thing of note on the return in the afternoon was a hundred-yard Marathon with eight young sharp-tailed grouse. These youngsters were already almost grown, and they slipped out of the grass beside the trail through the sand-hills and ran ahead along the dusty road. Though I put on my fastest walking pace, they kept the lead for some time, till wearying of the sport, they rose, one by one, and whirred into the shrubbery.

In the evening at camp, a large concourse of Franklin gulls came along from the the eastward and headed out to the lake. They have evidently

now left the hatchery, which was located out in one of the largest sloughs, and are foraging afield during the day. The numerous young in the flocks can readily be picked out, as they lack the black hood of their parents. The amount of insect life consumed during the summer by a colony of five hundred or so of these birds would be startling, if it could be correctly computed. The big, pulpy, short-horned grasshopper of the fields is a favorite victim.

Noticeable too in the evening were the numerous warbler voices in the grove. The faint, lisping "tsip" of the warblers is unmistakable, though many species have the same call-notes. A close inspection of the elms, however, revealed no other than the yellow species, which by this date is on the southward journey.

The night was not without incident. At midnight a coyote yelled clear and shrill out at the bend in the lake shore, and a few minutes later a commotion arose in the same direction. There came the terrified "Peep peep peep" of a young mallard, accompanied by much splashing and the distressed quacking of the mother; then silence. Later there was a bluster, as several hundred blackbirds were routed from the rushes, but

whether the coyote's stalking was rewarded with a full stomach or an empty must go unrecorded.

Aug. 3. A rain came on at five o'clock a. m. and continued through every hour of the day. It was from the east, and during the long day, all sound of living things was hushed in the drip-drop-drum of the big drops on the drum-like tent. Even the ground squirrels did not show up at all.

Aug. 4. It cleared in the morning; and bright and early, out came the ground squirrels—early at least for such lie-abed chaps,—and they were very hungry. Two of them even ate together for a moment at the log. This was something unusual, for as a rule their table etiquette was of the worst.

The bird-note of the day came in the evening, when just at dusk, the Bartram sandpipers began going overhead southward, on their fall migration. Their soft, liquid notes rippled earthward, as the members of the company called to one another along their airy pathway, and it was continued intermittently for about two hours after sundown. These birds seem to migrate just after dusk and in the early moonlight, and I have never yet noted them passing at any other time.

Aug. 6. Visited the heronry. This is a collection of some twenty pairs of black-crowned night herons that nest each year in a clump of maples crowning a knoll across the sloughs. During years of high water the place is an island. Accompanied by my Boy Scout trusty and armed with the kodak, I set out early in the afternoon. We waded a neck in the slough, and after crossing a pasture, were soon at our destination. The place was notably quiet now, as most of the young had flown. Three or four old birds squawk-wawked as they flapped out of the tree-tops, and soon we were beside a nest with two well-fledged young in it. We photographed them, and soon another larger fellow was shaken down and persuaded to pose. These all did their usual throw-up trick—disgorging the contents of their stomachs at us—but we had been there before. Their breakfast, as usual, had consisted of salamanders. It would be interesting to know just how the parent birds catch so many of these creatures that never seem to be very plentiful. On a former visit to the heronry a youngster actually coughed up a Carolina rail that somehow must have run foul of the wicked beak of the old heron in the rushes at night.

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Already it was plain that the crows had picked out this island for an autumn rendezvous. And a very suitable place it was, with shady trees, luscious dead-ripe choke-cherries in plenty, water on every hand, countless feasts of crickets and grasshoppers for easy picking, on the close-cropped pasture, and across the slough, yellowing wheat-fields. Just after we had left the place, two parties of about forty each, arrived. They were high in air and appeared to have come from a distance. When nearing the bluff, they sailed straight in, in the manner of vultures pictured somewhere, and when over the place they began to gyrate in as many different directions and at as many different altitudes as there were crows, and circling thus, they finally all settled on the trees. Neither memory nor the note-book holds a record of a similar performance.

We called at an old deserted house in another bluff to pay our respects to the barn swallows that we felt sure would be there. Up on a beam was a nest, with four handsome little heads beaming over the edge. But when after much labor, we dragged an old stove into position and I attempted to mount it with the kodak, they said "Good-afternoon" and flitted out of the win-



Black-Crowned Night Herons—Well-Fledged Young

dow, to join their parents and first-brood brothers. For even in Manitoba this bird nests twice.

As we returned along the slough, the actions of the snipe tribe were noteworthy. The willet were more numerous than usual, and one flock had a dozen members. Some of these big fellows were out on a bare sod knoll, and in company with a few lesser yellowlegs were busy stalking insects. Judging by the antics of the birds, their prey was grasshoppers. A few big, brown godwit cousins were also along the shallows. These noisy chaps usually collect in large flocks before moving southward.

But the real treat of the day came in the evening, when thirty great white pelicans, strung out in line, sailed over camp from the eastward, and with their huge ten-foot spread of wings, flapping and soaring alternately, they went out to the center of the open lake. Worthy foemen these, for the kodaker's steel!

Received a note from a friend, stating that a pair of eagles were nesting in the sand-hills. One young one, just able to fly, had been shot. Come at once if pictures desired.

Aug. 7. Off early on a ten-mile cross-country jaunt, loaded for eagle, with kodak supplies;

and there, dangling from a tree in the farmyard, I found the victim—a young Swainson hawk! Enough said.

Aug. 8. Early in the morning, set out with some friends in a row-boat, on a fishing expedition, bound for the creek-mouth across the lake. As we approached the opposite shore, the marsh terns became very numerous. Many of the young ones were roosting on the rafts of pondweed, now lying at the surface of the water, in brown patches. The black marsh tern was the common species met, but several families of the white species—most probably the common, but perhaps the Forster—also were noted. The white fellows have a way of their own of dropping flat on the water, with perpendicular beak driven down to pin a minnow or water-insect.

Close to shore two horned grebes seemed somewhat disturbed at our appearance, and the cause of it was revealed when we saw a tiny peeper grebe climb up on the back of each of the parents. Suddenly one of the old birds dived, and the little fellow was left on the surface. But only for a moment, when he swam to the other, probably his mother, and climbed aboard beside his brother navigator. A short distance ahead,

a tiny black thing on the water called our attention, and proved to be another grebe chick, being blown out to sea. He made no attempt to dive and we picked him up. He was blackish in color, had a small, naked red growth on the front of his head, and wore still the white beak-protuberance of the newly-hatched. We put him in close to shore and left him, but when we looked back again, later, he was again drifting out. Then we encountered a score of young ducks. Their large size, blackish color, and whitish face-mark pronounced them white-winged scoters, even had the big black mother of some of them been absent.

After catching four good pike, we landed and visited the shore, but the only thing of note we found there was three turnstones. These are not common in the locality, and the meeting was a rare and welcome one. A number of willets and some godwits were keeping the visitors company on the windy shore.

On the return journey in the evening, as we were making our way across the windy lake, six sandhill cranes made themselves conspicuous by circling around in one spot above the water, as though desirous of lighting there. It is prob-

able, yet hardly likely, that they mistook the brown pond-weed patches for sand-bars, for the crane is a mighty knowing chap, far surpassing his bird kin in sagacity.

Aug. 9. A real August morning in camp. The crows and flickers were raising a rumpus in the big elm near the tent, at the first light of dawn, when one crow, strangely enough it seemed, was rehearsing his spring love-song, "Wa-lunk wa-lunk." Later, a bright sun and perfect sky; crickets humming and piping in their million-voiced orchestra; a brown thrasher in the choke-cherry tree; three kingbirds on the dry elm tip; a catbird in the wash-basin; two young bronzed grackles at the fire-place, pecking burnt egg-shells; several chipmunks jerking about on the sunny spote; three ground squirrels scrapping ill-naturedly over their oatmeal and crackers; a score of lispig warbler voices in the elm foliage; yellowlegs and willet talk sounding from the sandy shore—who wouldn't be a camper at Lone Tepee!

Aug. 11. In the afternoon took a stroll around a mile of sloughs. There was a high south wind, and many duck parties were disturbed on the sheltered mud-bars and shore-line.

Most of the young of the slough ducks,—mallard, spoonbill, pintail, teal, and red-head—are now awing. In one mixed party of about fifty ducks, a big blue heron was standing stolidly among them,—a magnificent sentry. This is the first fall appearance of this bird.

Aug. 14, 15, 16. Deserted Lone Tepee and went off on a canoe expedition into the oozy places, all of which is too long to record here.

Aug. 17. Birds noted around camp to-day, and not mentioned earlier, were the rose-breasted grosbeak, several canaries, a black-billed cuckoo, and also a noisy, rattling kingfisher. The thrashers were not seen at all during the day. Can it be that they have moved southward?

Aug. 18. Off to town. Little of anything new noted, except that the members of the hawk tribe were numerous. This autumn increase is due to the young of the various species being abroad, also to the fact that the more northerly species have started southward. One large, whitish fellow, apparently a Krider hawk, rose from some deserted buildings and, passing low, directly overhead, watched me curiously with his clear eyes. Two fast-speeding smaller chaps, probably villainous duck hawks, were noted.

It was mid-afternoon when I returned, hot and dusty, and I went for a plunge in the lake. Suddenly, as I was swimming about, the whiff-iff-iff of a powerful wing came to my ear, and there above me was a great, white whooping crane. He was winging over, not thirty yards up,—a rare sight. Doubtless he had mistaken my head for some water bird; for he was mightily surprised when I stood up and gave him a head and shoulders view. A pity that this magnificent creature—really the grandest of all North American birds—is so rare that extinction is facing the species.

Aug. 19. A lazy day in camp. The bird census of my clump to-day revealed canaries, yellow warblers, warbling vireos, a tiny flycatcher, flickers, kingbirds, pine finches, catbirds, robins, and orioles—truly a goodly company. To-day I made more particular study of the bird raids on the choke-cherry trees. Up to date it has been found that almost all the larger birds eat them. The various species of blackbirds, the crows, jays, robins, catbirds, thrashers, orioles, song sparrows, cedar waxwings, Wilson thrushes, and flickers are all fond of them, and to-day even the kingbird was caught in the act. He was in a

cherry tree at the same time as a flicker, and I watched them closely. The woodpecker sidled up to a glistening bunch and with his long beak daintily wrenched off the cherries and tossed them down—fifteen of them I counted,—but the kingbird had a way entirely and characteristically his own. He sized up his cherry victim from afar off, exactly as he would a dragon-fly or moth, then darted at and took it off while going full tilt. But true to himself again he lit to swallow it. Each to his taste. On close inspection, I found that the chipmunk also had a way of his own. After cutting off the fruit, he deliberately slit the pulp in two halves, extracted the stone, and put it in his mouth, while the pulp dropped to the ground.

Aug. 20. The far-off voices of sandhill cranes came across the lake to-day, indicating that these great birds are collecting for the autumn migration. Their daily program seems to be about as follows: At earliest dawn they go to the fields and feed till nearly noon, when their thirst impels them to seek a slough or lake. Mid-day and much of the afternoon on fine days is spent circling at dizzy heights, far above the earth, often out of eye-shot. In the evening

they feed as in the morning, and about dusk they seek a safe night roost on bare shore or open mud-bar.

Aug. 21. In the morning I was treated to something rather new in the line of vocal antics and by a crow. I have heard crows with unusual vocal and linguistic powers, before, but this fellow had everything that any other kinsman ever possessed, and a dozen brand new stunts of his own. From an elm top close by, he delivered his strange oration. He cawed in several keys; he wa-lunked; sang a really musical two-note tune; cursed and swore angrily; growled like a dog; gutturalled in bass, and piped high treble, in a very realistic mimicry of human voices. Altogether it was the most remarkable bird effort I ever heard.

Aug. 23. The thrashers noted back at camp. Two other migratory visitors appeared during the day. These were some purple finches, in their autumn coats, and also a pale-clad American redstart.

Aug. 25. Up with the early dawn, and the chilly morning world seemed to have taken on its first real tint of autumn. The ducks were shouting in fine fettle from the sloughs, and



Crows Began to Gyrate in Different Directions

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Every Single One a Prehistoric Nightmare

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then, better still, came the deep-voiced "Ho-runk" of some Canada geese—always a sure indication that the season is wearing along. Later in the day, across the arm of the lake, huge blackbird swarms were noted, swirling back and forth on the horizon, over the yellowing oat-fields, and several ominous gunshots from that quarter told the tale. Sandhill crane voices are heard every day now, though such is the power of their vocal machinery that the birds themselves are not always visible.

The chilly evening spoke truly of autumn. The catbirds' voices sounded from the still shrubbery in the dusk after all the other birds were hushed; the night heron's bark rose noisily from the sloughs; at nine o'clock, the voices of the geese again came up from the same quarter of the slough; and from the oaks, in real fall fashion, came the ominous hooting of two horned owls.

Aug. 26. Off in the afternoon for a visit to the sloughs. Among the numerous ducks seen, a party of five spoonbills were observed at what to me was a new duck trick. They were young birds, having no objection to being observed, and I got quite near them. They were lying

low on the water, facing up wind, and with their beaks were skimming the water, but whether it was insects or algae that were being blown down their throats could not be determined.

On returning to Lone Tepee it was found that two sharp-shinned hawks were in possession of the grove, and as usual with them, they were tormenting the life out of the other birds. The flickers were special objects of attack, and their terrified and angry screams, as they dodged about the elms, could be heard at a great distance. It was not the first offence of these sharp-shins either, and a shotgun had been ushered into camp recently for just such an emergency, but the offenders flitted away scornfully before it could be used.

All afternoon, from the oaks across in the main woods, there came an unceasing disturbance from some crows. There was no mistaking the fact that they were mobbing a horned owl, so finally I sallied out with the gun. For after once examining the nest of this big owl in these woods, I have held that he is no friend of the birds. After a very long and careful stalk, I found two of these great gray fellows, surrounded by a dozen crows in the upper branches

of an oak. Though I had some slight compunction in shooting them down, I went away with the conviction that the waders along the shore, the ducks in the shallows, and the grouse and hares in the thickets would all sleep sounder for my deed.

To-day it becomes necessary to record that the ground squirrels have deserted me. Their feasting and fighting are over for the season, and the den in the cherry clump henceforth holds their secrets.

Aug. 30. Five sharp-shins were around camp to-day, and again all escaped. Several times, without warning, they darted into the grove, struck right and left at any bird found there, and then made a quick departure. I found the body of a poor catbird, with head and neck eaten off and the tail pulled out, lying below the trees, and have no hesitancy in charging the crime to their account.

Aug. 31. Celebrated the last day of a glorious month by canoeing across the lake with a friend, to troll for pike. The day was complete, but the evening was one to stay long in memory. The tall, plumed reed-fringes of the creek, now all red, brown, and yellow in their autumn tints,

made in the dark, placid stream such a perfect, inverted image that one could not but imagine himself in a world of unreal things, afloat in a magic bark; as we slipped out of the creek mouth and headed for the woods across on the distant horizon, the open lake was no less calm—a huge upturned mirror, lying upon the yellow plains.

Hushed evening held for a little time—the gulls in scattered companies riding at rest for the night; the sleepy terns perched on the pondweed patches; a raft of young scoters, or duck flock here and there; the garooing of a flock of cranes as they settled on their night-roost; far ahead from the darkening woods, the tuneful voice of some girl camper, singing over the water—then darkness settled upon it all, and August was gone.

CHAPTER XIII

IN QUEST OF A NIGHT-ROOST

SOMEWHERE out to the westward a whooping crane lifted up his mighty voice in a shout that rolled far across the prairie; and presently three of these great birds appeared above the horizon. They came from the direction of the lake and were on their way to supper on the broad wheat-fields that on every hand stretched away for miles. Presently as they went by at closer range—close enough for the swish of each huge wing to be plainly heard, yet still far out of gun-shot—they proved to be a family party. This was evident from the fact that the smallest bird of the three had, instead of the immaculately white plumage of the other two, a considerable sprinkling of yellow feathers in his coat, which garb proclaimed him a juvenile. With necks far out-thrust straight ahead, black, slender legs trailing in the rear, and black-tipped, giant pinions whiffing in unison, they

went by—the grandest, noblest picture in our North American bird world. When they lit in the field among the shocks, one fellow immediately mounted upon the sheaves, from which vantage his wary eye could tower up seven or eight feet—a magnificent sentinel, proof against surprise of stalking foe. At sunset they struck off silently, passed over the big expanse of grassland and marsh, and disappeared out toward the open lake. Where was their night-roost?

I felt that the wooded island, that on fine days glimmered off on the horizon across an arm of the lake, could probably answer, so next day I set out in that direction. It was a dozen miles by road, but bicycling on such an autumn day was a pleasure, and soon the miles of aster-decked trails all ahum with the vibrant cricket orchestra were measured off and the white shimmering lake—well named Whitewater—lay close at hand, and its treed island, looming up oasis-like on the plains, beckoned invitingly.

Just before turning into the broad pasture flanking the lake-shore, I came upon a rendezvous of the barn swallows and dismounted to pay my respects to these retreating summer friends. Lined up along the three-stranded wire



There Was a Scramble from the Mud-bank

fence and massed thickly on the sod were hundreds of these beautiful fork-tailed swallows, and darting back and forth about me were almost as many more. I counted the individuals on a wire between two posts, then a little problem in mental arithmetic gave me a rough census of the flock. There were about five hundred in the gathering, and a noteworthy feature of it was that a very large proportion of them were youngsters. There appeared to be five or six juveniles to each adult, showing that even in Manitoba this prolific bird is a two-brood nester. The dull sod fairly glistened with iridescent blue and chestnut and brown, and when a hundred pairs of slender wings flickered as the owners rose or slowly settled, the effect was magical. The air was filled with a sweet-voiced twittering—for this bird, unlike most of his kin, has not a harsh note in his vocabulary—and all together it was one of those happy meetings which make one glad that he has not been elsewhere.

Down along the pasture shore the waders were in abundance. This tribe plainly love a pasture shore or beach more than any other place. Possibly it is for the reason that the manure of the animals left along the mud at-

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tracts multitudes of insects, and thus provides good feeding-grounds for the birds. There also the grass is close-cropped and it is a good place for a short excursion afield. The willet, yellow-legs, black-bellied plover, pectoral sandpiper, and others all like to slip away a little distance from the water on hot, sunny days, and visit their noisy cousin, the kildeer, upon the knolls. This was where I found them, and down in the shallows, their tiny relatives, the least sandpipers and Northern phalaropes—the latter just arrived from the north—were almost alone.

There was but one way to reach the island. This way was very primitive but sure: to wade the intervening half mile of marsh. For though it was the ninth of September, this year it had been decreed that the shooting-season should not open till the fifteenth of the month, and so there were no shooters or boats handy. But the lack of a boat was compensated a thousand-fold by the birds of the place being in a measure unafraid and still in their natural environment of the summer. In another week they would be driven pell-mell out into the open and more inaccessible places by the shot and shell of the hunting fraternity.

It was not just the very easiest thing to wade that half mile. There were three feet of water over most of it; the bottom was clayey and much cut up by the hoofs of cattle in times of low water; and the course had to be picked through a maze of reeds and rushes which completely shut out all view of the surrounding country. But there were rewards around almost every turn in the rushes. Sleepy teal burst off noisily, and loud-voiced mallards gave warning to all and sundry, as they climbed up into the air and fled. But such was the air of security in the place that most of these warnings apparently were unheeded by the marsh folks. Two night herons perched on a rat-house—a favorite roost for all the marsh denizens—awoke with a start, squawked, and flapped off toward the woods. The grebe family were here in numbers, and it evidently was a favorite spot with them. A big Holboel's awaited me around a turn and stayed in sight long enough for me to note that his ruddy neck was rather faded after the wear and tear of the season. Two smaller horned cousins later were so terribly startled at my appearance that they actually took wing—which phrase as applied to a grebe is rather inaccurate and I had

better say "footed it," for these fellows always patter along on the surface for a time spanking the water with their feet, to gain the necessary momentum to get their planes working.

Several diminutive pied-billed relatives watched my movements uneasily or dived to reappear in another quarter and ogle in an interested, curious manner. Finally an intermittent rattling whistle ahead revealed the presence of others of the grebe clan. These chaps were almost strangers; but their long, snaky necks and large size pronounced them Western or swan grebes. In addition to the above, many coots were among the rushes, and either swam off nodding their heads stupidly, or if more hasty means of exit was required, kicked themselves along on the surface, after the manner of the grebes.

So far during the afternoon I had been in three distinct bird worlds; the prairie, the home of the meadow lark, vesper sparrow, Lapland longspur, and horned lark; the shore with its waders, given above; the marsh with its swimmers and divers; and now when I emerged dripping from the water and entered the shrubbery on a point of the island, I was in a fourth and

entirely new bird region. For here in the narrow strip of woods were the perchers in plenty. At this date most of the birds of the thickets are on their southward journey, and such tree-clumps as this upon the plains are welcome havens offering safety to the weak and timid ones that do not dare to cross the open country by laylight.

How different was the place now to what it had been on a former visit early in the month of July. Then the noises of the marsh rose in a steady, half-musical din—the peep-peeping of the ducklings, the clatter of the coots, the ridiculous songs of the yellow-headed blackbirds and the shrill voices of their young. Then on shore the yellow warbler sang in the thickets, and the song sparrow raised his voice from the willows, a dozen noisy crow pairs stirred up continual trouble, and the heronry out on the wooded point was a busy community. Now things were changed with the season. The place was quiet, at times almost lonely. Wader and Webfoot loitered lazily along shore on the mud and bars, and the woods were still. It was the bird world of autumn, and here it was in the primitive. It was only necessary to convert the two score of

cattle across the water into lordly bison, to have it all just as when La Verendrye first set his adventurous foot upon the plainland of the Northwest.

Just as I entered the old cow-trail into the strip of woods, I saw him. A lone whooper was winging majestically back across the marsh and heading out toward the bare pasture. Here he took a circle and then dropped down along the open shore and remained hidden from view by the rushes. What this lonely vigil meant, I could not know. Possibly it was one of the three, or it may have been a solitary bird, but the sight of one alone always brings a twinge of sorrow that this royal bird is all but gone from the earth.

There was not a yellow warbler left in the place to greet me. All had fled off through the August nights into the Southland. But as I slipped along the wooded rim—this strip was over a mile long, but a horse-shoe in shape and nowhere wide—I soon met other warbler cousins who had replaced him. A blackpoll was observed working through a maple, and later in the heavier woods, the plaintive call of a redstart led me to the little flitting fire-brand.

Other wood birds were numerous also. Cat-birds, grackles, thrashers, cedar waxwings, and even white-throated sparrows were here—the latter having moved their first stage or two out of the more northerly woods.

Yet save for their call-notes, all were silent, for the autumn stillness had settled upon them. Perhaps it is true that they leave the Northland under the spell of some impelling motive within their breasts—a prompting which they cannot in any manner control or comprehend—but I always like to think of these musicians as leaving sadly under the stress of necessity; turning their backs reluctantly upon their dearly-beloved Northland, the land of their homes and the birth-place of their young. The operatic stars of the springtime, the catbird, thrasher, and rose-breasted grosbeak, never in the autumn give the faintest hint of their powers. However, the second or third raters, like the white-throated or the song sparrow, occasionally trill a short song, and of the white-throat it may be said truly that the more dull, cold, and dreary the day, the more prone is he to lift up his voice in that plaintive song which, melting off through the woods,—north of the 49th parallel—is commonly inter-

preted as, "Oh, dear Canada! Canada! Canada!"

Slowly I worked my way around the semi-circular island. I disturbed the life of the place as little as possible, for I had come to see the creatures at home, and they are only truly there when unconscious of prying eyes. The heronry (black-crowned night species) in the heavier grove of maples, was a silent, deserted place, and as I stole through it and looked upon the empty, rickety nests, I was impressed by the power of the prompting that had seized these birds and so early in the season had called them away through the stillness of the August nights. On my former visit, the handsome but ungainly owners of the two hundred nests scattered thickly through the branches sat in the tree-tops and emitted nauseating stomach-tones and squawks and whoops, while their progeny—every single one a prehistoric nightmare—leered about from the rest-rims or branches and with callous unconcern vomited their latest meal at the head of the intruder who thus dared to invade their stinking privacy. Now all was quiet and but a dozen of the former scores of herons remained.

Out on the open lake, something of still a new type of bird life could be noted. Not only were the flocks of Franklin's gulls much in evidence, but several big, ring-billed relatives worked by over the water—their first fall appearance, after spending the summer at some of the larger and more northerly lakes. One of these chaps gave evidence of the sharpness of his eye by noting me peering out from the shrubbery and coming back to investigate. After circling overhead a time or two and eyeing me eerily, he went on about his business again. His dusky coat—the mantle of the immature—explained this display of indiscretion and inquisitiveness.

As I watched him go off about his aimless hunting, another autumn visitor came into view. A big black cormorant, flying low over the water like a huge duck, was winging rapidly up the lake. He appeared to be keeping an appointment; or probably he was out scouting in quest of a spot where he might get a square evening meal of minnows, or better still, juicy salamanders. For on the prairie lakes in which no large fish are found, this ungainly, repulsive little creature is called upon to head the menu list of many of the water birds. Half a mile out

on the calm water reposed seven Canada geese. At this date they come from their more seclusive summer haunts and move out to the lakes where grain-fields and good living are close to the water. They are the first of the geese to be noted in the fall, yet the last to leave the North, and usually remain till the last water-hole is ice-locked.

Around at the southwest corner, the island ran out in a flat which in the present stage of the water was a narrow mud-bar, and it was this point that had been in my mind all day. Yet when I very cautiously crawled to the outskirts of the woods and peeped out upon it, I was disappointed, for the great white sentinels I fondly hoped to find there were not in sight. Yet the place was full of interest, for the sunny bar was literally burdened with ducks, and it was good to just lie and watch them. There seemed to be representatives of every duck species on the lake either on or about this bar. Most of them were standing on the mud, but a few bluebills and canvasback as usual refused to come ashore. Half a dozen herons were standing hunched-up among the crowd and occasionally taking a short walk just to disturb everyone. Running along

at the water's edge were a number of lively little Northern phalaropes.

It was especially interesting to watch the antics of a family of blue-winged teal. They were engaged in what might pass as a sort of game, the fun consisting in each youngster taking a dash, half flying, half running, for ten or twelve feet, then diving like a shot. They plainly were unable to navigate the air, and if the expression learning to fly as applied to a fledgling, ever means anything, it is in such a case. They were evidently exercising their wing muscles so that in a few days more, when the rapidly-developing primaries would be a little longer, a real flight would be possible. A young duck cannot make a hundred yard flight at his first attempt, like many other fledglings, because he has to rise from the surface of the water, and must keep trying till his pinions are sufficiently strong to bear him. His ambition is always in excess of his wing-development; hence his many early attempts and failures while he is "learning."

The significance of the diving part of the performance was made manifest presently, when a quick shadow shot over my head and, with an oblique descent like a falling arrow, a duck hawk

was almost in the midst of the company. A mallard's warning quack was the danger signal, and then there was a wild scramble from the mud-bank. They scurried from both sides of it, helter-skelter, but instead of taking wing, they all rushed out a few yards and dived. Then while the villain whirled and darted impotently here and there, the water beneath him fairly seethed and boiled. Heads came up but instantly bobbed down again, and little geysers were thrown high in air by kicking of webbed feet and frantic, or perhaps well-intentioned wings. When the fugitives reached deeper water, they cautiously came up to the surface, then shook the moisture from their heads and watched the foe with a sort of triumphant satisfaction. Now that his swoop had failed, he set off on slower wing, apparently unconcerned and dead sure that on some other bar a duck could be found to provide a dinner.

Then as that part of the island seemed deserted, I followed the woody shore again and soon found another host of the lake things. This congregation apparently had not been disturbed by the hunting of their deadly foe; they were packed upon a strip of sandy shore, right

within a few feet of the shady willows, and after a careful stalk I was almost in their midst without their being aware of my presence. It was indeed a rare opportunity for getting acquainted with these creatures as they are when truly at home. They were so close that I could see the yellow glint in the eye of a bluebill and get interested in the hunting of a heron. The latter waked suddenly from a siesta, took half a dozen stiff-legged strides, and then attempted to spear something in the water. I could not see that he succeeded in getting anything in his beak, but a little pied-billed grebe nearby had better luck, for once when he bobbed up he was pinching a small minnow. In order to swallow him, the little fisherman deftly turned his victim and bolted him head first.

When I had circled the entire island, I returned and took up my former position at the point. The company there again had come ashore, but they were not to remain long unmolested, for once more the duck hawk swooped over the woods on lightning wing, and they had to flee. Four times during the afternoon, as I watched the bar, this persistent hunter struck with murderous intent, but each time he failed.

After the last stoop, he lit on the bar and glared savagely around him for a few minutes, then rose and came directly over my head. His keen eye had sighted me instantly, and as he went by he eyed me fiercely. Had I not alarmed him he probably would have changed his tactics and remained on the bar till some luckless duck came along on the wing and gave him an opportunity for a chase.

As evening drew on the birds threw off their sleepy ways and most of them left the bar for good. At sundown I was almost alone, so I slipped out for a moment to examine the mud for traces of the great three-toed tracks of my whoopers. And I found them in plenty, baked into the mud like prehistoric lithographs, so I scurried again for cover. But the dusk stole over the lake; a southerly wind sprang up and rustled mournfully among the crinkling leaves; and the wavelets began to whisper and then talk aloud along the shore; and soon night had come. But the great birds I sought did not, so reluctantly I slipped away to find a more sheltered spot for a night camp.

It was only now that I realized that all my matches were in the pockets of my trousers, and

all soaked and headless. A bivouac on a September night, without blanket or fire, is not the acme of comfort, so I chose the lesser evil and turned away homeward. That marsh by night was a weird place, and those miles of trail were now leagues, but by the time I reached my destination, I was possessed of two firm and well-founded convictions; first, that when one wades a deep marsh, it is well to carry matches in a shirt pocket or hat-band; and second, I had had a great, grand interesting day out among the birds.

CHAPTER XIV

A MIX-UP WITH THE LAUGHERS

IT was Sunday, the 24th of September, cold and dull, with a raw wind hurrying southward across the lake, and bearing the message that old Boreas had thrust himself another stride forward out of the Northland. Indeed his frosty, gray beard seemed just back of the northern horizon; and when in mid-afternoon, I slipped out of the tent and ran down through the wild sun-flowers to the shore, just for another look, there was in the air and landscape that feeling of the fall, that comes to us each season, when first we realize that we are in the presence of dead summer, chill and wan, and can see her sister season, gentle autumn, fast following in decline.

It was good to lie upon a patch of clean, warm sand, in the shelter of the yellow-tasseled reeds, and feel the mood of Nature, on such a



The Waders Love a Pasture Shore

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I Saw the Leading Goose Collapse

(Page 223)

day. The subdued twitterings of a whole flock of robins came from the elms, close at hand; a big golden eagle, just arrived from his northern summer home, swung along the shore and put to wing some mallards, resting in the quiet shallows; and his close relative, a rough-legged hawk, also just arrived, went drifting by, followed soon after by an idling marsh cousin that peered down curiously at me. Out on the open water, the field-glasses picked up a flock of canvasback ducks bobbing up and down ceaselessly on the waves; and drew in the morose, ring-billed gulls, till the twisting action of their heads was visible, as they searched the surface of the water; and then the glasses got focused on something else.

Away across the five-mile expanse of white-caps, a line of dots above the dark horizon drifted into focus and hung there steadily. They held their formation too long to be ducks, and they were going westward off the lake, therefore I judged that they were a flock of wawas, the first of the wild geese on the fall migration. I guessed too that they were laughers, or speckle-breasts, which are usually the first of their clan to reach the Manitoba fields, in numbers in the fall.

As I sat up and propped my elbows on my knees, the glasses wobbled and covered another string of geese. Then I slowly swept the western sky-line and found not two but many flocks of wawas; it was evident that the heavy wind during the night and morning had hurried them down to the land of broad stubble-fields and good feeding. Rising from the water, they all struck off in the same general course and slowly sank into the dull horizon. It was evident that their intended feeding-ground was several miles beyond the lake, and there were goodly numbers going to it. Plainly the cold weather had had its effect on the knowing ones, and they were down in force much earlier than usual.

A half-mile walk to a farm-house and a telephone put me in communication with Andy.

“What?”

“I say there is a flight of geese going out of the lake.”

“Say it again. It sounds good!”

“Any chance of a run out after them?”

“How many are there?”

“Oh, two thousand or so.”

“What are you keeping in that big jar, now?”

“Honest; I counted 'em every one!”

“Where are they feeding?”

“West.”

There followed a muffled conversation, but I knew what it was. Andy was breaking it to his father—the commander-in-chief of many of our expeditions into the goose-grounds—then:

“It’s too wet to stack to-morrow; meet us at the cemetery at four in the morning. The kid and I will be there.”

At a quarter past two next morning, the clamorous din of my lusty alarm clock, reverberating through the tent, disturbed the night silence,—also several white-footed mice—and called me from slumber and the warm blankets. Boohrrr! that atmosphere was frigid, but soon the little chip stove was puffing merrily, and breakfast ready. When a wondrously large potful of oatmeal porridge—the same that had simmered two hours or more on the embers the previous evening—and some bacon and eggs had been stowed away below, I was ready for the road.

About three o’clock I shouldered my traps and struck off afoot in the darkness. The traps were no small item either, for in addition to the six-pound kodak and its accessories, I had a

lunch, also a gun and a supply of ammunition to carry, so that my hands were well occupied and the pockets of my shooting-coat bulged. There was to be no escape for wawa this time. If the weather turned too dark for me to bring him down with the speed shutter, he was to take his chances with the twelve-gauge, which is not so partial to any particular light conditions.

It felt like a mid-October morning, for the mud on the roads was frozen, and a keen air still drifted out of the northwest. As I trudged along the road that skirted the lake shore, a flock of loud-voiced mallards got up with a rush from a bay; but soon the road turned across country; and then, save for the keen, morning yells of two answering coyotes, I was in a deserted world during the remainder of my four-mile tramp. I was alone also for some time after reaching my destination, as contrary to all precedent, Andy was late.

When daylight crept over the chill, gray, prairie landscape, we were a few miles west and a little north of the lake, and when the distorted sun peeped up through the haze upon the horizon, we halted and eagerly watched the dull sky-line for the coming of the morning flight.

But we watched in vain. The best that three pairs of good eyes, assisted by the field-glasses, could accomplish, was to sight one small flock of grays far off on the southern horizon. Accordingly we drove on in that direction, and finally pulled up at the creek bridge, fifteen miles from home.

In order that the goosing expedition may be successful, it is very necessary, as a rule, to find geese, but in the present instance it seemed that this important factor was wanting. For though we were now in the heart of our best goose-grounds, there seemed to be no wawas in the country, and I found myself the butt of many and various remarks and questions. Was I sure that I had not been to town the day previous? Where did I get my drinking-water at camp now? Had I ever examined a flock of mosquitoes with the field-glasses? I was assured that when so studied they appeared remarkably large—in fact quite resembled geese. While I was attempting to dodge some similar insinuation, a double shot rang up the creek, and next moment several hundred ducks rose to view, circled a few moments, and then drew out in long quivering lines, and struck off lakewards.

“There are your geese!” laughed Andy, with much conviction; and after such a third-degree morning, I was almost ready to confess that I had been seeing things. However, just to satisfy ourselves, or to be explicit, I should say myself, that I had been duped—and the thought was not pleasing at all, either—we drove off southward, knowing that if any geese were really in that part of the country, they must pass within eyeshot when they returned to the lake in the forenoon.

“There they are!”

As usual Andy was the first to get his eye on them. We had mounted a slight ridge along the edge of a threshed field, and there out on the stubble, a quarter of a mile distant, a goodly concourse of grays were feeding quietly, so we swerved off to the nearest hay-stack, and made camp. Camp-making at such times consists of putting the outfit on the lee, and if possible, the sunny side of the stack, tethering a horse to each wheel, and giving them a feed of oats, and then unpacking everything from the box of the democrat. For experience in the past has taught us that the best-behaved horse on the farm is not to be trusted beside the loaded rig. He gets lone-

some, standing there on the prairie so far from home, and being idle, sets out to amuse himself.

In consequence, when you return, to be greeted by his glad nickering and reproaching eyes that seem to say, "Why were you gone so long anyway?" you will find that among other things he has torn the top out of a seat cover, crunched the side from the grub-box, and expectorated half-munched oats through the opening upon what sandwiches he couldn't reach; drawn the cork and upset the water-jar into the reserve ammunition, and shaken his blanket or robe from his back to the ground, and tramped upon it.

The geese were in no hurry back to the lake, for doubtless a guzzle of plump wheat has a good, satisfying feeling after the green stuff of the summer in the Arctic regions, and we lay in the warm sun on the stack and watched them. It was my innings now, and after studying them long with the glasses, I could not refrain from remarking that they did slightly resemble mosquitoes. There were some two hundred laughers and a small flock of black-necked fellows, most probably Hutchins. We were a little surprised to find the former on the threshed

field; as early in the season, they show a preference for the fields dotted with shocks.

Though very well aware that such places make excellent blinds for shooters, they rely on their sharp sight and extreme cunning to warn them of danger. When feeding in shocks, the first flocks circle and reconnoiter a great deal, often passing and repassing the contemplated spot a dozen times before alighting. Then they not only glean from the field, but climb upon the sheaves and guzzle to their hearts' content—which with a goose means till his neck is packed tight with several ounces of grain.

About ten o'clock they rose in three detachments, and with much tittering and cackling, strung off lakewards. They did not even take the precaution, as usual, to rise out of gunshot, and it was very evident that they were just down and a little rusty on the subject of shooters. We might easily have obtained shots by lying hidden in the grass on the lakeward side of the field, but that of course would have been poor tactics in goose-hunting. Andy now declared that he was going to kill some geese in the evening; Rob intimated that the gun he carried would live up to the traditions founded when

she was in the hands of his father, and I felt that negatives were assured.

We prepared early for the evening flight, and by two o'clock had the pits dug and the decoys set out and were ready to do the disappearing act at a moment's notice. Andy's pit was just in front of mine, while Rob was located about fifty yards distant, across the expected line of flight. In the corner of my pit was a pocket for the kodak case, that it might be kept out of the way of my feet, and the muzzle of the twelve-gauge, nicely hidden in stubble, protruded about an inch over the pit-rim.

The digging and arranging of a goose-pit is an art by itself. Probably no two hunters fix it just alike, but there are certain things which must be borne in mind by every successful goose-shooter. The green-horn usually excavates a grave and throws the earth up conspicuously. The second-rank tyro covers the fresh earth with straw, or sticks weeds upright in it. And it is amusing to watch the wily goose wink one eye at these blinds and move along—when the other fellow is in the pit, of course.

But the real goose-pit has no fresh earth, no weed fringe, no straw, nothing, and it can be de-

tected only from a distance of a few feet. It is a study to take a turn over a much-hunted field in the fall and see the various types of hole left behind. Most of them will be filled, but their design will still be plain. There will be the round, the oval, the square, and oblong pits, deep and shallow, narrow-mouthed and wide, some big at the bottom, others small, and so on to suit the whim, or sometimes the bulk of the shooter who handled the spade.

The bulk of the Nimrod has sometimes a great deal to do with it. I once heard of a goose-hunter who had to forego this particular chase, for the simple reason that he could not get himself hidden. He managed in the early days, when the geese were not very wide-awake and discerning, but in later times when they had developed the critical eye, it was utterly impossible for him to get out of sight. The poor fellow weighed three hundred and forty pounds, and carried much of it within his waist-band, so that a cellar capable of holding him, even when he took along the hired man to excavate it, was an impossible blind on the stubble feeding-ground.

About three o'clock we noted a visitor in a buggy approaching from across the field, and it

was with some trepidation in our hearts that we received him; for owners of fields do not always welcome shooters, and sometimes have a way of visiting you just after you have set up and telling you that you are wanted urgently out on the road allowance. We usually ask permission, but in the present case the field was so far from any buildings that we had not done so. However, the clinking of sheet-iron decoys soon reached us and revealed his mission long before he arrived.

“Hello! Geese feed here?”

We weren't sure, but we thought they fed somewhere on the section. He looked down at the oat-stubble and his eyes narrowed knowingly.

“Well, I think I'll go up on the knoll and set up. I thought they lit up there a little farther. Good decoys you've got.”

“You think we are green. But wait, you primitive, and we will show you, if your cast-iron junk doesn't scare all the geese off this section!”

Such was Andy's comment after our caller had pulled off a little distance. It was a case of the little knowledge being dangerous. He of

the sheet-iron decoys knew that in nine cases out of ten, geese feed on wheat stubble, and we were in an oat-field. What he didn't know was that this was the tenth case, and we were on the exact feeding-ground—the only place worth while, as a rule.

About four o'clock, Rob's warning shout and pointing hand announced the start of the evening flight. Off to the southeastward, just above the horizon, the first flock was visible. Cunning as usual, they were not taking the same course over which they had gone to the water, and it was evident now why we had missed them in the morning. It is this waiting on a flock and watching in hopeful expectancy that gives a great part of the keen zest to goose-shooting. The flock is visible three or four miles distant, and though it really takes the birds but a few minutes to cover that distance, the suspense seems prolonged to hours.

The watcher can never be sure just what the in-coming birds will do. They may give his layout an exceedingly wide berth, or they may decoy almost into his pit. And the sight of a goodly flock of geese decoying close is a sight worth while, and always a nerve-wrecker for the

tyro. The man who can shoot in such times, without having his bump of excitement stirred through and through, is not a sportsman, but a killer in cool, cold blood, and he had better go home and behead hens.

It soon became evident that this flock must encounter our friend on the wheat field before they could reach us. As they swung in toward his layout and eased up a little on their wings, Andy turned a disgusted glance at me and—but what he said was proper and fitting under the circumstances. Then suddenly the birds climbed skyward, for they had sized-up the “cast-iron junk,” and passed on very high. Of course he fired, and much to our surprise, a goose wriggled a moment, hard hit, and then settled to earth in a quick slant.

“Must have pushed mighty hard on that old Kildeer!”—this from the other pit.

In a short while another large flock worked up over the same course, but crossed the field down wind of our neighbor and headed for us.

“These are ours, Mack!”

When Andy pronounces sentences like that on a flock, it is seldom that the law doesn't take its course. But instead of lowering and swinging

in up wind to us, these sixty or seventy laughers swept by quite as though we were not there, and giggled and tittered mirthfully as they passed away to the northward. We missed that joke. Another large flock followed them in five minutes and rehearsed the same capers as exactly as if they had seen the previous performance. Then we all said fitting things and got up and looked around. There wasn't a red box of shells protruding anywhere, nor an overcoat lying on the ground; the rig and horses were not in the way; and the pits passed rigid inspection all right; so there was nothing to do but wait for another flock of geese not so well informed.

The next comers appeared to be what we were waiting for. They took the same course at first, but when three hundred yards down wind, they turned slowly into the breeze and lowered perceptibly as they worked up toward us.

"They look good!" whispered Andy.

"Say when," I replied.

Nearer and nearer they loomed up, their shrill voices now sounding plainly and so different from the trumpet notes of the black-necked grays, their quick wing strokes reduced almost to a half soar, up, up till their yellow out-thrust

beaks were plain against their ruddy gray plumage, till their white face-crescent that gives them their name, till their eyes——

“Now, Mack!”

I bobbed up with the kodak set and ready, pointed it toward the flock, and glanced at Andy. His gun was directed toward the southward, and I turned the lens around in that direction also. No time to adjust the eye to the finder, but only to point at them generally, and—bang! I saw the leading goose collapse, and I pressed the shutter release. Bang! and the flock was tittering hysterically far out of range, and two of their number were dead in the stubble.

But another flock was already in sight. In fact they were so close that while I was getting the next film in position, Andy deemed it too risky to attempt to retrieve the dead birds and left them as they fell. The new flock came in as well as the preceding, but very considerably swung up to Rob's pit instead of ours. I held myself down till they were almost over him; then I rose and held the finder upon them, and when the crash of the guns burst out, I pressed the release. The net result, as far as could be judged at the time at least, was one dead goose. Rob

had cut loose on them when they were very close to him, and head on, a very difficult shot with these geese that are the swiftest of them all awing; and as a result, he missed them with both barrels.

We had scarcely secured the dead birds and put them out of the way—it doesn't do to leave them belly-up in the stubble, where they fall—when three more flocks were coming, one detachment after the other, and about half a mile apart. I was making adjustments and declaring that I was going to use both kodak and gun this time, when a profoundly disgusted remark from my companion caused me to look up quickly. He didn't say very much—words are so impotent at such times. Approaching along the edge of the stubble were three teams, each hauling a binder. They were strung out a good distance apart, and it didn't need a mathematician to figure out that those teams would be in front of us when the geese arrived. They were; and though each flock halted a little in indecision and climbed higher as though to await the passing of the obstructionists, they finally decided to pass on to the northward.

The next flock came broken in two detach-



The Crows Came Home

ments, and two birds, separating from their companions, swung in ahead of the rest, and, flying very low, seemed bent on going right over the lad's pit. Andy whispered to me to wait for the flock in the rear; so hoping that Rob wouldn't open fire on the two, I pivoted around to the front, when bang, down came the head goose, and bang! his mate followed—as pretty a right and left as the goose-grounds ever saw. They were old birds, with plump breasts almost black with the handsome markings; and he was proud of them. It was his first double, and I snapped him at Andy's pit as he held them up for inspection.

For some time there were no more birds in sight. The sun was getting low, and we had concluded that the flight was over, when the last belated string appeared on the horizon. They decoyed beautifully and came up exactly between the pits. When they had almost reached the line and I saw that tragedy was inevitable, I rose and held the finder on them while the two guns roared a volley. Then I snapped, put down the kodak, grabbed up the gun and, swinging around after the flock, brought down the goose on the end of the line. It was only

then that I realized that it was raining geese, for seven of them fell within a hundred yards. In point of deadliness, the kodak is not usually classed with the twelve-gauge; and it is hardly possible that my shutter did any of the damage. It was not a cross shot into a swarm of geese, for the flock was small; and such a killing, in the annals of the trio was without precedent; but it is safe to say that those six geese that went away whole will never again travel to their feeding-ground thirteen strong.

The flight was over; so also thought our neighbor on the wheat-field, and the clash of his metal decoys came to us over the still prairie, as he picked up and left. So we also packed up, and after having a bite to eat, set off homeward, satisfied that our first outing of the season on the goose-grounds had been a success.

To be acceptable to a gun man, I realize that this narrative ought to end right here, but to a kodaker this is impossible. For the benefit of the latter, I will state that that precious roll of film was developed the next night, with Andy ably assisting. If I had not been case-hardened against the little disappointments caused by the eccentricities of the kodak, if my bump of cha-

grin had not been wearing calloused welts, inches thick, from former experiences, I verily believe I would have shed tears. The first exposure got the picture shown herewith, where the leading goose may be seen killed in his tracks, but scarcely falling; the other two films of the birds in flight were blanks. Some sand had clogged the shutter and it had not made an exposure.

“Better go back to the gun, Mack!” was the comment of my assistant.

CHAPTER XV

WATCHING THE DAY DIE

IT was September 8th, so said the camp calendar, but the day was an August day, warm, bright, and calm, with bobolinks—the rear-guard of their migrating army—“chinking” overhead, Lapland longspurs clicking down from the North, a far-off crane flock garooing from a dizzy height, the broadwing hawk perched sleepily in the elm at the edge of the roadway, duck flocks dozing out on the still water, and all well with the drowsy autumn world.

But in at least one particular it was September; for at four o'clock a sizzling canvasback was hauled from the little clay oven, and we—Bobby the ground squirrel and I—fell to. It was to be Bobby's last public appearance for the autumn, and he celebrated the occasion accordingly. He ate a portion of the meat and

dressing, also all the small bones; then he polished the larger bones, and while the dishes were being washed, he carried off all the scraps which refused to be accommodated in his pudgy little belly. Then he disappeared without even a semblance of "Thank you!" so thus deserted, I picked up the paddle and slipped out of the elms and down to the shore to watch the day die—to see the last act of "A September Day"—a play staged on the plainland, out where the small hand of man takes no part in the performance.

The woods along the shore were almost silent, for the few campers of the summer had left the place, and now the shady retreats in the yellow maples and red-brown oaks were given over to the broadwing, and the nuthatches, white-throat sparrows, and jays—quiet fellows all, save the jays. They were picking the acorns now falling so abundantly each day, and their strident voices often echoed in the evening stillness. As the canoe slipped down the quiet shore, caressing the lazy little ripples stealing in from the westward, it was easy to imagine the modern craft a birch-bark, and the evening reverted some fifty years to a day before the prairie lake had mir-

rored the face of a white visitor. A few blue-winged teal, feeding in the reeds, eyed the intruder a moment uneasily, then burst up and off; a coot or two, strangely alone when all their brothers were rafting in numbers elsewhere, pattered helter-skelter from their reedy retreat and out to the open lake; a muskrat already abroad for his nightly tasks, plunked on the right of the canoe and reappeared on the left and headed shoreward; the big blue heron that had haunted the shore for many days, sprang up from an obscure pool and flopped awkwardly along the shore; then the woods were left behind, and the shore became low and swampy. Here just at the point where the big slough flanking the timber to the eastward sweeps around almost to the lake and the separating isthmus is narrow, I pushed the canoe ashore close in against the weed-strewn, two-foot bank, and then lounged back comfortably to look and listen.

Had the swan grebes been absent it would have been almost a silent evening. These noisy chaps surely deserve the name of swan, rather than Western grebe—their pedigreed cognomen—for they have the longest necks proportionately of any of their swimming kindred; in-

deed it is small wonder that their whistle gets twisted and rattles a good deal. Thanks to their weird, far-reaching whistle, they are the noisiest birds on the lake in summer, and a stiff contrast to their smaller grebe cousins, the eared, Holboells, or pied-billed species. Now their shrill cries floated up over the water from a dozen locations, and the glasses soon picked up the makers of the weird calls. They were in little groups of twos and threes, old and well-grown young. The old birds were diving assiduously in the pursuit of food, most probably fish, and the youngsters were begging for the produce of their parents' labors.

A young Western or swan grebe has an original manner of begging, one that is distinctly his own. Almost all fledglings of the land-birds beg alike, by drooping their wings and thrusting their body forward while extending a gaping mouth, but the grebe cannot assume this posture, possibly for the reason that he cannot stand on the water. The way of one youngster noted was as follows: When his mother dived, he tried to puzzle out in his narrow head where she was most likely to reappear and made haste to reach the spot. Sometimes he guessed fairly

well, but more often he missed her by a mile. The instant he saw her bob up again, he started toward her, threw himself down in a crawling attitude with outstretched neck, and then shouted shrilly, "Peep-peep-peep-peep—" *ad infinitum*, or till his breath gave out; it was a most monotonous rattle, but so full of beseeching that one who did not know better would think that he had not been given a morsel for a week.

Out on the open lake, just above the shimmering of the low sun upon the sparkling ripples, an animated mass of flapping objects loomed up suddenly, rose and fell for a few moments, then settled upon the water—a flock of some twenty white pelicans getting located in their night quarters. Two weeks earlier they had come down from their summer colony to the northward, a proud rank fully a hundred and fifty strong, and now broken in smaller detachments, they were scattered about the lake and sloughs of the vicinity. Each day they fed about the sloughs, though what the huge fishermen got in return for prodding away at the water with their big beaks was something of a mystery; and each evening they returned to the open lake for

their night refuge. As fifty of these great, white chaps, strung out in a magnificent undulating line, winged over the yellow timber out into the sunset, they made a picture rarely equalled in the bird world.

Soon another flock far to the southward drifted into eye-shot. Though scarcely more than a mist to the unaided eye, the glasses enlarged them to about thirty more of the huge fellows, circling slowly downward, evidently bent on alighting in the big slough beyond the lake-rim. Down, down, slowly, airily they drifted, and at length disappeared below the horizon. Then came another detachment of a score, appearing mystically from somewhere in the dull, blue sky to the eastward, and they also drifted away to the south, just as if they knew well—which doubtless some of the old heads did—that the farther slough was linked to the lake and well stocked with young pike. They moved silently along in Indian file—each one a tiny white yacht in a leaden sea. For, at half a mile, their black wing-tips faded from view and the sun glinted only on the white of their huge pinions and spotless bodies; thus was revealed why Nature, so discerning in her gifts, gave to the peli-

cans and snow geese and gulls, also the mighty whooping crane, black-tipped pinions.

To be appreciated, the pelican must be seen high in air, up where he has sea-room for his great wings—these together making an eight-foot expanse of feather planes. His straight-away gait is an easy sail-and-flap sort of progression. With a few strong, apparently slow strokes of his wings, then a little sail, easy and graceful, but eating up distance wondrously, he drifts along, but occasionally in ascending or descending, he soars and circles jauntily as well. In rising from the water he is a joke, grotesquely comical. Like most swimmers when getting under way, he makes use of his feet to kick himself up into the air, but unlike the others, he kicks back with both feet at once, and goes off over the water for a few yards with a ludicrous bobbity-bob, spat-spat-spat. Even when clear of the water, he bobs jerkily for a time, as he beats the air, and this, coupled to the fact that he is stumpy of body, short of tail, and big of head and beak, makes him show to disadvantage at close quarters. Also the weight of his forward parts is so great that to trim his craft, he tips up his body and sits back as it were, in a posture rather un-

like other birds. But when seen at a distance, all these peculiarities vanish and he appears at his best: a great, graceful bird-yacht.

Soon the crows began to wing homeward toward the yellow timber. In loose, scattered companies, but all forming one well-connected army, they swung along the same course. They were strangely silent; scarcely a sound came from the black ranks, except that when they passed close, the whif-if-if of their wings came down plainly to the ear. Perhaps it was that they were in tune with the peace-spirit of the evening, but more probably their reticence was due to their being stuffed with good living, each maw so filled with wheat, choke-cherries, and grasshoppers or crickets that vocal performance was quite impossible. Tens, scores, several hundred winged by in a few minutes, all headed for a well-frequented night-roost in the woods—the same to be rather a fair-sized pandemonium at day-break the following morning.

Next a moving mist away on the horizon to the southwestward claimed attention. Crows? blackbirds? ducks? gulls?—what? The living mist circled back and forth mysteriously a time or two, and one by one the possibilities were

weighed: "Crows move in looser companies and do not drift about so; blackbird hosts form more compact masses, wheel about speedily, and change shape every moment; ducks move more quickly and do not hold together for any time; gulls then it ought to be." And gulls they were, the little Franklin in hosts, coming home for the night after the day's excursion afield. The glasses soon found several such companies working lakewards, and during the next half hour they congregated in a huge swarm out far from shore—a great living raft to float through the coming night.

By and by a penetrating shout sounded out of the northward, and along came six sandhill cranes. With slow flap and but a few yards in the air, they worked straight out across the lake. They could not join the gulls or pelicans or ducks rafting out in mid-lake, and they had no notion of trying, but in spite of this apparently useless journeying, there was a deep-laid plan in their heads. It seems that the constant problem of the wary sandhill crane is to hide his night-roost, and these fellows were bent on stealing low across the water to drop down upon a point of the bare prairie shore on the farther side. There

were a hundred nearer roosts, which seen through other eyes seemed as suitable, but the crane knows his business well.

But all of the bird neighbors of the evening were not big fellows. A flutter scarcely audible and an intermittent rustling in the withering sunflowers along the shore disclosed a swamp sparrow. This retiring little chap seemed to be spending the evening in darting every few minutes to another teetering stalk, and occasionally dodging down out of sight into the swamp grass. Closer investigation revealed the fact that there were several of them in the vicinity; doubtless a little migrant company that, having spent the day in the marsh fastnesses, were now ready to speed out into the night and measure off another lap of their south-going journey.

Then another tiny visitor was noted in the same weeds and rushes. Owing to his diminutiveness, he probably would have entirely escaped notice, but that once he gave a cross little chirrup. Marsh wren or northern yellow-throat? For though quite unrelated, both of these denizens of the marsh tangles have rather similar voices. But it proved to be a marsh wren—noisy little chap of the summer who, when the

first September frosts pinch sharply, steals off to other marshes. Little do we know of the manner of his going and quite forget him usually, till some day in May or early June, he announces his return home by bursting up from the reeds or bulrushes and exploding in chatter and song.

All the while the canvasbacks had been coming lakewards. Every few moments a flock of twenty or more burst out of the darkening eastern sky. Lined up like veterans—some of the whitish-backed fellows were old-timers—irregularly, yet somehow symmetrically ranked, with whirring wings ablur, they shot in against the sun like so many black cannon-balls, and their whizzing resounded through the stillness. Up to the lake-shore they came, then they lowered their big heads and slanted down at a fearful, dizzy angle. There was a rush and crash and crackle as their sharp wings and stout breasts smote the air, then the broken rank of animate projectiles reformed in a twinkling, and, speeding off low over the shimmering water, they disappeared far out in the lake.

How different was the coming of the mallard flocks that helped swell the evening flight from the slough. These brown-breasted, whiffle-wing drakes, their green caps already showing gaudy,

came along high in air and held back to survey the coast, searched the rushy fringes for sign of foe, and examined critically the canoe and figure in it before venturing to cross the danger zone. The canvasbacks, living rockets that they are, had made up their stupid minds to go lakewards, and would have tried it even had they known that forty gunners barred the way; the mallards, less speedy, but more crafty, were not taking chances, and to-day the mallard still thrives on other marshes where the canvasback is but a memory.

Out to the westward, following a magic sunset, was a rosy afterglow, with fairy cloud-patches all repeated in a mystic nether-world of reflection; overhead a veery thrush whispered softly, "Peert!" and again more faintly to the southward; from over the woods came the discordant squawk of a night heron; the musical whiffle of a mallard wing sifted down through the quiet, night air; the ritz ritz of sharp muskrat teeth sounded in the reeds; a little long-eared owl squeaked in the willows; his great horned relative "Hoo-hooed" from the dark oaks; then the canoe grated discordantly on the landing and another September day was done.

CHAPTER XVI

THE SHARP-TAILED GROUSE IN WINTER

WHEN bitter Winter swoops down from the northward to lay siege to all the denizens of the woods and fields that do not take a hint from the autumn and slip away to the south, there are few of the wild folks better prepared for him than are the sharp-tailed grouse. Hardy this bird must needs be; for his range—the Northwestern States, and the Western Provinces of Canada—is a land of long, cold winters and far-famed for its snow and blizzards. Of the several varieties inhabiting this wide range, none are really migratory, and unlike the pinnated grouse, they spend the year around pretty much on the same grounds. True, in the strictest sense, the sharp-tail is also slightly migratory, in so far as he usually leaves his more open summer haunts to seek the shelter of the nearest scrubby woods, but as a rule he does not move any great distance.



Sharp-tail a Few Feet from the Door

Instead of migrating, he prepares for the severe weather by growing a thick, cold-proof coat of warm feathers and donning leggings and snow-shoes to protect his members that must patter about in the snow during the bitterest weather. His leggings consist of a thick covering of hairy feathers that encase his legs and most of his feet, and the snow-shoes are formed by rows of little projections growing along the sides of his toes and thus making a greater bearing surface in the soft snow. It is these shoes that cause the wearer to leave such big, diamond-shaped tracks in the new-fallen snow. When his footprint is left on a firmer foundation, the snow-shoes do not come into play, and it is then a neat, four-toed track.

That this bird has succeeded in keeping his species in existence in the face of his host of enemies, speaks well for his sagacity and racial stamina. Even after his long list of foes has been cut down in winter by the migration of the larger hawks and the denning-up of the skunks and badgers, there still is left a formidable array of enemies. The wolves, coyotes, foxes, and weasels all stalk him while he is asleep in his snowy bed; the horned and Arctic owls drop on him

from the tree-tops, during the day; the fierce goshawk, with his great speed, strikes him down on the wing when he can scare him suddenly from the shelter of the thicket; and in the well-settled districts, wire fences, also telephone and telegraph wires knock him down with fatal results. And all this havoc must be wrought upon the survivors of the gunning season—a period of from two weeks to as many months, varying in the different sections of his range.

That the odds against the grouse in the winter are greater than in the summer is undoubted. This statement, of course, applies to the adult birds and not to the fledglings which in their peeper days are prey not only for the same foes of the winter, but also the crows and most of the large hawks as well. The adult birds are possessed of a wonderfully protective coat which aids them in hiding in the scantiest cover; so that the thick foliage and grass of the summer gives them ample protection. In the winter, however, this means of concealment is largely lacking, and the bird has to face the problem of hiding his brown body on the white snow. This is his one big winter problem. It is far more important than his food supply; and he has learned to solve

it by burrowing in the fluffy snow. By so doing he holds his own with the coyote, fox, weasel, lynx, and owl, all of which hunt him at night. The owl simply cannot find him when so hidden; and keen-scented as are these other foes, it is almost too much for them to locate the sleeping quarry closely enough for a sure spring upon him, without disturbing him prematurely and sending him bursting away to safety. Not only does the sharp-tail spend the night so hidden, but at mid-day on the coldest days, when the sun is shining, he takes his siesta in the same manner. By so doing he escapes, also, the sudden onslaught of the goshawk that comes whirling along, bent on murder.

In making his bed, this grouse does not seem to have hit upon the trick of his ruffed relative of the woods—that of diving into the soft snow. The sharp-tail merely scratches and kicks and flutters till he gets himself covered, then works along horizontally for several feet, usually closing the hole after him as he burrows. Such a bed has other advantages than that of protection from his foes. It is a snug nest for this hot-blooded fellow, and there is no doubt that he sleeps warmly. As a rule there is no large air

space in the tunnel, and the heat of his body is well conserved by the loose, dry, snowy covering. In emerging from the bed in the morning, or when disturbed, he never comes out where he entered, but makes a burst upwards from his position at the end of the tunnel.

The dormitory of a flock of sharp-tails is worth visiting. For a night-roost, they usually choose some scrubby, well-sheltered hollow where the snow is deep and soft. It is essential that the snow must not be subject to drifting, as otherwise the flock might be imprisoned during the night by a change of wind packing the covering over their heads. In the midst of a network of chain-like tracks, are scattered the holes where the birds entered or emerged. Here a tunnel has fallen in from the too-violent struggles of the excavator; there a long swish shows where a bird alighted; or again a track ends abruptly with a round, wing imprint on each side of it, where the maker of the trail took wing. Unlike their quail cousins, they never roost bunched closely in a mass, but always remain scattered several feet apart. It would seem that they thus sacrifice warmth to secure safety, for the scattered covey with its outposts must be a more difficult prob-

lem for the night prowler than if the same birds were lumped together in one spot.

Many indeed must be the failures of the coyote or fox in their attempts to stalk the birds while in their beds. It is easy to imagine Reynard stealing into the opening in the scrub, hungrily nosing the air which is faintly laden with the odor of the birds, arising from their fresh tracks. Sniff, sniff. Somewhere just ahead of his nose are a dozen dinners. Then just as he feels that he has located a victim,—biff, in a shower of snow a bird bursts up beside him; and then biff, biff, off they all go. From a dozen different spots they start up explosively and disappear in the darkness; and this time Bre'r Fox goes away hungry.

With the coming of October the sharp-tail changes his habits somewhat and from a ground bird becomes a percher as well. Early in the autumn he mounts upon the wheat-shocks, fences, and grain-stacks, but later when the frosty mornings pinch keener, he regularly takes to the tree-tops. This serves two useful purposes for him. From the poplar-tip, he can get comfort from the sun's rays quite early in the morning, and from such a vantage-point, also, he can the better

discern his foes. It is true that as a rule he has no great discernment, and it must be admitted that he is not burdened with a superabundance of brains. All too frequently he allows himself to be potted by some shooter in a buggy, but it may be said truly that late in the fall, when he is in the trees, he is at least wilder than at any other time of the year.

The question of winter food is never a big problem with these grouse. There is always an abundance of hawthorn hips, rose fruit, snowberries, or other winter-cured fruits; in addition to these, edible buds of many kinds are in abundance. Best of all, they seem to relish the sweetish, frost-ripened berries of the dwarfish snowberry that peep above the snow just far enough to invite picking. Of the tree-buds, poplar, willow, and dwarf birch are winter staples, and these are consumed in great quantities. The amount of these foods that is required to keep up the heat in their plump bodies is very considerable. An examination of the night burrows reveals the large amount of material that is worked upon by their digestive apparatus during the fourteen to sixteen hours in which they occupy it. Naturally, best of all, they love grain food, preferably

wheat. When the winter's snow shuts them off from the gleanings on the stubble, they feed for a time at the straw-stacks by scratching down through the snow and chaff to reach the grain on the ground. Though they are not very expert scratchers, nevertheless they can excavate a fair amount if there is wheat in prospect.

The quest of wheat in winter frequently leads these grouse to come right into the towns. They first took this bold step after finding wheat dropped along the roads and railway. As the clue led in the direction of the big red elevators, they followed it in at first, but soon needed no grain trail by way of invitation. They were quick to learn that they were not molested in the winter, and indeed received a ready welcome. To the shooter whose only acquaintance with the sharp-tail is gained during the open season, when khaki-coated hunters and their dogs rout the birds from their thickets, far distant then from towns, the sight of twenty of these fine birds running around the railroad station, perched upon flat-cars in the sidings, or accepting the screenings thrown out for them from the elevator or flour-mill, is all something new and to be remembered.

It invariably gives the shooter a feeling of better fellowship toward these grouse, which in all places where adequate protection is not given them, must shortly face extermination. The accompanying photographs were taken within a few feet of a front door in a town in western Manitoba. Every day in mid-winter the birds come into town to be fed thus. The great danger attending these habits arises from their propensity for sailing full tilt into the telegraph wires. A number of them are killed thus each winter, and a walk along the railroad track in the spring, out a little distance from town, always reveals half a dozen tragedies from this source.

The daily itinerary of this flock in mid-winter is about as follows: With the first peep of dawn they leave their snow beds and mount to the tops of the willows and poplars, close at hand. At sunrise or a little before it, they whizz off into town and scatter around the various feeding-grounds mentioned above. About ten o'clock they usually take a run out along the railway track, evidently to get a supply of gravel; then they return to spend the warm part of the day in the scrubby sand-hills. Here they sit about in the

sun, and pick a few buds; or if the day is very cold and the snow light and deep, they burrow for their noon-day nap. At three o'clock they return to their feeding-place of the morning, and then shortly before sundown go back to the scrub to make their beds for the night. Here while the cruel wind sweeps across the plains and the thermometer oftentimes registers in the minus forties, they remain cuddled snugly away from the bitter night-world.

THE END



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