

Some readers may raise an eyebrow at the publication of the following article, which for Bird Observer touches on an unusual aspect of birding--the human aspect. To listers, Fred Hamlen's article may seem of marginal value; to experts, it may seem trite. To this editor, Hamlen's narrative echoes the era of Bent, Chapman, and Forbush, a time when descriptive ornithology was at its height and when observers tried to capture the actions and interactions of birds in language that was personal, original, and literate--though often too anthropomorphic for modern taste.

Yet, today we may be too clinical--a field mark, a breeding record, or a high count seems to constitute an end unto itself. Who looks at birds? Those who are not too jaded enjoy a bird in exceptional plumage; others seek nesting grounds; a few try to understand birds.

In what context do we put all this effort and diversity of goals? Is there an underlying gestalt whose components come to the fore in different eras or through an evolution of concepts? I will not speculate about man's ethic toward birds, the sport of birding, or the science of ornithology--you need only turn to Charlton Ogburn's The Adventure of Birds.

But now you are going on a journey, one not too far. Perhaps you will experience vicariously some strange sights and emotions; perhaps you will gain some new perspectives. There are no "cheery Chickadees" in this story, merely poignant observation and introspective reflection about Nature at its zenith.

L. J. R.

A BOREAL ODYSSEY

by Fred Hamlen, Dover

On August 21, 1953, Ludlow Griscom recorded in his 17-volume ornithological journal: "Awake at 3:30 and hear thrushes passing and stay up as it is a great experience. Awaken Ruth Emery at 4:00 a.m. and both stand on porch listening 4:00 a.m. on. At first birds very high at rate of 100+ a minute. An occasional bird much lower--mostly all Olive-backs, at least 20:1 Olive-backs versus Grey-cheeks. Marked falling off at 4:25 ... suddenly resumes with usual intensity, birds much lower, slowing up markedly. At 5:00 a.m. first flush of dawn, last thrush heard at 5:00 a.m."

After coming upon this entry my bones began to yearn for the northern forest, and as my thoughts coalesced it was clear that I must visit it. Long had I entertained vague thoughts of learning about that ecosystem, and long had I wished to get away from rude signs of human presence. In such a habitat I might have some control over what I see: it would be a countryside flooded with birds in migration. Only finding endemic birds

on territory could I express thoughts about a land ethic. Though unspoiled soil is essential, it must have the endemic wildlife to achieve the dynamics required to bring it alive and to flourish in human eyes.

Thus, I found myself taking aim on the Gaspé, and thanks to Jim Baird and Dick Forster my timing was perfect. Jim had advised the third week of June; Dick suggested tenting it all the way.

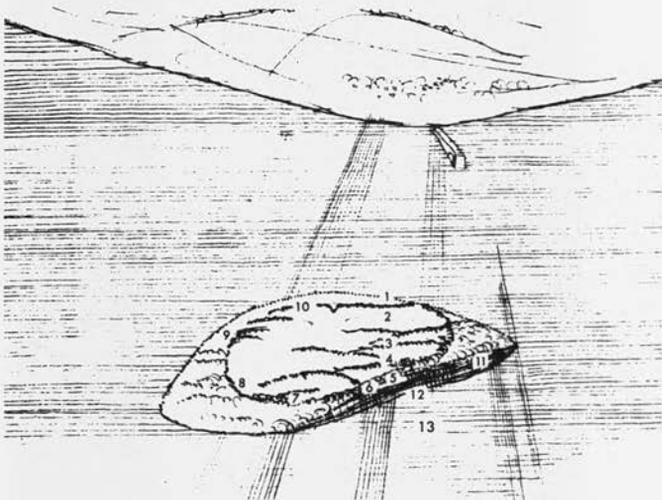
I reached Percé, at the southwest tip of the Gaspé on June 12th. While going north through Maine and New Brunswick I thought continuously about choruses of Fox Sparrows, birds in which Griscom used to take immense delight while afield in Essex County. And in the companionship of Olive-backs and Gray-cheeks--were I to know that my preconceptions would pale by experience and that I would be humbled by that which lay ahead.

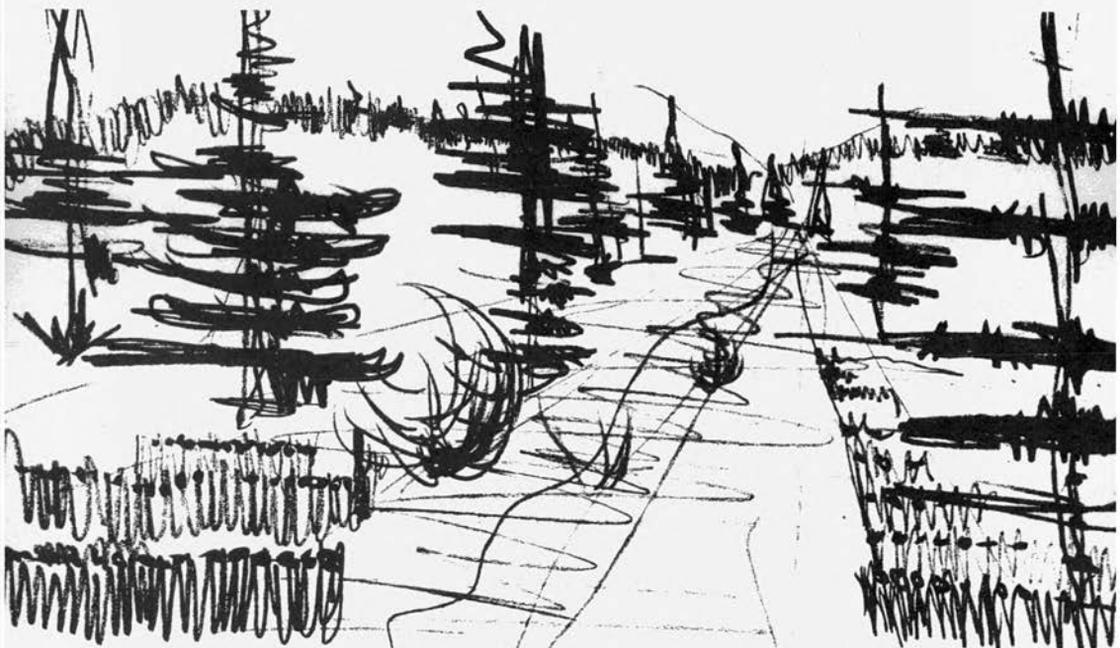
The lesson would be learned on Bonaventure, that island which I scanned across a mile of placid and frigid water. As we drew near the northern and highest end of the island, I found for the first time that the cliffs cannot be described, at least by me! I cannot cope with the dynamics of thousands upon thousands of Gannets on the upper ramparts and the thousands of Black-legged Kittiwakes that dot its middle parts--the all-encompassing bustle defies description. Common Murres--hundreds of them--as well as Guillemots and Razorbills rest closer to the water.

But what happens in the air as the boat approaches is much more awesome; it boggles the mind and squelches the ego.

Gannets leave their cliff tops and return in constant streams. Through them fly the Kittiwakes, careening in all directions--how are mid-air collisions avoided? Alcids in big and small flights buzz past at every angle. And then, a dark patch forward erupts as 150 murres scurry at the last moment to get out of the way before being run down! My God, what action! (Why do people brace the frigid winds at Cape Ann to glimpse merely a token of the real thing?)

1. Dock
2. White-throats
3. Warblers
4. Thrushes and Wrens
5. Gannetry
6. Hawk Owl?
7. Robin and Sharpie
8. Mourning Warblers
9. Grey-cheeks
10. Meadow Birds
11. Kittiwakes
12. Alcids
13. Seabird Rafts





The maelstrom at the cliffs is over, and after a complete circling of the island, those of us who wish to go ashore are let off at the dock. There is a group of abandoned houses at the edge of a broad meadow on the leeward side; beyond is the beginning of the boreal forest.

Ray Geras of the Toronto Ornithological Society and I start up the well-worn trail to the tree line; to the west we see the rugged coastline of the Gaspé peninsula. A gloom sets in as we enter the spruces; the stillness is earsplitting; I cannot even hear my footsteps or Ray's! I feel strangely detached--and then the melancholy and seemingly ventriloquial sounds commence. I think of Green Mansions by W. H. Hudson. In the distance the flutelike sound of a White-throated Sparrow is heard, two of them, three, many, each from a different direction and at a different pitch.

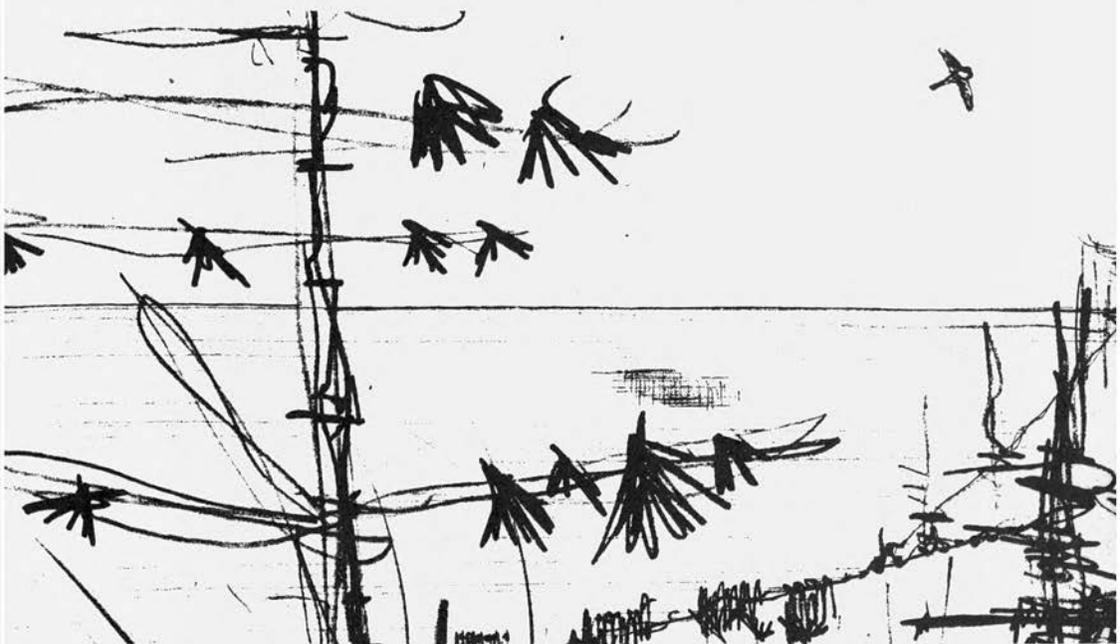
As the spruces thicken and close in around us, these voices are left behind. The path continues gently upward through the ever deepening stillness and gloom. Now the soft-voiced warblers are heard--Blackpoll, Bay-breasted, Cape May, Northern Parula, Yellow-rump, Blackburnian--alternating and repeating, from left and right, from ahead and behind. I also hear the punctuation of Yellow Warbler, Nashville, Northern Yellowthroat, Ovenbird, and Northern Waterthrush. Wilson's Warblers seem to be close by. If I were to wait, this mixture of voices would continue until sundown; they would not evaporate as on a spring morning at Mount Auburn. I listen, mainly because it is hard to see the origins of the sounds. Only occasionally are binoculars used, but eventually each species is observed. However, I am content merely to listen, for the sound of the warblers and the sight of the forest seem perfectly merged. Gradually, I am transformed from an observer to a participant in this subtle action.

As the warbler voices diminish, the clarinet tones of many Fox Sparrows surround me. This outdoes anything I ever heard while with Ludlow Griscom in Essex County; how I wish he could be here at this moment; how I would like to see the broad smile of immense satisfaction spread across his face!

I am grateful that Ray has moved ahead, leaving me alone. This is my day, and it is by no means finished. A Winter Wren explodes! Then a couple of others answer one another, from left and right. The songs are incredibly long--15 seconds (!) with at least one full trill more than I ever heard at home. Except for the Fox Sparrows and the Winter Wrens, it is quieter than ever, not a breath of air. And then--

I hear the quiet "whock" of a thrush, followed by the four ever so faint and constricted rising notes of a Swainson's. I freeze, knowing of the thrush's habit of hopping onto the path ahead. Sure enough, a little olive drab bird plays the role precisely. I see the buffy throat and cheeks, but no eye ring. I am looking at a Gray-cheeked! But as soon as it flies off, its place is taken by the Swainson's. The latter leaves, and presently I hear again the ventriloquial notes, followed by a whining "yea." My thoughts return to Griscom and sounds in the night. He was right; the incisive flight notes of the Swainson's Thrush seem to leave us with a casually spoken promise about a pure land far away. By now my expectations and hopes run high, but the song I really seek has not yet reached my ears.

The scene brightens, the spruces thin out to make way for deciduous growth of maple, aspen, and birch; the air becomes warmer. In concert with it all, I hear a weak "pwee," followed by "zibew." I putter about



the clearing with its Yellow-bellied and Willow Flycatchers, enjoying the sunshine which foils the dark magic of the boreal forest. My sense of time is reacquired; on the downslope my spirits run high and my ego returns; I am in control of myself again.

As the trees give way to a small meadow, a distant clamor strikes my ears, an appalling fish odor my nose. I am at the Gannetry atop the cliffs; nesting birds are within 15 feet! One picture is taken--more?--I nearly throw up on the spot! (To hell with it!) Seeking the windward side of the island, I gaze to the north at a dark blur, a huge raft of alcids resting upon the calm ocean. A smallish raptor makes its rapid way toward the shore--flapping, then gliding, it veers. I see that this is no falcon, and its head is too big and blunt to be that of an accipiter. Excitedly, I sketch quickly, with the idea of looking later into the owl section of Robbins. (When I did, I was stunned by the similarity of what was drawn and what was printed in the book as a Hawk Owl.)

As I continue to windward, the entire aspect is different--cliffs dwindle away to nothing, the boreal forest has been left behind, the faint warbler voices are gone. The magic is long gone!

The trail, which I know about from guides, becomes obscured, a testament to the proclivity of visitors interested only in the Gannetry. I become lost in the dense damp undergrowth shot with fallen timber and the noise of gushing streams of springwater. I become nervous upon remembering my rendezvous with the boat back to Percé. (The skipper's parting words were: "Do not forget, because we will!")

There is a new feeling now;
Perhaps nature is playing with me.
But that may be as I want it to be.

Suddenly, a bleeting robin desperately twists his way past attempting to thwart a determined Sharp-shinned Hawk. Both birds almost take my head off! I swear, I can see the panic in the robin's eyes--a clatter of branches, a shower of falling feathers, the episode ends somewhere in the brush.

Slipping and falling on the forest floor, and soaking my feet in the bogs, I eventually regain dry and sunny ground. Ahead is a dense thicket, and at its edge two warblers are copulating. I hear a loud, harsh "chirrt" followed by a brief but ebullient song. Again, I freeze. I can easily see the crepe effect of the male's black bib and throat--I could watch these Mourning Warblers forever, but after 10 minutes I reluctantly press on.

Then, totally unexpected, it happens! I learn the BIG reason why I am here in the spruces of the boreal forest. Ahead I hear the brief but incisive "cheer" of a thrush. Then come three weak and constricted falling notes, followed by a barely audible higher one. It is said that the Gray-cheeked sounds Veery-like, but this is not so. The Veery is liquid, free and easy; the Gray-cheeked sounds as though the notes were being squeezed out of him. Again, the immense wild place and fragile

voice blend to perfection. Symbiotic! I think of Aldo Leopold's partridge, which when gone, deprives the woods of its motive force. This boreal forest minus this thrush would mean little to me. Again I recall Griscom's "tremendous experience," when he and Ruth listened to the call of the wild, flight notes that symbolized the awesome force that drives the ecosystem of this lonely island. And I think of his role in the history of American ornithology. Griscom was not the mere statistician he has been accused of being. He was keenly aware of the value of wildness, as his journal attests. But, in the days before World War II, his task was to document the avifauna. Now, with the preservation of wildlife being a paramount issue, we need persons of his talent more than ever. His efforts have put us where we are; at the very least, we owe him a debt for teaching a way to realize our ecological concerns.

The Gray-cheeked Thrush is heard no more--the forest becomes empty. I move ahead, and reach the low southern end of the island. The mid-afternoon is bathed in warm sunshine. While walking 1 1/2 miles north to the dock, I am regaled by troupes of Red-winged Blackbirds, Barn Swallows, Tree Swallows, Bobolinks, Empidonax flycatchers, and warblers of open spaces. No longer spellbound, I find the magic entirely dissolved--a memory only. The essence of Bonaventure was its forest; now I return to reality. The island has done its job!

Someday I will have to ask Ruth how clearly she remembers back 23 1/2 years, to that August night when I was in the middle of the Atlantic en route to Europe. Ornithology had been left behind; in those days I was only interested in Gothic architecture and medieval city design. How could I know then that one day bird study would return to me with vengeance and new meaning--that ornithology and architecture would eventually blend into a quest for methods of architectural planning around a land ethic--or that Griscom's words from the past would send me to the Gaspé for the answers!



Gannets on nest. Photograph by Cynthia Moller
Courtesy of the Massachusetts Audubon Society