



It's the vacation season and some of you will be enjoying the seashore at the moment this issue appears. The shorebirds that lingered briefly along Atlantic coasts - Pacific coasts also - as they travelled to the far north in May and early June, will be returning, and watchers will be reporting early arrivals. Therefore it seems an opportune time to devote some consideration to books about shorebirds.

During an east coast "northeaster", I have been happily browsing through a delightful book called "A Gathering of Shore Birds" by Henry Marion Hall, edited by Roland C. Clement, and illustrated by John Henry Dick. It is published by Devin Adair with a "Publisher's Preface" by Devin A. Garrity, himself a nature enthusiast. It is not extra large, heavy nor expensive, and was copyrighted in 1960. It would make a wonderful gift.

Chapter 1 is called "An Introduction to the Shire Birds" and is written by the editor (who also wrote a few chapters on species). Don't overlook it. A great deal of interest and value is packed into 15 pages, as well as some of the delightful black and white drawings of Mr. Dick's. One of these shows drawings of a plover and sandpiper against the white background of the page, and the same birds against the natural backgrounds of seashore or mud flat. In the latter the birds acquire some measure of invisibility.

The chapter also contains a brief survey of the trend toward extinction of shorebirds through market slaughter, and the encouraging come-back of many species. The writer speaks further of three phases of shorebird watching. The first was collection of specimens, especially of rarities. The second was the "era of modern binocular birding". The third is the "true bird watching (in contrast to bird listing or 'birding'), the study of individual and group behavior that has been opened to amateurs by the development of the subsience of ethology".

The chapter ends thus: "This book, which grew out of a series of shorebirds in their haunts by Henry Marion Hall who knows how to capture the play of light and wind on the saltings of the coast, and of some lively and attractive line drawings by John Henry Dick, is therefore neither the long-awaited monograph nor a handbook of the North American shorebirds. What we have tried to do, is to bring Dr. Hall's essays up to date in a series of comments on recent changes of status which have occurred, and to interpolate some of the more readable scientific commentaries gleaned

from a perusal of an extensive literature in order to introduce the non-professional reader to a particularly attractive group of birds."

Following this introductory chapter comes a brief comment on the shorebird families illustrated by drawings of one representative species of each family. Each family is then given a brief survey, followed by more detailed comments on each species therein. I wish it were possible to sit down and read aloud to one and all fascinating excerpts from species descriptions as I have done recently to any friends within hearing distance.

The text would be fascinating to any lover of fine writing whether or not he had ever seen a shorebird. "When the beach birds ride north to us on the wings of spring most of them linger only for a breathing spell before taking off for the 'Land of Little Sticks', the tundra, or the barren shores of the Arctic Ocean. Driven by some mysterious urge, strong as that which moves the Gulf Stream, the summer under the Northern Lights but winter below the Southern Cross. In this drive the migratory impulse is paramount, and mating just one significant detail.

"Shore birds seem mere exhalations of the sea and reflect its eternal restlessness, somewhat as do the sands over which they scamper. Subject to every whim of the waves, the beaches never emerge from the ocean quite the same, though they repeat patterns dating back to creation. The fore-shore is somewhat more stable; yet anybody who has seen it smoking in a gale must realize that it forms but an ephemeral basis for the nests of birds. Nevertheless, several species brave the perils here and brood their birds between storms."

Regretfully I must limit myself to only one more sample of poetic reminiscence. "Your woodcock may be a descendant of ancestors who left the sounding shores to wander up this inland valley a million years ago and liked it well enough to call it home. Only a theory, of course, but rather a pleasing one. You glance round, marking the place well...on your right a stand of birch whitens a ridge from north to south. On your left fields of faded goldenrod slope towards the river. Every hundred paces or so runlets trickle down from bosky pockets...

"The western heights are a jumble of knobs, just now (October 12th) an incredible blaze of color - carmine, crimson, gold and ruby-red - rolling away in wave after wave of incredible magnificence. Somewhere beneath the horizon the grand Sachem of Indian Summer smokes the pipes of peace, stopping the hands on the clock of time and long postponing the fall of the leaf."

If any birder has a heart too hard to be melted by the poetic approach (which seems an impossibility and a contradiction) then he may have a curiosity to tempt. Would he know the theory that would explain why the Killdeer has two ring-necks instead of the one worn by smaller plover species?

Would he know why the Killdeer and the Mountain Plover react differently to human beings? Or why Killdeer have one type of reaction to most large mammals and a different one for dogs and man?

Anyone, I'm sure, will be intrigued by descriptions of a few species of shorebirds that can walk and swim under water like an Ouzel. He will also enjoy George Miksch Sutton's description of the courtship of Semipalmated Plovers as he saw it enacted on Southampton Island at the head of Hudson Bay. He will be intrigued, while reading of the theories of migration routing, by the statement that "some of the most spectacular 'signposts' of the planet are the cloud belts that lie over the sea like white quilts". Finally I can't imagine the person who would not be amazed and exhilarated by the distraction display of the Purple Sandpiper which has been termed the "rodent run". It is fantastic!

Parts 2 and 3 comprise a dozen pages with a list of South American shorebirds, and three lists of wanderers. Under the latter are American shorebirds in Europe, and European and Siberian in America. There is an illustration of the Spoon-bill Sandpiper of Siberia which is accidental in Alaska. I wouldn't believe it if I saw it.

As I regretfully close the pages of the book I can't resist sneaking in one more quote about plovers. "Their gentle voices repeat marine melodies as ancient as Creation but as modern as yesterday's high tide."

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The book of Dr. Hall's was published eight years ago, but will never be out of date. A year ago Viking published "The Shore Birds of North America". The editor and sponsor was Gardner D. Stout, the text was by Peter Matthiessen, the illustrations by Robert Verity Clem, and the species accounts by Ralph S. Palmer. This is a "coffee table" tome; large, heavy, expensive, and utterly desirable. Put it at the top of your Christmas list.

According to one bookseller, "The species accounts with carefully arranged information on the 75 species occurring in North America is the most comprehensive in any book on the subject...Sections on Description, Behavior Afield, Voice, Habitat, Distribution, Migration, Breeding and Habits, all inclusively treated, followed by a helpful bibliography."

"The paintings are done in opaque water color which reflects with remarkable fidelity both the blaze of full sunlight on a beach and the crepuscular shadows of the Woodcock's world." "Really, you can imagine you have the actual scene before you."

Peter Matthiessen has written eleven spellbinding chapters. I have chosen the following from his delightful prose. "The departure of curlew from a given place often occurs just prior to a storm, and in ancient days, in England, the curlew's cry, the plover's whistle boded no man any good."

Of the golden plover it was said in Lancashire that its sad whistle was the plaint of errant souls - not any old souls but the souls of those Jews who has lent a hand at the Crucifixion. In North England, curlews and whimbrels were called 'Gabriel's hounds'; the name whimbrel comes from 'whimpernel' which, in the Durham Household Book of 1930, refers to a habit attributed to it of houndlike whimperings. Both birds were known as harbingers of death, and in the sense that they are birds of passage, that in the wild melodies of their calls, in the breath of vast distance and bare regions that attends them, we sense intimations of our own mortality, there is justice in the legend. Yet it is not the death sign that the curlews bring, but only the memory of life, of a high beauty passing swiftly, as the curlew passes, leaving us in solitude on an empty beach, with summer gone, and a wind blowing."

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Good news!

Back in the nineteen-tens, Arthur Cleveland Bent was commissioned by the Smithsonian Institution to produce the series of Life Histories of North American Birds. He sent out an S.O.S. for information whose details he incorporated with his own observations and issued one volume after another including everything about a given species that he could lay his hands on, along with black and white photographs. Some of the details of distribution and plumage changes may now be out of date, but the main text will always provide absorbing reading. After the publishing of some twenty volumes, Mr. Bent died, and the job of completing the series was assigned to Oliver L. Austin Jr.

It seems to me years that we have been waiting for the final volume on the Fringillidae. I have used the volumes of this series like an encyclopedia and so often needed a ready source of reference for the species of this group. Just today a heavy package came by mail which contained three volumes on the Fringillidae. I hope the late Mr. Bent may be hearing an angelic bird chorus chanting a Nunc Dimittis.

May I remind those of you who were not fortunate enough to acquire the issues of this series in the past, that Dover Publications is offering reprints of most if not all of the back numbers, many of which had been out of print for a time.

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