

CHANGE OF LOCATION OF A CROW ROOST.

BY CHRESWELL J. HUNT.

THE lower Delaware Valley contains as many if not more winter Crows than any other one locality in the eastern States and one of the ornithological features of this section, during the winter, is the evening flight of the Crows toward their roosts.

One of the largest roosting sites is situated in Camden County, New Jersey, south of the town of Merchantville and some five miles from the city of Philadelphia. This is known to ornithologists as the Merchantville Roost, and here thousands of crows congregate to spend the winter nights.

On February 4, 1906, we spent the afternoon on Pensauken Creek and toward evening, when the crows began to gather preparatory to their evening flight, we decided to visit the Merchantville Roost.

Not knowing its exact location we waited until a well marked flight of crows began to pass over and then we followed them. After crossing numerous frozen marshy tracts, skirting others, climbing worm fences, and invading the privacy of many an orchard and cornfield — guided ever by the black line of homeward flying crows — we at last arrived at the roost. It was situated in a patch of oak and chestnut woodland of some eight or ten acres in extent lying a mile and a half or so south of Merchantville. From our station to the north of the woodland we could see three distinct flight lines coming in — the one we had followed from the northeast; one from the northwest; one from the west.

Some of the crows would pass on into the woods while others would alight upon the ground in the surrounding fields until parts of these fields were blackened and appeared, as Mr. Witmer Stone has described it, to have been burnt over.

As we sat on a fence beneath one of the flights the whirr made by the wings of the incoming birds was plainly heard. It resembled the rush of the surf along the beach. As night approached small flocks would rise from the fields and enter the woods until at last the ground was forsaken. All this while the birds kept up a con-

tinuous racket; possibly discussing the adventures the day had brought forth, at any rate they were advertising the whereabouts of their roosting spot to both friend and foe for a mile around.

As the sun sank in the west it seemed as if the whole top of the woods arose into the air — one immense flock of thousands and thousands of crows circled round and again settled in the trees.

Now they became more quiet, but it seemed that for some husky individuals sleep was out of the question, as a great many still persisted in making a noise.

When they had become comparatively quiet, we entered the woods. In the moonlight the leaf strewn ground, spotted all over with the white excrement, took on a ghostly aspect. Our progress was not very noiseless — we had to fight our way through the underbrush and pause now and then to untangle ourselves from a too friendly strand of green brier. As we startled the crows in the trees directly over us they would fly further into the woods.

When thus startled suddenly from their perches the birds seemed more or less bewildered and unable to see distinctly. We saw one crow which apparently flew against a limb, for after starting up he fell back and caught himself with an effort on a lower branch where he sat apparently dazed, and it was a minute or more before he was able again to take wing.

When well within the woods we shouted and the air became filled with a roar like thunder as the birds in the trees about us took wing and flew deeper into the woods. Then we left them but when well on our way to Merchantville we could still hear a few discordant 'caws' — possibly blessings called down on us for having disturbed their slumbers.

We described this homeward coming of the crows to a friend — how they came and came, thousands and thousands of them; how the ground was black with crows, etc., and he became greatly interested and wanted to see it himself; so we agreed to take him to the roost. It was on the evening of March 4 that we made the pilgrimage, and took him over the route followed by us a month before. When we reached the woodland there was not a crow to be seen. On the way we saw flight lines, which fact had somewhat puzzled me; but here in the woods, where a month before had been thousands, there was not a crow to be seen or heard. Even the

report of a revolver failed to dislodge any. Our friend was disgusted; I believe he thought we were playing some practical joke on him. But where were the crows? Had they taken up domestic cares already, and was the roost forsaken for the season? Only the previous week, February 25, I had seen a big flight toward the roost. It did not seem likely that they would break up the roost so suddenly.

March 11 was spent on Pensauken Creek. Toward evening, as we were walking to our homeward bound trolley, I noticed a flight of crows passing over, flying high, but apparently in the direction of the roost. I proposed that we should go over to it and see if the crows were not there, but my friend — he who had been disappointed the week before — did not care to accompany me, so we said good night and I set out alone.

When I neared the woodland where the roost had been situated I noticed that a flight of crows was passing directly over it and going to the northwest; so I changed my course and followed them. They led me through muddy cornfields, past a little stream where the first Killdeers of the season greeted me with their cheery call; past a clump of woods where a large owl left his perch with noiseless wing and sought a darker retreat among the trees, and on to a patch of woodland a little less than a mile northwest of the old roost.

Two flight lines were coming in and a great many crows were already in the woods. Here was the solution of the problem. The crows had changed their roosting place, for what reason I am unable to say. Possibly some of the nearby farmers — always at war with them — had disturbed them.

In reaching this new roost the direction of flight had changed, so that we missed them entirely the week before.

The near approach of the nesting season had no doubt lessened their numbers, but here the main body had assembled, and the old roosting place had been entirely deserted. One would think that a few, from habit, would stick to the old roost but they seemed to have, with one accord, sought new sleeping quarters.