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A WADING-BIRD ROOKERY.

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At the end of Florida, where the Everglades run out to the mangrove-fringed coast, a shallow lake spreads a mile of open water. Mangroves have rimmed it about with promontories and islands of verdure, scattered cypresses rise behind, and there are intervals through which the eye ranges away to the horizon. By hidden creeks the gentle tides flow and ebb, and above high-water level on the digitated mangrove stems rests table-like a semblance of firm land. There various small creatures lurk,—raccoons, rabbits, an occasional bobcat or otter, and such few alligators as have eluded the wandering hunters. The birds which on the shore of this lake maintain their immemorial nesting-place, breed in mid-winter; for, under the tropic, winter is the salubrious season and the season when, no doubt, suitable food for the nestlings is most abundantly available. The two visits upon which these notes are based were made on February 24 and March 8, 1927.

From a distance no lake is to be seen,—an island, rather, or the semblance of one, in an ocean of saw-grass. Experience only gives assurance that where mangroves rise, there open water is to be found, washing their stems. Herons of various species, singly and in companies, move over the plain; Vultures and Ibises swing overhead; an occasional Hawk passes; but there is nothing in view to indicate, to the casual visitor at least, that within one mangrove cluster rather than another a bird nursery

of large extent is to be found; indeed, there is nothing to indicate the existence of such an establishment in the neighborhood.

The approach to the lake is along a drainage canal, and thence by a creek winding blindly through the marsh. Two of us in a canoe together followed the known course. As we advanced, we surprised Louisiana Herons hunting along the canal banks. Ducks sprang nimbly and Pelicans flapped heavily from the water before us. The silvery fins of tarpon gleamed from the surface. Overhead the numbers of sailing birds increased—Ibises, Pelicans, Water Turkeys—and suddenly the anticipation of many days was realized, when with swift, strong strokes three coral-pink birds came winging over the mangroves. No anticipation could surpass the startling beauty of these Spoonbills in the sky.

As we threaded our way through a screen of mangrove stems, Night Herons flapped and squawked in the tree-tops; a Water Turkey fell like a plummet and with muffled splash was gone. Presently we burst through into broad water. A raft of Ducks rose before us and like a waving carpet drifted away. Far out on the lake a few great White Pelicans were floating. And as we moved out from shore a receding promontory brought the rookery to view. There, along the distant eastern margin, the mangroves were laden white, decked with birds as with an efflorescence. There was flash of distant moving wings, but from so great a distance no sound reached us.

As I think about it, I wish that we might have glided unseen into that city of the birds; for we had no thought to harm them, nor had they need to fear us. There was, however, nothing for it but to come visibly and terrifyingly among them. We skirted the lake and approached as quietly as we could. But as we came into the midst of the city all was clamor and confusion. Such flapping and croaking and squawking! such scrambling and tumbling! We paddled about, noting with wondering eyes the splendid Herons in their nesting-time plumes, the curious nestlings,—the younger ones fearless still and quiet; those of larger growth tumultuously clambering away, and though unable to fly, astonishingly acrobatic among the branches. Presently we found a cove and drew under cover, and then after a time the wild excitement passed and the birds returned stealthily to their usual pursuits.

Along this, the eastern side of the lake there are detached mangrove growths, two or three small elongate islets strung along the shore. Their total length may be four hundred yards, and their breadth fifty, their area a few acres. Upon these, isolated and secure, the city is built. It is compact together. It covers the islets, but not completely. There are unoccupied extremities, and the curious fact is that, while elsewhere the islets are most densely filled, these marginal areas are quite empty of nests.

The southern precinct of the city, comprising one islet and a good part of another, is occupied by Wood Ibises, the remaining northern portion by Herons of various kinds. The Ibis nests are built upon and surmount the trees, the Heron nests are placed in the forks of the branches and within the protection of the foliage; and because of this difference in the manner of building, the two parts of the city are unlike in appearance. It is the southern precinct covered with the nests of Ibises which bears the distant semblance of efflorescence. This Ibis precinct too has the appearance of being more densely populated. The nests are so closely crowded together that they seem to fill all the space,—continuous surfaces of birds. Even among the Ibis nests, however, we found a few nests of Louisiana and of Night Herons, and a few of Cormorants and of Water Turkeys. As we paddled near, the parent birds rose in the air, and the young Ibises turned and ran pell-mell toward the summits of their hills of foliage, flapping, crowding, treading one upon another, in a wild and raucous scramble. The little Cormorants beat no such retreat, but standing on their nests, vomited unpleasantly.

The Herons, to the northward, are segregated somewhat according to kind and occupy successive levels. It is the Louisiana Herons chiefly that live in the lowest stories. Their nests rest in every available crotch; indeed, we found one of them beautifully fashioned and resting in the boots of a cabbage palmetto which had grown among the mangroves. Standing in our canoe we could look down into many of these Louisiana Heron nests, and could see in some the elongate clear blue eggs. Higher in the arboreal tenements lived the Night Herons and the Snowy Egrets, and in the airy upper chambers, thirty feet above, the great American Egrets, some scattering Wood Ibises, and the few Spoonbills had their residence.

It was a satisfaction and a reassurance to find the two species of Egrets present in substantial numbers. And elsewhere too in the Everglades we found these fine birds fairly abundant. We felt sure that the endeavor to protect them and to save them from utter destruction is having effect.

Of the Spoonbills' nests there were, we believe, four in all. At the time of our first visit we found two in immediate proximity, to one of which a brood of five belonged and to the other, four. One of the young remained still in its nest, and the others were perched near and immediately above. In addition, we found one or two isolated nests, but because of the confusion and the winding of the water ways we could not be sure whether we had seen two other nests or had seen but one and had seen it repeatedly. On our second visit, however, nearly all the young Spoonbills were in flight, and then counting two birds still flapping in the tree-tops and nineteen in the air, it seemed fairly sure that in all there were four families.

How great is the population of this city? We tried in bewilderment to say. A thousand? Yes, easily. Two thousand? Yes, and more. How many nesting pairs of Wood Ibises? Several hundred, certainly. At length we set the number down at three hundred, and as I review the matter I find myself saying at one time, Can there have been so many? and again, Yes, certainly there were. Here are the figures,—guesses, to be sure, but they will serve to give approximate indication, at least.

Water Turkey (<i>Anhinga anhinga</i>).....	25 pairs
Florida Cormorant (<i>Phalacrocorax auritus floridanus</i>).....	50 "
Roseate Spoonbill (<i>Ajaia ajaja</i>)... ..	4 "
Wood Ibis (<i>Mycteria americana</i>)... ..	300 "
Egret (<i>Casmerodius egretta</i>).....	25 "
Snowy Egret (<i>Egretta c. candidissima</i>)	100 "
Louisiana Heron (<i>Hydranassa tricolor ruficollis</i>).....	200 "
Little Blue Heron (<i>Florida c. caerulea</i>).....	50 "
Little Green Heron (<i>Butorides v. virescens</i>).....	25 "
Black-crowned Night Heron (<i>Nycticorax nycticorax naevius</i>) ...	100 "
Total.....	879 pairs

In addition to the householders, there were transients and lodgers in this city. A dozen or more White Ibises were flying

about, and a pack of a hundred Brown Pelicans was roosting in a neighborly way in those portions of the islets unoccupied by nests and mentioned above. We could not perceive that either of these species was nesting in the rookery. There were a few Crows about, and many Turkey Vultures. Here and there we saw a Vulture perched near the nests. The Crows were marauders, the Vultures the mortuary police of the city,—parasitic species, to be sure, but still constituting with the nesting birds a biological entity, a piece of the web of life.

These many birds, Ibises, Cormorants, Spoonbills, are grotesque fellows in the picture books, each with an oddity of his own. But here in their environment nothing grotesque appeared. Each in his proper place was alert, vital, adequate. There was no excess, no disproportion. What splendid birds the Wood Ibises are!—not Ibises at all, but Storks in reality,—the only American Storks. And what mighty fliers! How steadily, vigorously, grandly they sail! excelling even the Vultures. One of them comes hurtling from the sky to perch in a tree-top. The long legs are lowered and spread apart,—serving as drag, as well as rudder; the neck too is lowered and as the bird reaches its perch the tip of the bill and the feet come almost together. But the great body floats easily and precisely to rest.

Of the Spoonbills it is impossible to withhold an enthusiastic word more. Sailing in the sunlight, from translucent bill to toe, from wing tip to wing tip they are suffused with color. And such color! Flame birds! Birds of the dawn! Rosy pink, with wing and tail coverts of deepest carmine. The tail tawny orange. It is as though an orchid had spread its lovely wings and flown. The sight of this beautiful creature is an event, an experience; a thing to be carried in memory, with the sight of Fujiyama in the dawn, with an eclipse of the sun.

We moved away and the croaks and calls sunk to a murmur, as of a crowd of humans in the distance. We looked upward and there in the high heavens the Storks were sailing—dozens, hundreds of them, some near at hand, some at amazing and giddy heights, revealing unthought-of depths within the blue empyrean. Vultures too were sailing there and Anhingas and Pelicans, and now and again the band of Spoonbills swept in harrow formation across the field, equally beautiful against sky and cloud.

When we neared the exit from the lake we heard the disturbing sound of gunshots, and presently rounding a point we came on two boats, a ramshackle power boat with a skiff in tow. There was a loutish looking cracker at the wheel, and with him in the boats were five or six city men. Some of them had guns, and they seemed to have been firing at whatever came near. In their wake we picked up the poor body of a Pelican, shot down and left floating.

Not plume hunters, these,—American citizens, if you please, visiting the wilderness, full of the spirit of adventure, and gratifying a desire to kill. I do not pretend to understand them. I would not speak for them. I give them such credit or excuse as may be found in thoughtlessness. I can imagine, that if pressed, one of them might recklessly say, "We read of the pleasure which rich men find in shooting up Africa, why should not we on a scale within our reach do the like?" And here they were, advancing on one of those two or three rookeries where, as may be believed, the whole precious remnant of the Spoonbills of southern Florida is to be found.

The sudden encounter, the realization that there were those who might bear witness, a word of reminder that there was a law protecting the "pink curlew,"—these things were a restraint, and we heard no gunshot more. But a painful impression remained to mar a beautiful memory. For this year it may be supposed the Spoonbills are reasonably safe (unless, perhaps, they rear a second brood). The young now are fledged, and they will keep vigilantly beyond the range of guns. But there will be other nestings and there will be occasions when such lust to kill will meet no check.

Why these disquieting words? Why, after writing of pleasant things, conclude with a matter unpleasant to think about? For two reasons. First, for the sake of the birds. Twenty years ago the Audubon societies accomplished the cessation of the plume industry, and something has been said of the value of that accomplishment. But another danger remains. It existed from the beginning, but only now has it become imminent. It is a danger which is incident to advancing civilization, to the extension of automobile roads. The remotest regions have been pene-

trated, no refuge and fastness remains. The wrong behind the millinery business was an unnecessary and indubitable wrong. Exposure only was needed. It could not stand in the open. Brought to light, it became intolerable, and was done away. The wrong in the present situation is less obvious, and it is elusive. It is possible to gain some glimpse of it, and to urge that if the birds are to be saved, people must come to care enough and enough people must come to care. Then with destructive tendencies checked, remedial measures may be made effective.

The second reason concerns ourselves; for our own sakes we must save the birds. They are but a part, the most easily appealing part of that realm where, entering in, we find ourselves *in specie aeternitatis*. Care and fret have been left behind, the sting of sorrow is eased, and in the presence of the eternal we find a cure for life.

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