

VIII. A VOICE FROM THE HEIGHTS

Above the chorus of the Humid Coast belt three soloists stood apart, not from any brilliancy of execution or charm of vocal accomplishment, but from their deep human appeal, their rare moving quality. The clarion *pu-pu-peo*, or the keener *pu-pee-peo*, of the Olive-sided Flycatcher from the hills aroused rich mountain memories, as did also the fresh uplifted song of the Nuttall Sparrow, whether heard from a fern field, a tree top overlooking the fishing village and the quiet inland waters of the blue Bay, or from a cliff overlooking the wide sandy beach and the long white lines of surf coming in from the ocean.

But there was one voice that was new to me, whose appeal was reinforced by no rare memories, though given glamour by Alaskan song and story—the voice of the Varied Thrush. Its single note with its mysterious vibrant trill had been heard from the mountain tops in the chorus of morning and evening; and on one red letter day, from the wood road one of the rare birds had actually been seen near enough to distinguish its golden brown, dark-collared breast.

But not until one Sunday morning when I was sitting quietly in the fern field, did I really hear the wonderful song. Then through the clear air, each single, long-swelling note came down from the ridge above like the peal of a golden bell. It was indeed a Voice from the Heights! The best songs from the lower levels and even those of the Olive-sided and the Nuttall Sparrow but lead up to it, for the song of the Sparrow is full of plaintive yearning, and the call of the Flycatcher, pure and clarion toned though it be, has a note of striving in its exaltation; but the voice of the Varied Thrush seems the voice of one who has attained. And as it comes from the Heights with their far view over the ocean, it seems to voice the serene philosophic spirit by which life, death, and the veiled hereafter seem but links in the chain of the ordered Universe, upon which, with bared head, one may gaze, content to bear his part.

Washington, D. C.

FROM FIELD AND STUDY

Peculiar Nesting Habits of the Avocet.—While collecting on the south shore of Big Quill Lake, Saskatchewan, on June 22, 1915, on a low, sandy island I found three nests of the Avocet (*Recurvirostra americana*). Nest number one contained four eggs on the point of hatching. Number two, six eggs, three of which were fresh and three on point of hatching! Number three, eight eggs, all fresh. During the time I was on this island, nearly two hours, I counted ten birds. On June 8, at Buffalo Lake, on a small low island, I found only one nest containing seven fresh eggs, though I counted there eight birds.

Mr. W. E. Lake, of Edam, Saskatchewan, a reliable observer, told me he had noted Avocets breeding in his district for some years, and of having found nests containing from three to eight eggs.—H. H. MITCHELL, *Regina, Saskatchewan.*

The Surf Bird at San Francisco.—On November 5, 1916, a very exceptional opportunity was afforded the writer for observing a flock of Surf-birds (*Aphriza virgata*), on the boulder-strewn beach below San Francisco's famous Cliff House. I had been looking seaward through the powerful binoculars that may be rented on the piazza, when my attention was attracted by nine of these birds on the ledges almost directly beneath. Upon adjusting the glass to proper focus, the birds were revealed in startling proximity, appearing scarcely an arm's length distant and permitting of the most minute inspection.

They were busily engaged in exploring the mossy buttresses, and apparently were not at all alarmed by the numerous visitors on the terrace above, though acknowledging their presence by pausing from time to time to look upward. They worked industriously

and continuously, evidently finding an abundance of food, without, however, prying off Crustacea from the rocks as observed by Mr. Dawson at Santa Barbara. Whatever their diet, it was gleaned with but small exertion amid the moist seaweed, and consumed in great quantities and with avidity.

Each individual was quick to resent intrusion, and the encroachment of a neighbor upon another's "sphere of influence" usually resulted in a sharp "passage-at-bills", three of which were noted within the short space of time the birds were under observation. The protective coloration feature of their autumnal plumage was very pronounced, particularly in an instance where a bird crouched down for a moment, remaining immovable and almost invisible, the dusky gray of its back blending most harmoniously with the surf-worn rock. The contrast was the more noticeable because of the distinctive appearance of the same bird while in motion, the upraised wings with their broad, exposed portion of white, rendering it very conspicuous.

Unlike many of our shore birds the initiative of all, in this particular case at least, did not depend upon the alarm of some, and though it may be presumed that in any extended flight the wanderers clung together, yet the excited departure of three birds, startled by a paper fluttering down the cliff, was but disinterestedly watched by the remainder. The flock continued feeding for some moments longer, and then rising rapidly one after another, swung about the point and disappeared.—GEORGE W. SCHUSSLER, *San Francisco, December 18, 1916.*

Vermilion Flycatcher at San Diego, California.—While visiting at Nestor, at the south end of San Diego Bay on December 25, 1916, I saw a Vermilion Flycatcher (*Pyrocephalus rubinus mexicanus*) busily engaged in catching flies in front of the house where I stayed. At the same place on March 17, 1906, I saw another individual of this species, hawking for flies all day long from the fence. These are the only two I have ever seen here, and it is curious that I should have seen them at exactly the same place. It is not surprising that these birds should occur here occasionally, however, as there are no high mountain ranges to bar them from leaving the desert region to the eastward.—HENRY GREY, *San Diego, California, February 23, 1917.*

Early Nesting of California Brown Pelican on Anacapa Island, California.—I was on Anacapa Island on March 12, 1911, when there were about two hundred pairs of Pelicans (*Pelecanus californicus*) on the island. None of them had eggs at that time, although a few had started nest building. I visited the island again on May 12, 1912, finding that the colony had not increased in size during the year. Most of the nests were ready for eggs at that time, but there were only two fresh eggs to be found. On June 11, 1915, the colony had increased noticeably and had divided into two sections, one on the top of the island and the other on the slope under the cliffs on the south side. The one on top had a few newly hatched young, but in most cases there were eggs, fresh or nearly so. In the colony on the south side all of the eggs had hatched, and most of the young were nearly grown.

On March 7, 1916, we estimated that there were at least fifteen hundred pairs of birds upon the island, in two colonies, as before. The nests on the south side contained three eggs each; most of those on the top of the island were just completed, though one set of three fresh eggs was seen there, and a few with two eggs. This year (1917) we were on the island on March 2. There were at least two thousand pairs of Pelicans in the colony, and they were already breeding. In fact, most of the eggs were heavily incubated, and in one nest there was a newly hatched young, together with two eggs on the point of hatching. Many sets of four eggs were seen, and one set of three was collected containing a runt egg about the size of a hen's egg.

From the above data it appears that the colony is increasing rapidly in numbers, and that the birds are nesting earlier every year.—SIDNEY B. PEYTON, *Sespe, California, March 24, 1917.*

Early Nesting of the San Diego Song Sparrow.—Mr. P. J. Hartman tells me that on February 20, 1917, he found a nest of the San Diego Song Sparrow (*Melospiza melodia cooperi*) near La Habra, Orange County, California. The nest was placed in a dock plant ten inches above the ground, and contained four eggs with incubation going on.—W. LEE CHAMBERS, *Los Angeles, California, February 23, 1917.*