

Gleanings from the Journal of William Brewster: Brewster's Artistic Friend — Daniel Chester French

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In the following account Brewster writes of his annual October trip on the Concord River with his childhood friend, Daniel Chester French, who attained recognition as one of America's greatest sculptors. The "boys" attended the same grammar school in Cambridge and became inseparable companions during their youth, a connection which developed into a lifelong friendship. Daniel's father was a great taxidermist and passed on his art to both Daniel and William Brewster. The French family moved to Concord in 1865, but Dan and Will kept in touch with each other. Brewster's devotion to the study of birds led to a vocation, while French met fellow Concord resident Louisa May Alcott, who encouraged him to pursue a career as an artist.

On October 10, 1879, Brewster is 28, and French a year older at 29. Brewster was well on his way to making history in ornithology. He started the Nuttall Club in 1873, and by 1879 had published fifty-nine manuscripts on birds. French, too, was well on his way to becoming known as a great sculptor; his first commissioned work was the famous 1875 statue of the Minute Man that stands near the North Bridge in Concord.

Brewster visited French at Chesterwood, Daniel's studio in Stockbridge, in his last years. In *October Farm* (Harvard University Press, 1936), French recalls a perfect summer day in the Berkshires when he and Brewster talked about death. Brewster regretted that he must sometime leave all the beauty of the world that he loved so much. A few years later Brewster died at the age of 68. It was Daniel Chester French who found and selected the Quincy granite stone that marks his grave at Mount Auburn. Daniel also designed the Brewster Medal, which was given to outstanding ornithologists.

October 10, 1879 Concord, Massachusetts, Middlesex County

Cloudy, with thin hazy masses of vapor, thro' which the sun occasionally shone. Exceedingly close and sultry with occasional faint puffs of light wind.

At 8A.M. I started off with Dan, French for our annual day on the river. Our progress was leisurely as it was too hot to work hard at the oars but we reached Fairhaven Bay by 11 o'clock. On the way up we saw numbers of birds, among them a Blue winged Teal and an exceedingly tame Coot of which now anon. At the trout brook we went ashore and rambled about for a little while discovering some fine paper birches and a very large witch hazel which was in full bloom altho' its leaves had not all fallen. Dan, taking my gun, walked up to the duck ponds while I lay down on the edge of the woods and watched a swarm of titlarks [American Pipits], which were feeding over a newly plowed field. In the woods behind some Jays and Squirrels

were busy as usual and an occasional cicada shrilled while the answering calls of the unknown autumn voice were almost incessant. Finally D. returned: he had seen several partridges but did not get a shot at them.

Starting again we rode up past the next bridge to the spot where we ate our dinner last year (Oct 16). Here we landed and spent a pleasant hour at our noontide meal. As we were about to set off again, a couple of rakish looking gunners entered the marsh on the opposite side of the river and began to beat it with a large orange and white setter. In the course of the next half hour they flushed five Snipe, four of which they killed. The old dog worked most admirably pointing every single bird. From our slightly elevated position it was a most interesting if somewhat tantalizing sight.

From this place we rowed about two miles farther up stream and then turned our bow homeward. As we again entered Fairhaven a thin gray mist had settled over the beautiful basin. The surrounding hills were brought out in unusually bold relief and looked much higher than normal. The expanse of water was absolutely without a ripple and the moist air rendered distant sounds distinctly audible. We could hear a farmer whistling as he worked a mile away and the chirp of crickets came distinctly to our ears across the widest part of the bay. A few frogs were croaking doubtfully among the reeds and an occasional distant shot was heard in the woods. For a long time we floated aimlessly reluctant to leave the peaceful beauty of it all but as the shades of twilight began to fall we resumed our oars and glided down the sluggish river. As we were leaving the bay a pair of Wood Ducks passed us flying up river and we startled a solitary Black Duck. On the long reach below Hubbard's Bridge, we found the Teal seen in the morning but he flew before we were within range. A little lower down a few musk rats forged their silvery ways across the dark water- then our bridge and- our day on the river was at an end.

Notes:

Fulica americana [American Coot]: The "Coot" is seldom a wary bird- at least the few straggling individuals that visit New England waters in the early autumn — but the tameness of ours that we found on the river today, excluded anything that I have previously observed. When first seen this bird was swimming near the bed of lily pads that fringes the margins of the stream. As we approached it showed no signs of fear, so laying down the oars I took a paddle and resolved to try how near it would allow us to come. Without using any special caution we actually glided up to within six feet of it. Then it simply dodged our bow and continued to feed within reach of one of our oars. As it gradually increased this distance I turned the boat and again overtook it getting as near as before. We then stopped the boat and watched it for a long time. It was an unusually small specimen and swam very low in the water. At each stroke of the feet the head was oscillated in the usual manner. It was continually picking up food from the lily leaves and occasionally it immersed its bill to seize a particle from some submerged water plant. Finally I again forced the boat forward and obliged it to fly, which it did when the bow was within about three feet of it. As it rose it ran for some distance on the surface and when after a short flight it again dropped, it lowered its feet and ran several yards along the water before settling.


Podilymbus podiceps [Pied-billed Grebe]: We saw no less than eight of these pretty little Grebes to-day. At one time three were in sight at a time. Most of them were quite shy and took to diving before we got within range. When not apprehensive of danger they float very high on the water and look much larger than they really are. One which we saw some distance ahead floating in mid stream dove and disappeared. Opposite the spot was a dense growth of button bushes standing in shallow water. I suspected that the Grebe had sought shelter among them and as we paddled quietly by I scanned every inch of water among their stems. Finally I discovered the little fellow within two yards of me. His body was floating on the surface but it was flattened and his head was stretched out level on the water. Under the shade of the overhanging foliage he looked like a brown withered lily-pad. Only the twinkle of his bright eye betrayed his identity. So long as I kept my paddle moving he remained motionless but after we had passed him I stopped and turned my head quickly when he instantly dove leaving scarcely a ripple from where he had sat.

Anthus rubescens [American Pipit]: A flock of at least a hundred individuals feeding on ploughed land. When closely approached they would stand immovable and were fairly hard to see. Absolutely silent when on the ground.

Scolecophagus ferrugineus [Rusty Blackbird]: juv. male, fall pl. Iris pale lemon yellow-nearly white with a brownish tinge. Shot from the top of a maple that grew on the river bank a little above Fairhaven Bay. Accompanied by two others. Many hundreds seen during the day. [MCZ # 204745]

Scolecophagus ferrugineus [Rusty Blackbird]: juv. Female? fall pl. Iris pale lemon, nearly white. Shot from a willow, which overhung a tangle of button bushes. A large flock collected there. Outlet of Fairhaven Bay. [MCZ # 204746]

Sayornis fuscus [Eastern Phoebe]: adult male (?), fall pl. molting. One of a pair that were perched on the tops of some leafless maples by the river, at the foot of the cliff-or rather at the landing. The other bird was also shot but could not be found. Six individuals of this species seen along the river to-day. [MCZ# 204747]

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RUSTY BLACKBIRDS BY GEORGE C. WEST