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DOOR-YARD BIRDS OF THE FAR NORTH.

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DEPRIVED by confining duties of the opportunity for frequent excursions, I have passed many pleasant hours in the companionship of my feathered friends, that, happily, in place of requiring to be sought out, appear to become the seekers and find me. Before we proceed, however, let me introduce the surroundings. The locality is St. Michael's, Alaska, which, thanks to its 63° of north latitude and relative geographical position, enjoys a sub-arctic climate, if enjoyment can be extracted from gloomy skies and a barren, gale-swept coast. The Redoubt, as it is familiarly termed here, is built about twenty feet above high-tide mark upon a small point of St. Michael's Island extending into a narrow bay three miles wide, which makes in from Norton Sound, and separates this part of the island from the mainland. About a dozen, low, one-story houses, mainly ranged in the form of a imperfect parallelogram some thirty-five by fifty yards in diameter, with the breaks between the houses closed by a high board fence, and the remainder of the buildings scattered irregularly outside, go to complete the metropolis of Northern Alaska. On the land side, extending to within a few feet of the houses, is the perennially wet land so eminently characteristic of Arctic countries. Fortunately, however, owing to the more fertile character of the soil in the

immediate vicinity of the houses, the sponge-like mosses, covering all the surrounding country, have retreated fifty or sixty yards and given place to a belt of luxuriant grasses, which, in turn, makes way in places in favor of dense patches of weeds. From the north-eastern to the southern side the sea approaches to within thirty yards, the grassy slope ending abruptly at a beach formed of dark, angular fragments of basalt; this, with a hard-trodden court-yard, absolutely bare of vegetation, and a small kitchen-garden, completes the immediate surroundings. On distant hillsides a few patches of dark green show where small groups of hardy alders have secured a foothold, beyond which, excepting a few dwarf willows, not a bush raises its head for many miles.

To all appearances, not a very tempting locality for birds, would be one's decision at first sight; but a closer acquaintance will prove the contrary. Some cheerless morning in May, on the border line between winter and spring, as we walk about the buildings, we are greeted by the sharp *tsip, tsip*, of the Tree Sparrow which has arrived over-night and now holds possession of the weed patches, whence it makes foraging expeditions into the yard, ready to skurry back to its stronghold upon the least alarm. As the weather becomes milder, their number is augmented, and, in company with the plump, rosy-breasted little Redpoll, they are seen every where, from the top of the wind-vane to the kitchen window, whence they peep in from the sundial. As the snow decreases the Tree Sparrows slowly retire, pre-empting summer houses in the alder bushes, where they hold possession by right of numbers; they are not, however, too conservative to share their haunts with inoffensive strangers. The Redpolls also now seek more congenial haunts, and are soon lost to view. Meanwhile the Savanna Sparrows have arrived and enliven the borders of the numerous muddy spots surrounding the place, running in and out, mouse-like, among the dead grass, as they playfully pursue each other. At the first alarm they dive into the cover of standing weeds and grass only to reappear, a moment later, on the further side. As the season advances, the males mount the woodpile or other conspicuous object to pour forth their weak, unmusical notes, which they at times also utter from the ground.

Gambel's Finch now makes its appearance, and, capturing the

woodpile from its smaller relative, proceeds to favor us with its sweetly modulated song. A little earlier than this the familiar form of the Barn Swallow has taken its place in the scene, and, as it circles about, utters its chuckling notes as though fairly bubbling over with delight at reaching home once more after spending the winter in a distant southern clime. Pleasant sunshiny days follow, and we human animals sit and bask in the grateful rays upon the veranda, watching, with careless eye, the passage overhead of various water-fowl; while the occasional appearance of a Gyrfalcon, a Goshawk, of other bird of prey lends further interest to the view.

On fine evenings our ear is greeted by the clear Thrush-like whistle of the Fox-colored Sparrow, generally from the top of the cross surmounting the roof of the Russian church just back of the houses.

As June arrives we obtain a glimpse of one or two Black-capped and Yellow Warblers as they investigate the insect preserve in the garden, after which we must seek amusement in the struggles of the Swallows to master unwieldy feathers, or to carry off straws, one end of which is embedded in the ground, varied by numerous hand-to-hand conflicts between the pugnacious little males as they roll about on the ground and pummel each other heartily, sometimes for half an hour together; the object of all this battling, in the form of some charming female, stands close by, looking on as complacently as a lady of olden time upon the tournament, and it need not be said that the victor receives the homage, now, as then. All obstacles are finally overcome and in various snug nooks under the eaves the birds hover with pride over their treasure-filled nests. At the same time a pair of Savanna Sparrows keep watch and ward over their egg-laden nest, neatly hidden on the sloping bank close under the ice-house.

Spring passes into summer and from the middle of July until well into August the smaller birds make the Redoubt a general rendezvous. The Redpolls return in family parties, the roseate flush of youth worn from the parental breast by the cares of family life, all being now clad in dull brown. Like neglected children, who, if they have no costly garments, are determined to enjoy themselves and make merry, so these little plebians stuff themselves to repletion with the good things of the garden and

weed patches, chirping and frolicing as merrily as though adorned with the most brilliant hues. They invest the Redoubt, flitting from place to place; one moment see-sawing on a tall weed, the next, hopping carelessly along the walk before you or peering from the eaves with an odd expression of lilliputian gravity. In return for this good-natured familiarity they are prime favorites with all. They do not, however, come unattended, for, in the yard, or outside of it, wherever a bare spot of ground is seen, are congregated parties of young Lapland Longspurs, which are nearly as careless of our presence as the Redpolls; they are, however, more sedate and business-like, and appear solely intent upon gormandizing. They run from place to place with their bills pointing downward, their eyes intently scanning every inch of ground, oblivious to their surroundings until a passing footstep starts them away to a short distance, where they resume their search for food. They have none of the pretty confiding ways of the Redpoll and consequently awaken but little interest.

The young Yellow Wagtails (*Budytes flava*) are also now numerous, searching, with a jaunty air, damp spots in and near the yard for insects, their tails constantly oscillating as though their owners were trying to maintain an ever changing equipoise. When the tide goes down they gather along high-water mark to feast upon the fare there provided. Flitting from rock to rock, or picking their way daintily from place to place, they afford a pleasing picture, until, their hunger satisfied, they rise, and, uttering a sharp metallic note, pass one after the other to their haunts upon the bare hillside, where they remain until the calls of appetite allure them back again.

The garden, meanwhile, has been the centre of attraction for various species of Warblers which revel among the insects found in the lettuce and turnip beds. The Black-capped Flycatcher is the most numerous though at times the Black-capped Warbler is about equally common. A Yellow Warbler at times enlivens the place, like a ray of sunshine; peering into the crevices of the fences, with an occasional foray among the spiders and other insects along the eaves of the houses, are seen the young of the Golden-crowned and the Kennicott's Warblers. From the wet paths leading away from the houses, or, at times, even from the yard itself, are started stray Water Wagtails (*Siurus naevius*) and Titlarks.

Golden-crowned Sparrows (*Zonotrichia coronata*) and Gambel's Finches claim their share of attention as they levy their tax upon the garden or flit from fence to fence, diving into the shelter of the weed patches on the first suspicious occurrence. The Fox-colored Sparrows return to take a short, though timid farewell before seeking winter quarters, followed by the Tree Sparrow.

A stray Robin shows itself oncè or twice during the summer, but a single visit to the garden appears sufficient, and the solitary voyageur is seen no more. A few Olive-backed Thrushes flit silently about for a day or two, and, if we are fortunate, we catch a glimpse of a rare visitant from Asia in the form of the Wheat-ear (*Saxicola oenanthe*) as it skulks around the end of the house and hastens to take shelter in the crevices among the rocks along the beach. I fear my thoughts are animated by a spirit of destruction, when such a visitant as this or Kennicott's Warbler is seen, which generally results in a tragedy in which the hapless little wanderer plays the part of victim. A few White-bellied Swallows fraternize with the Barn Swallows for a short time before leaving, the latter being now busily engaged in preparing their young for the long journey before them.

At times a pair of Black-breasted Turnstones are caught investigating the wet places about the houses, while the Semipalmated Sandpiper is quite numerous. Adventurous individuals of the latter even pass under the fence to explore the yard after a rain-storm. Once I even caught a Golden Plover making itself free within the fence, but as I stepped out of the house it hastily retreated.

The August moon rises, fills, and is on the wane; the air becomes chilly; one by one the sprightly forms, which, until now, have surrounded us with joyous life, slip away, so imperceptibly, however, that scarcely is one missed until we awake to the fact that of all the goodly company only a few stragglers remain. We may now look for a visit from one or two solitary Downy Woodpeckers, which, clinging pensively to the side of a log house, are evidently ruminating upon the strange phenomenon of barkless trees ranged in a series one over the other at right angles to the position in which experience has proven all properly conducted trees should extend. With a parting tap to make sure his eyes have not been deceived, he relinquishes his hold and departs for the interior where primitive nature still holds undisputed sway.

During September we are visited by various birds of prey. Every autumn brings one or two Hawk Owls to perch upon the top of the flag-staff or wind-vane, while young Goshawks and Gyrfalcons circle about, frequently alighting for a short time upon the fence or any convenient post. More rarely, a Pigeon Hawk appears for a moment, only to vanish as quickly. Several times during the evening, I have surprised a Short-eared Owl perched upon the fence or hovering over the yard, probably attracted by the mice which gather about the buildings at this season. One fall, in October, a Great Horned Owl for several successive evenings converted the woodpile into a lookout station, but was careful to decamp before a gun could be brought into requisition.

As winter sets in a small party of Black-capped Titmice may appear for a day or two and, less often, the Hudsonian Titmouse may be seen. Both climb about the old log houses or examine the weed patches, all the while cheerily uttering their familiar *dee-dee-dee*, and, in the end hurrying off as though they had not a moment to spare. Then follows a long blank, broken only by a stray party of Redpolls from their winter quarters in the interior; or, as may happen, a Ptarmigan perches upon the roof of one of the buildings for a few moments, gazing with astonishment on the mixture of dogs and men below; then, probably remembering a pressing engagement elsewhere, it precipitately departs. Once a Ptarmigan, more philosophically inclined or more foolish than the average, came whirring along and dropped into the centre of the yard amidst forty or fifty Eskimo dogs. Several persons who saw the performance stated that, as the birds feet touched the ground, there was a wild rush of dogs, a few feathers floated upward, and the dogs walked innocently away casting back regretful glances to make sure the gods were not to provide another heaven-sent gift for their delectation.

ON THE FINGERS OF BIRDS.

BY J. A. JEFFRIES.

THE anterior limb or wing of birds is homologous with the anterior limb of reptiles, batrachians and mammals. Hence it is