

WITH THE BIRDS ON A FLORIDA RIVER.

BY WILLIAM BREWSTER.

On the 19th of March, 1877, the writer, in company with a friend, took passage on a little freight steamer which at long and irregular intervals ascended the Wekiva River with supplies for the few settlers at its source. The "Fox" certainly bore a most inappropriate name, for her best speed was but little over four miles an hour. She was, in fact, an old flat-boat, square at each end, after the usual fashion of her kind, and equipped with a small engine, which, judging from its dilapidated appearance, had probably spent its best years in some saw-mill among the pineries. But from her light draught and low hull the rude craft was by no means ill-adapted to the navigation of a stream impeded by shallows and choked with fallen timber.

After spending a tedious day in the descent of the St. Johns River from Mellonville we entered the Wekiva just as the sun was setting and at once found ourselves surrounded by scenery of the most novel and beautiful character.

The short twilight of a Florida evening soon faded, however, and after a run of a few miles we were obliged to make fast to the bank, for the stream is too narrow and tortuous to be safely navigated in the night. Later, the moon rose and her rays streaming down between the tree tops cast a soft light on the narrow strip of water that stretched away into the gloom like a shining pathway. In-shore everything was in deep shadow, save where a stray beam rested on a glistening lily leaf or silvered the drooping frond of a palmetto. The night air, fragrant with the breath of forest flowers, stole gently by — so gently that scarce a leaf was stirred, and the stillness was only broken by the innumerable nocturnal voices that filled the woods.

At intervals a Courlan (*Aramus pictus*) sounded its harsh cry and the watchword, taken up by dozens of vigilant sentinals, was passed along the line of river thickets until it died in the distance. The hooting of the Barred Owls was almost incessant and the arches beneath the trees seemed to echo and prolong the hollow sound. Frequently two of them, after answering one another a

few times, would come together and their combined shrieks and whooping were absolutely indescribable. Such a meeting occurring in the middle of the night directly over the boat instantly brought us to our feet. It was their mating season, but we could not determine whether these outbursts were the love passages of the sexes or the rival performances of two males.

Everywhere by the marshy edges of the river arose a confused medley of Hyla voices, among which the tinkling note of the bell-frog was especially prominent, and underrunning all was the low monotone of the crickets. These, with the occasional croak of a Heron, were the most characteristic sounds.

I was early astir next morning and rousing my friend we took our station in the bow to watch the day break. A dense fog hung over the narrow river, shrouding even the taller trees, and the light struggling into the eastern sky just touched the upper wreaths with delicate salmon while all below still lay in gloom. Insensibly the tint deepened and worked downward; the heavens grew more opaque; the stars faded, twinkled feebly, then disappeared and every moment the daylight grew. Almost perfect silence reigned. The Owls had ceased; the frogs and crickets were still; there was a solemn hush over everything; nature seemed to sleep on the eve of her awakening. The river eddied swiftly by and so perfect was the stillness that the swash of the water laving the foliage of a drooping branch on the further shore came distinctly to the ear.

But quickly all was changed. As we looked, the beams of the rising sun touched the crests of the cypresses and, working downward, the undergrowth felt the genial warmth and the whole forest became flooded with sunshine. Then, as if the spell were broken, the birds began and their various songs swelled into a full, glad chorus. From far and near came the reveille of Woodpeckers, apparently countless in numbers. A Vireo (*V. olivaceus*) sang cheerfully from a sweet-gum near the boat and dozens of Warblers could be heard in the surrounding cypresses while a Water Thrush warbled a few doubtful notes from the recesses of the swamp.

We had brought with us a small skiff and as the steamer was not to start for an hour or more we decided to push on ahead, and a few strokes carried us around the nearest bend. On either bank rose the column-like trunks of giant cypresses whose branch-

es in many places completely overarched. Between their stems appeared dismal pools choked with decaying logs and thickly sprinkled with those curious objects called "cypress knees" which reared their slimy heads above the stagnant water. The general desolation of the scene was greatly enhanced by long streamers of *Tillandsia* "moss" that hung from every limb and waved impressively in the light morning air.

These cypress swamps rarely afford any great variety of bird life but they are by no means entirely deserted. The sonorous whistle of the Redbird (*Cardinalis virginianus*), the *pe-to, pe-to* of the Tufted Titmouse, and the clear notes of the Carolina Wren enlivened the depths of the woods while in the tree tops Yellow-throated (*Dendroica dominica*) and Blue Yellow-backed Warblers sang incessantly. Turkey Buzzards wheeled and soared overhead while an occasional dead tree was thronged with the sable forms of the Black Vultures patiently waiting until the dead alligator beneath should become sufficiently decomposed to afford them a loathsome feast. More rarely a Swallow-tailed Kite glided by, lashing the air with its cleft tail as it turned in its course or spreading it to the utmost while it poised for a moment to inspect the ground beneath, then rising on motionless wing as buoyantly as a ball of thistle-down it would float off over the woods. Once six of these graceful creatures came in sight together, chasing one another and playing like so many Swallows. When at length they left us the scene seemed to lose something and we hurried on.

With the next bend the character of the scenery changed. The river became more winding, and frequently doubled so sharply on its course that we could see across the narrow strip of land that separated the successive reaches. The current glided swiftly between well defined banks or settled for a brief rest in pools where tall sedge lined the shore and water-lilies floated on the quiet surface. Willows and sweet gums took the places of the cypresses next the stream, while in the background palmettos reared their grotesque heads and hummocks of swamp oaks shut out the sky. Everywhere near the water there was a profusion of rank vegetation and where the eye could penetrate beyond it rested on a matted undergrowth of saw-palmetto. The greens were of that vivid shade seen only in the south and with the morning dew sparkling on every leaf, the scene was one of indescribable freshness and beauty.

A great change too was apparent in the abundance and variety of animal life. Butterflies floated about the openings, the reeds were tipped with slender dragon-flies and on a half-submerged log where the sun rested lay a long line of turtles, many of them of great size and brilliant coloring. Dozens of alligators were in sight, some floating in mid-stream, others basking along the shores while one huge fellow monopolized a mud bank near at hand and turned his sunken eye on us with an expression of fierce but sleepy curiosity.

Birds of various species, especially aquatic kinds, were in great abundance. With every turn of the stream Wood Ducks and Hooded Mergansers rose before our boat or led their broods of ducklings among the water plants while an occasional Florida Gallinule peeped out from behind a lily leaf, then quietly drew back or perhaps pattered off, half running, half flying over the surface. Herons of several species were continually in sight. Now five or six Blue Egrets (*Ardea cærulea*) flapped heavily from the sedge and alighted on the surrounding trees, while a graceful Louisiana Heron, too intent on its morning meal to notice our approach, stalked through the shallows. Or a tall White Egret appeared on a distant point, its erect form and snowy plumage contrasting finely with the dark back-ground.

The Florida Cormorants and their curious relatives, the Water Turkeys (*Plotus anhinga*), were also among the characteristic birds. The latter species interested me greatly. We usually saw them in the upper branches of the trees where they sat well out over the stream and craned their long, slender necks to obtain a better view of us. Sometimes one was perched on a snag not more than a yard or two above the water, intently watching the surface like a Kingfisher. But as we drew nearer it would drop into the river and just showing its snake-like head for a moment would sink again and be seen no more.

Woodpeckers were, as a rule, less numerous here than among the cypresses, but there were numbers of the Pileated and Red-bellied species, and we saw a single pair of the rare Ivory-bills. The latter swept across the stream, the male leading, and alighted against the trunk of a palmetto. They were very shy, restlessly swinging from tree to tree, and taking good care to keep beyond gun-range. Their motions were characterized by great energy and animation and the sound of their powerful blows on the

dead trunks rang through the woods, but the only note which I heard them utter was a comparatively feeble *hæc* that reminded me of the usual cry of the little Downy. Their great size and striking coloring harmonized well with the semi-tropical surroundings. Shortly afterwards a troop of Carolina Parroquets (*Conurus carolinensis*) came darting through the trees, each individual screaming as if determined to outdo his neighbor. Their pointed wings and long tails gave them a striking resemblance to Wild Pigeons, and their flight was scarcely less swift. The sound of their clamor reached us long after they were lost to sight.

Again the scene changed. The river broadened and the forest line retreated a little, leaving an expanse of low growth with occasional open spaces between. We were approaching the "prairies" of the Wekiva, as the settlers term the peculiar flooded meadows that form so marked a feature of this in common with most Florida rivers. With the altered surroundings were introduced two birds not previously seen, the Everglade Kite and the Purple Gallinule. Both were apparently rare but several other species before uncommon now became very numerous. Of the latter class was the Florida Courlan (*Aramus pictus* [Batr.] Coues) which from its unique and interesting habits deserves something more than a passing notice. They were especially abundant about the bayous that extended back from the main river and into one of these I would now take the reader.

We entered a narrow channel that wound among the willows until it apparently came to an abrupt end. But catching the gleam of water beyond we parted the tangled vines that formed a sort of natural curtain over the outlet and pushed our way through. Before us lay a nearly circular expanse of open water with a narrow margin of sedge and in the centre a floating island, composed entirely of "bonnets," as the immense leaves of the southern water-lily are called. Thickets skirted the shore, with here and there a stray palmetto, while at the further extremity stood a group of fine cypresses. A number of Coots (*Fulica americana*) were collected around the lily-island, some of them standing on the broad leaves, others paddling idly about or chasing one another. There were a few Herons scattered along in the sedge and an Osprey quietly sat on her nest near at hand.

But if our presence was a matter of indifference to the birds just mentioned we certainly were not ignored by the vigilant Courlans.

for any sudden noise, like the splash of a paddle in the water or the rapping of its handle against the boat, was sure to be instantly followed by a piercing *kur-r-ee-ow'*, *kurr-r-ee-ow'*, *kurr-ee-ow'*, *kr-ow*, *kr-ow*, from the nearest thicket; or perhaps several would cry out at once as Rails will do on similar occasions. For the most part the birds kept closely hidden but at length we discovered one feeding on the shore. His motions were precisely similar to those of a Rail, as he skirted the oozy brink, lifting and putting down his feet with careful deliberation. Occasionally he detected and seized a snail, which was quickly swallowed, the motion being invariably accompanied by a comical side shake of the bill, apparently expressive of satisfaction, though it was perhaps designed to remove any particles of mud that may have adhered to his unique food. Finally he spied us and walked up the inclined trunk of a fallen tree to its shattered end where he stood for a moment tilting his body and jerking up his tail. Then he uttered a hoarse rattling cry like the gasp of a person being strangled, at the same time shaking his head so violently that his neck seemed in imminent danger of dislocation. Just as we were nearly within gun-range he took wing, with a shriek that might have been heard for half-a-mile. His flight was nearly like a Heron's, the wings being moved slowly and occasionally held motionless during intervals of sailing.

Shortly afterwards another, his mate probably, was detected under a palmetto leaf near at hand. In the shadow her form was dimly outlined and she stood perfectly motionless, evidently relying upon concealment for protection, but her quick eye took in every suspicious movement and at length, conscious that she was seen, she ran rapidly for a few paces and launched into the air, following the course taken by the first. Her fate was, however, sealed and the plunge of her heavy body in the water succeeded the report of the gun. Carefully laying her on a thwart in the boat we paused to admire the soft brown plumage, spotted with white and glossed with iridescent green. The light was fading in her beautiful hazel eyes and bead-like drops of water rolled from her ruffled breast. She was exceedingly heavy and muscular and upon spreading her wings I was surprised at their great breadth.

The preceding account will, I trust, illustrate one phase of the Courlan's nature. But I cannot hope to do full justice to the sub-

ject within the limits of the present paper, for his character is a many-sided one. He is perfectly at home in the tops of the tallest trees where he walks among the twigs with all the ease of a Heron or stands motionless on some horizontal branch with one leg drawn up and the curved bill resting on his breast. These elevated perches are generally resorted to at daybreak. The people told us that when the country was first settled the "Limkins," as they are called from their peculiar halting gait, were so tame that they could frequently be caught on their nests, but incessant persecution has had the usual result and they are now at all times among the most wary of birds.

But our morning had passed into noon. The sun poured down its scorching rays, the birds sought a deeper shade among the thickets, and quiet succeeded the former bustle and activity. A distant whistle caused us to hurry back into the river and as we passed out under the vines the steamer appeared around a bend below, puffing desperately as she struggled against the current. At her approach the Coots scurried off over the lonely pool; the Osprey hurriedly launched out from her nest and the startled Herons disappeared over the tree-tops. The charm of the place was gone.

Recent Literature.

COUES'S THIRD INSTALMENT OF AMERICAN ORNITHOLOGICAL BIBLIOGRAPHY.*—The present instalment of Dr. Coues's "American Ornithological Bibliography" is by far the largest of the three, embracing upward of 500 pages, and completes his "Bibliography of Ornithology so far as America is concerned." The first instalment appeared in 1878, as an "Appendix" of 218 pages to this author's "Birds of the Colorado Valley" (see this Bulletin, Vol. IV, pp. 56, 57), and gave the titles of "Faunal Publications" relating to North America. The second instalment (about 100 pages) was published September, 1879, in the "Bulletin of the U. S. Geological and Geographical Survey of the Territories" (Vol. V, pp. 239-330), and embraced the titles of "Faunal publications" relating to the rest of America (noticed in this Bulletin, Vol. V, p. 40). The present

* Third Instalment of American Ornithological Bibliography. By Dr. Elliott Coues. U. S. A. Bull. U. S. Geol. and Geog. Surv. of the Territories, Vol. V, No. 4, 1879, pp. 521-1066. Published "Sept. 30, 1880."