

The young when hatched are naked, but gradually become sparsely covered with light down. Feeding, which is participated in by both parents, takes place at short intervals during the greater part of the day, until the young are ready to leave the nest. So far as I have been able to observe, the parent birds appear to entice the ambitious nestlings into the tule and willow thickets away from the open flats where they may have been hatched. This is probably in order to afford them the shelter of the branches and, by removing them some little distance from the ground, to protect them against small predatory mammals.

In September the summer songs of the males have ceased and a great diminution in their numbers is noticeable. By November, *sinuosa* has again largely retired to his tule jungle and with his added winter air of distrust is once more the shy flitting figure of the December marshlands.

San Francisco, November 9, 1917.

A RETURN TO THE DAKOTA LAKE REGION

By FLORENCE MERRIAM BAILEY

With one photo by Robert B. Rockwell

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5. THE PHALAROPE SLOUGH

ANOTHER slough only a few rods from the farm house filled a level floored basin bounded by a low-bench line. When the first settlers came, the slough was an overflow from the lakes, one could row from it to both the north and middle Sweetwaters, I was told; but now in dry years the entire slough could be mowed, as was attested by remains of fenced haystacks that made islands in the open water of the slough. The grass was the typical headed slough grass though not quite so high as that in the Big Slough, while its water was only about knee deep. The place had attracted me from the first because of the Redwings that nested there and the Sora Rails whose ringing ecstatic songs came from it. In looking for the invisible Sora, one day, I flushed a small timid Sparrow, presumably the Nelson, which sang a variety of songs with the emphasis on the first and second syllables—*chit'-tah-chitter; chat', chat, chat-ah-cha; chit', chat', chitter, chitter chit; or chit, chat, chittah, chittah, chittah*—and which gave a flash of buffy before he disappeared in the grass. When he had gone down and I had roused the worried interest of several pairs of Blackbirds, I had a great surprise.

The Redwings which were following me around in the slough were joined in air by two small waders, white from below and with sharp bony wing angles. Slender, long-winged, able-winged creatures of the air, with long legs projecting beyond their white fan tails, they were striking contrasts to the stocky Red-winged Blackbirds, so evidently creatures of the earth. Much smaller than the Upland Plover, with free open flight instead of the quick wing beats of *Bartramia*, and with a hoarse cry too large for their size, they puzzled me greatly; for it was hard to catch markings, they flew so high above my

head. But at last, getting a hint of the reddish brown neck stripe, I knew my lovely birds for the Wilson Phalarope, and recalled with a thrill that they were said to nest in prairie sloughs. The Wilson Phalarope! Years before, my first—shall I ever forget it?—was seen on a flood pond in Texas on its northward migration, its slender neck arched, its plump body riding the water with easy grace; dainty, exquisite bird with touches of color adding richness and elegance to its beautiful form.

Before reaching the Sweetwaters, I had seen a small flock on Devil's Lake, charming little creatures, rapidly turning and twisting as they picked up tiny insects from the surface of the water. And now to find the lovely birds with a glamour all their own, living in my very dooryard! My cup seemed full indeed. The slough seemed a place of rare good luck and mystery. Where had the beautiful visitors hidden their nest?



Fig. 5. THE RESULT OF A SUCCESSFUL HUNT—A WILSON PHALAROPE ON ITS NEST.

Photo by Robert B. Rockwell.

When they stopped following me for a few moments, one of them flew away out across the slough and I saw it go down. Marking the spot by a distant fence post, I started to wade to it, but as I waded I came to one of the haystack islands from which a party of Blue-winged Teal and some larger ducks rose, and on which scattered feathers spoke of a preening ground. The Phalaropes discovering me here began following me around and one finally flew down to another haystack island where, although it tried to crouch to make itself inconspicuous, I had a moment's good look at it. When standing with wings folded it seemed much smaller than with wings extended in flight. Exquisite, slender-throated little beauty! How I feasted my eyes on it

In flying back and forth the White-wings did not follow me closely as did the Redwings, but crying in a hoarse monotone of one or two notes they swept from one end of the long slough to the other including me in their beat and

sometimes coming as low as ten or fifteen feet from my head. They generally flew near together, especially as they approached me, but toward the ends of their beat would sweep off wide apart in a broad turn. In flying swiftly by with closed tail the disappearing Phalarope suggested the bullet-like end of a dirigible, but when one hesitated over my head, its slender outstretched feet and legs trembling from arrested motion, its spread tail suggested a white silk fan. Sometimes the beautiful birds would hover in air with feet hanging, calling *wek-wek-wek-wek-wek*.

Most of the time during the first day that I was watching them, two pairs of Redwings and two White-wings were following me. When they were excitedly flying over my head, one of the Phalaropes almost jostled wings with a Blackbird, and another time when the weaving wings became confused, a Barn Swallow actually chased a Phalarope for a good swing of the circle, a Swallow being used to circling the earth unhindered. Again, a Killdeer added its emotional cry in passing. When a young Redwing flew clumsily and noisily out of hiding, the old ones made a great to-do, one of them projecting a handsomely decorative figure against the blue overhead, with wings and tail widely spread. As I passed a fence, an old male addressing his mate puffed out his scarlet epaulettes till he seemed all red, the glowing color filling the eye. A third Phalarope appeared on the scene later, but did not join in the demonstration.

There were two pairs of Phalaropes apparently living in the slough, and the two that most persistently followed me about were probably the larger, more brilliantly colored females patrolling the slough while their mates—reversing the general laws of nature as they do—were brooding the eggs and caring for the young. But in any case the presence of these most interesting birds made the slough a compelling place to return to.

Enticing as it had been from the presence of the teasing, invisible Soras, now, with a bird of rare charm conspicuous in its sky, the little Rail's songs called irresistibly from its green cover. There was a delightful Sora concert before sunset one evening when I was there, the blithe songs tripping joyously down the chromatic scale, and at night, from the open windows of the farm house occasional outbursts came till nearly midnight from this joyous, irrepressible Bobolink of the Sloughs.

The afternoon following my discovery of the Phalaropes, I again made my way down to their attractive home. Small cumulus clouds floated in the soft blues of the level horizon while big white clouds with wind-frayed edges stood out in the deeper blues above; but as with the Big Slough, the low horizon clouds seemed to come close, to make the prairie circle small and intimate, to make the Phalarope Slough a little world of its own. And what a sunny, peaceful world it seemed, with the western sun yellowing its tall waving grass and giving a keen edge to streaks of yellow mustard beyond! Across the near sky line, telling of peace and plenty, a gang plow moved slowly back and forth. As the horses went and came, I corrected my count of five, for one horse without a white nose stripe—interesting point in Protective Coloration—had not been discovered at first!

As I waded slowly about the slough, swashing through the water in my rubber boots, getting whiffs of fragrant mint and enjoying the pink flower spikes, near the line of the wire fence the Redwings followed me solicitously and the Whitewings flew overhead watchfully, but—clear mark of intelligence—after

one day's experience the Phalaropes showed much less anxiety and did so little calling that I was actually afraid they would lose interest in me and fail to appear.

Redwings on fence posts called *tchack* and whistled and opened wide their bills, emitting a gurgling run. The sight of a striped female carrying food, and glimpses of grown young gave point to the solicitations of the six that flew noisily back and forth over my head, sometimes with feet dangling, when I was in their especial neighborhood. Wading out to the fenced hay island where the Phalarope had stood while I admired him, I opened my camp stool in the shallow water and sat down with the brown-topped grass waving high around me. On three of the four fence posts, Redwings lit, males on two posts, a female on the third. Other males tried to take forcible possession of the post occupied by the female, but she, as if aware of the tendency of the times, flatly refused to relinquish it! A handsome male with flaming epaulettes flew close over my head trying to get courage to light on the fourth post, in front of me. The Whitewings were evidently afraid to light on the fenced island, much as they wanted to, so I finally gave up waiting for them and moved on to explore other parts of the slough.

Another time a pair of Shovellers were flushed from this popular resort and a pair of Blue-winged Teal rose from a similar hay island, flying off with a weak *wang, wang*. Once a pair of Mallards, the duck in the lead, circled twice around me and then flew off, and occasionally a single duck or a pair would fly swiftly low across the slough to disappear in the green of the prairie.

As nearly as I could make out, the Phalaropes lighted only in the old hay islands, going down awkwardly and with apparent effort as if the air were the only natural place for them. One in descending first dropped its legs and then tipped up its wings, giving the effect of pitching head first.

Various small Sparrows sang small songs in the slough grass here and there, some Savannahs, some Nelsons, and perhaps others. One Nelson gave its *tsang'ger-ee*, but in such a subdued voice that I barely recognized it. Another small Sparrow sprang up high in the air and gave a flight song, but with such a faint buzz that I could hardly be sure it was singing. Delightful little will-o'-the-wisps, they added their own charm of life and mystery to the slough.

As I waded slowly back and forth through the high grass, the Soras were singing ahead of me, and when I stopped and sat down quietly they sang all around me. When I tried to whistle them up one answered so near that it seemed to fairly take the words out of my mouth, and I barely escaped seeing it. But although I did fail to see the mouse-like little Rails in their dense cover, several times during the summer I was fortunate enough to happen along just as one was walking jauntily along a ditch or slough by the roadside—once when a small furry animal, doubtless a meadow mouse swimming to shore, attracted my eye. Again, a little fellow was wading up to his body, with wings tight at his sides, as neatly and prettily as could be; and another time one deliberately walked across the road only fifteen or twenty feet ahead of the automobile.

The call of the Sora, though only a single *kee* or a double *ker-wee* roused my attention by its brightness and animation as well as its association with the more elaborate song. Tripping down the scale in a rapid chromatic *We-he-ee-ee-ee-ee-ee*—or *Kee-wee-wee-wee-wee-wee-wee*, the song rang with exuberant joyousness. When not sung with fervid ecstasy to its close, the scale was

broken near the end, and after a moment's pause, the last notes were repeated, slowing up at the close. What a delight to sit in the slough and hear these charming musical scales run all around you from invisible choristers! Joyous Bobolinks of the Sloughs, they surely are! After a rich afternoon with the Phalaropes and the Rails, as I started homeward facing the lowering sun, the shining bent blades of the beautiful slough grass, green to the east, were blowing white to the west.

Wondering if possibly the Phalaropes nested on the dry ground outside, instead of in the water-floored slough itself, I walked down the adjoining strip of dry ground; but though one of the long-winged birds came far afield to investigate me, he soon returned to the other Whitewings and they all kept beating back and forth over the brown-topped acres where their chief interest indisputably lay. But where were the nests, I kept asking myself with insistent disappointment. Perhaps on some of the platforms of old hay that I had missed, safe in the heart of their water-floored cover.

On my last visit to the Phalarope Slough, about a week after my discovery of the birds, as two flew overhead near together I distinctly caught the reddish brown stripe along the front of the neck and the color on the chest characterizing the female. By this time the birds were so used to me that their remonstrance at my presence was half-hearted and they soon dropped back to go about their own affairs. I had failed to find their nests, I acknowledged with keen regret, but the beautiful Whitewings had given me many choice hours.

As I waded around listening to Soras and nondescript Sparrows, a noise overhead made me look up. High up, away up in the blue dome, so high it seemed as if it must soon go out of sight, I discovered first one and then one more white Gull—a rarely lovely sight. Then as I turned toward home, a great cloud of white smoke from a burning straw stack rolled up and, blown by the wind, swept out across the prairie.

6. FROM THE FARMHOUSE

A low knoll overlooking the sloughs afforded dry ground for the farm buildings, and barn, vegetable garden, and potato patch attracted birds not found in the wet sloughs. In the barn, around whose doors the large band of farm horses and colts gathered picturesquely, a colony of Barn Swallows made themselves at home, and short rows twittered on the telephone wire outside, at a safe distance from hungry cats. On a fence near the barn an Eave Swallow was seen once or twice, perhaps from a neighbor's eaves.

The piazza of the farmhouse looked out on a yard having delightful western suggestions—scattered banners of gramma grass and a low form of sagebrush (*Artimisia frigida*), well associated with Clay-colored Sparrows and Western Meadowlarks. One of the larks sang habitually from the posts of the garden fence and he had a droll, rag-time phrase that seemed to run in his head. *Su'-key, su'-key, su'-key, su'-key, suke'*, he sang over and over, to the irritation of the listener but with entire satisfaction to himself; he, the renowned musician who—but perhaps he was a young tenor whose full repertoire had not yet been developed! Or, on the other hand, was it he whom I happened on at a crucial moment? On the grass in front of the house a handsome suitor stood facing his lady, displaying all his charms, his black-collared golden breast and his rich elaborate song, rendered with ardor and persuasiveness. Apparently, however, both charm of voice and person were lost on the lady, for

she made no sign; and as if feeling his dismissal final, he flew back to the garden, presumably leaving the field to a third Meadowlark who was waiting as if to see what the decision of the lady might be.

His love song, especially as given in flight, is a musical rhapsody, an elaborate musical performance suggestive of the enraptured flight song of the Oven-bird, altogether apart from the rich, uplifted songs of both eastern and western Meadowlarks.

The season of song varied somewhat with the birds. A Vesper Sparrow was heard July 12th singing with such sweetness and fervor that I imagined a second nest was in progress, while both House Wren and Song Sparrow sang enthusiastically, and the Sora Rail joyfully the second week in August. In the main, however, the lovely song of the Meadowlark stood out with peculiar charm in the August dearth of song.

In June and July the tinkle of the Horned Lark was often heard from the piazza, for the birds were attracted by the large black-earthed square of the vegetable garden, as a family of Killdeer were attracted to the soft earth of the potato patch. But our most striking visitors were the handsome Yellow-headed Blackbirds who came from their marsh nesting grounds to the garden for worms. Between times they sat around on fence post or wagon wheel looking very much overdressed with their low-cut orange vests, at intervals giving vent to their feelings in curious fashion. One of their calls suggested the *krup* of the Red-headed Woodpecker; another, too harsh and strident for such elegant personages, might have suggested an exaggerated Redwing *o-ka-lee*, but was in reality a strange *oak-oak-kah*, so run together that the k's gave a sustained throaty effect. The Yellow-head's song was even more peculiar than his call. Raising his head he started out not unmusically, but followed with an awful strangling utterance, after which he serenely put his head down and sang a low rhapsody full of delightful musical murmurings! Such originality carried into every day life would surely make him an enlivening companion!

Several times, as I sat writing on the piazza, I looked up just in time to see a brown Duck furtively waddling by along the protecting bottom of a terrace; but hunt as I might, I never succeeded in discovering her nest.

In the late afternoons the rattle of old Polly's hoofs would make me look up quickly to greet our little school boy, home again from his daily three mile ride across the prairie. And later, when he had taken a look at his new brother, at the sound of loping feet I would see him again, on a fresh horse, racing bare-back down the wheat fields to bring in the cows for the evening milking. In the barn yard at one time were found some of the repulsive looking mud puppies chanced on in other places, one half buried in a mound of soft earth—big black, lizard-like creatures, sometimes spotted with yellow, with round puppy heads, soft bodies, and thin, high paddle-like tails which they whipped around to terrorize inquisitive chickens and other too familiar observers. A plague of these horrid, uncanny creatures appeared at times, as once during a storm when so many took refuge in a cook car, that they had to be shovelled out of the door, the Norwegian cook informed me.

From the piazza of the farmhouse many a beautiful picture was seen during the season. Gorgeous sunsets were so frequent in this lake region with its heavy summer storms that they were one of my greatest pleasures. One June night when the wind was shifting and the sky breaking away after a storm—low buffy clouds blowing southwest—the sun shot out blindingly in the

west and the red farm buildings glowed a keen red, the fence posts standing as bars of gold. Over the fields the projected shadows of the buildings made irregular domes of cold green across the sunlit yellow green of the young wheat fields. On a July night a thunder storm at supper time made an obscured sunset, but when the heavy rain fell from the sky, the darkness lightened and an unusual color effect was given the landscape. The squares of plowed ground stood out black against the intense vivid green of the grain fields. It was at once a repressed but illuminated sunset, the light apparently being reflected from the clouds.

After trying east winds, electric storms, and unprecedented rains, near the middle of July the wind veered to the northwest giving us one of the perfect, heavenly prairie days with serene blue sky, ever shifting cloud forms, and a caressingly soft prairie breeze that brought the sweet breath of new-mown hay. As I watched the ever-changing white forms in the sky, I wished that a moving picture film might be taken of clouds on the prairie. Now a row of pointed caps marked the east, now small irregular cloudlets floated along the southern horizon; then cumulus masses formed but to dissolve, while far-flung exultant clouds held the eye in the high sky. Bands of light illumined the wheat fields, and from a fence post a Vesper Sparrow sang his uplifted song, in rare harmony with it all.

(To be continued)

SIX WEEKS IN THE HIGH SIERRAS IN NESTING TIME

By MILTON S. RAY

WITH FOUR PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR

BY RETURNING for a number of years to the same localities in the Tahoe region I have had opportunity to note the variations in its bird-life from year to year, both in abundance and variety. Almost every season I have added new birds to the Lake Valley list, though each year, too, I have failed to record certain birds present the previous seasons.

The winter of 1911 had been one of very heavy snowfall, and while en route from Truckee to Lake Tahoe on the thirteenth of May the train track led the entire distance through snow, in places as deep as twelve feet. Willows and aspens along the roaring streams showed as yet no signs of leaf. Notwithstanding this wintry outlook, I noticed a newly completed nest of the Water Ouzel (*Cinclus mexicanus unicolor*) on the top of a large boulder in the middle of the Truckee River near Deer Park Station, while nearer Lake Tahoe I noted numerous American Mergansers (*Merganser americanus*) in pairs flying up stream.

Snow, three to twelve feet deep, running down to the water's edge, covered the western shores of Lake Tahoe everywhere along the route to Bijou, where I arrived at 1:45 P. M. in time for a short tramp afield. I saw the Audubon Warbler (*Dendroica auduboni auduboni*), Calliope Hummingbird (*Stellula calliope*) and seven other species in the winter-like solitudes, before a blinding snow-storm