

A RETURN TO THE DAKOTA LAKE REGION

By FLORENCE MERRIAM BAILEY

(Continued from volume XXI, page 230)

PASSING WINGS

EAGER TO SEE the lakes where the Ducks of East Sweetwater went at night, and to find where the Gulls that came over to Sweetwater at night spent their days, I made a circle of six or seven miles out over the harvest fields, discovering four blue lakes among the dumps of glacial drift. Three were rather small, but one was long and attractively irregular in outline, and all were open bordered so that it was possible to see approaching hunters from a distance. The nearest lake, from whose direction many of our Ducks came, was a small round basin sheltered from the wind by low glacial hills and had strips of beach that glowed pink with a low branching plant suggesting coral. A flock of about thirty Canvas-backs and a few other Ducks were already here at half past four, but at sight of my figure on the bank above nervously rose and swung back toward Sweetwater.

Another of the small lakes, besides the Ducks scattered over its surface, had a flock of seventy or eighty Franklin Gulls sitting picturesquely in the middle of its blue water. Sloping up from this lake to the wheat fields was a rough strip of weeds and bushes from which I flushed some young Prairie Chickens, two of which burst away like bombs from almost under my feet. The largest of the four lakes, on which was a goodly number of Ducks, had a long point projecting out into the water which was outlined with Franklin Gulls, probably gathered in ready to fly across to Sweetwater. The harvesters had reported seeing Gulls "catching crickets", and when starting on my round I had discovered a flock hunting over the bundles of wheat. One would fly low over the shocks till, apparently, a cricket or a grasshopper caught its eye, when it would suddenly pounce down upon it. A droll sight it certainly was, to see a Gull, a bird associated with the ocean, in the middle of a harvest field sitting on a shock of wheat catching insects!

On the way home after my tour of the lakes, following for greater ease the hard tracks of the reaper and binder, I crossed prairie billows dotted with shocks of wheat; billow after billow rounding up as far as the eye could see, under the blue sky; until, all landmarks lost, I looked to the sun, pointing the compass in the west. Another type of prairie landscape, another prairie microcosm, these rolling billows with their straw colored sheaves of wheat added to those of the level-topped miles of grain, the cloud-encircling sloughs, and the golden mustard islands.

My tour of the lakes gave me a new understanding of the movements of the masses of waterfowl to and from East Sweetwater. While many flocks of Ducks usually crossed from our lake to the open eastern lakes during the latter part of the afternoon, about the middle of August, on several days that I watched them, the flocks from the west end of our lake gathered along the tules bordering the east bank before flying over. On August 17, at 6:30, there was a wide band of Ducks so closely brown-spotted that from my distance it was impossible to count individuals. Hundreds were there. Many preliminary adjustments were made,

with beautiful mass movements. Some of those in the front ranks would start up, others down the line following, their brown bodies and light underwings catching the western light. Sometimes when the light struck their underparts, the shifting flocks looked almost as white as flocks of Sandpipers in evolution. Flying up over the trees bordering the lake, they would swing around with a wide circuit, settling down again on the water. Once so many rose that the whole surface of the water seemed in motion. And still the flocks of Blue-winged Teal and other Ducks kept coming from the back of the lake to join the restless throng, some flying so low that they were mirrored as they came.

After much shifting back and forth, the black hordes started up over the bank and across the sky toward the eastern lake, winging their way along till finally their black dots disappeared in the sky. As I was watching the shifting formation of the outgoing black hordes, to my surprise, coming in toward the lake passing them, was a white horde of Gulls, as they reached the slanting rays of western light turning one by one to glistening spots in the sky. Flying out over the middle of the lake, they settled down on its surface, presumably for safe shelter for the night.

At 7 o'clock more Ducks crossed over to the east, and again, as the black flock passed out, to my great delight, in came another long trailing white flock of Gulls. At 7:20 a small flock of little Phalaropes came in and lit among the tule islands. At 7:30 mixed flocks of Blackbirds began stringing along to the islands in front of me. By this time the main movements of the Ducks seemed over for the night. Hundreds had flown across to the eastern lakes but hundreds remained along the east side of Sweetwater below the tule border, while others were scattered among the tule islands and the western part of the lake, much as in the day time.

At 7:40 the shocks of wheat lit by the lowering sun sent long shadows across the stubble field. A Night Heron flew over the lake and lit at the edge of a tule island, Gulls called, and the occasional quack of a Mallard was heard. At 7:53 Blackbird notes were heard, and a Song Sparrow sang brightly a number of times, while Barn Swallows came drifting into the tules. At 8 o'clock a few Yellow-headed Blackbirds were flying toward the canes, while another Heron flew across to a tule island, probably to go fishing. The sun was now a yellow ball on the horizon, the surrounding sky a clear red, the lake a satiny gray with soft pink lights and reflected salmon cloudlets. Barn Swallows were still skimming over the water and running through the sky before settling down in the tules, a few Blackbirds were still shifting about, and a few Ducks still swimming around. There was a soft cool breeze, grateful enough after the heat of the day, bringing the sweet smell of the wheat. Above the blue of the horizon there grew a delicate pink afterglow, more pink coming into the water. At 8:09 when the lake seemed settled for the night, a large flock of Franklin Gulls came trooping through the sky, passing on in the direction of the main Sweetwater lakes to the west.

The next night was cloudy, with a hard south wind blowing, and the Ducks hurried across to the eastern lakes to get settled for the night in the protection of the hills. As early as six o'clock the sky over the lake was astir with Ducks, Gulls, and Black Terns, the Terns flying about over the surface, dipping down as if to pick off insects as they went. The most notable sights were a beautiful flock of Gulls that came in at seven o'clock, glistening white spots against the dark woods at the south end of the lake, and at 7:45 a flock of two or three hun-

dred more straggling in from the east, a rare sight illumined by the setting sun. Another night at 7:12, a Crow cawed, there was a roar, and up rose a black horde of Redwings and Yellow-headed Blackbirds. Before going far the flock split, part going west to the canes, part east to a willow, a black mass entering it.

During the days when the hordes of Ducks and Gulls were moving back and forth between their feeding grounds and their sleeping grounds, migrating flocks of Bank Swallows stopped off with us on their southward journey. The first of August a flock of five or six hundred took possession of a section of telephone wire over the wheat fields, looking like beads on a string, and in flying down, as when a Hawk passed, looking like swarms of insects over the wheat. At first they kept to the wires over the fields, but afterwards came up to the wires near the farm house where they could roost in the trees if they chose.

Once a dead cottonwood was all a-flutter with them, more a-flutter than when the wind had rustled its leaves; for with balancing wings they were trying to light on the sides of the upright twigs. Going over to the large living poplar trees, they fairly swarmed about the green tops. When on the wires near the house, at the slightest disturbance they would fly down over the road and grain field. At a loud twitter of alarm from one voice, nearly all dropped from the wires, but when nothing happened, back they flew again.

In the hottest parts of the August days some took sunbaths on the wires, striking amusing attitudes, tilting up one wing so the lining showed and spreading the tail till it made a grayish fan in the sun; or spreading both wings and tail and holding them out for the sun to beat down on. But the strangest thing they did was to lie down on the road. Some lay as if dead, looking like specimens in a museum case, except that their backs were up. Power through Repose might well be their motto! Were they tired young, recently projected from their stable nesting holes in the bank and finding the need of Rhythm in Life? For even a Swallow cannot always be on the wing or on a vibrating telephone wire. Some, instead of lying prone, sat up and picked about; others, apparently fluffy breasted young, took sunbaths lying on one side, showing the light breast and the underside of the wing as it tilted up sharp pointedly. One lay with both wings up. They seemed to want the sun to sift down through their feathers and under their wings, but only one that I saw gave any suggestion of trying to dust. When a ground squirrel, ignoring their presence, trotted down the road most of them rose, though a few on the far wagon track stayed where they were. Among the large flocks of Bank Swallows I recognized one Barn, one Eave, and I thought one White-bellied Swallow. Some of the flock in the early afternoons were seen sweeping over the smooth white face of the water.

While the Swallows were still with us, the August heat culminated in a cyclonic disturbance. The Norwegian farmer's wife at the north side of the house was watching a strange dark gray cloud that, as she said afterwards, started big at the top and circled and kept circling till it got small at the bottom, near the earth "like a tahsel cap". At this point a commercial traveler drove up to the house and looking north demanded, "What's that cloud?" exclaiming after a second look, "That's a cyclone cloud!" Just then a black whirl of dust suddenly swept out over the grain fields. The men in the hayfield seeing it coming drove behind a large hay stack and fortunately, although many stacks were torn apart and scattered over the field, theirs escaped. When the wind had passed

we looked down at the lake, usually so quiet, and saw white spray blowing from the surface of the roughened water out onto the bank above. To the south of us, we heard later, buildings were blown down and people killed by the cyclone. Big thunder heads, an electric storm, and a rainbow followed, and the next morning it was cooler. As my notes record, there was "a cool perfect day with west wind and a wonderful sunset."

Where the Swallows were during the storm I do not know, but at seven o'clock that night, as if nothing had happened, they were flying from the lake across the wheat field to the telegraph wires in front of a deserted cabin. By this time the flock had increased in size from five or six hundred to between nine hundred and a thousand. They fairly swarmed around the house, lighting on the ridgepole and the chimney and then dropping off and flying over to the wires. The late comers had to fly along the line looking for a vacant seat. If a row was sitting close, the seated birds objected to the efforts of the newcomers, perhaps not liking to have their balance disturbed; so, after flying along the most closely packed wires, they had to go on to the more openly spaced. After laboriously getting settled, at a word, those on a long length of wire would break away and have it all to do over again.

Finally, to my surprise, a large section suddenly dropped from the wires and flying toward the lake crossed high over the wheat field, the sky fairly twinkling, sparkling, as their white fronts caught the light. Then they pitched down over the lake and I realized with a thrill that this great migrating flock, nearly a thousand strong, was going to roost in the tules, a sight that, for years, I had been longing to witness. What a perfect hour they celebrated! No trace of the cyclonic disturbance was left. The woods at the foot of the lake, yellowed and enriched with shadows by the sinking sun, were mirrored in the quiet water. The tule islands—long thin streaks of tule—were imaged in the lake whose opaque surface was almost opalescent with the reflections of soft cloudlets. Glancing back at the wires I saw another section left bare, a large flock breaking away and sweeping low over the surface of the water, glinting white as they went. Swarming over the tule islands, fluttering over the dark pointed stems and settling down among them, when I supposed they were quiet in their roost, they swarmed up again, going on to other islands out in the sunset. By 7:20 the wires were deserted and the flock apparently quiet for the night, though the harvester was still heard in the wheat field, and not until after our belated supper did the shocks of wheat around the farm-house lose the soft pink of the afterglow.

The next morning at eight o'clock when the shore was resounding with the notes of young Black Terns, and large flocks of Ducks from the open lakes were coming back and lighting down, the surface of the lake was alive with Swallows, and some were flying back to the wires; but in the afternoon when a strong east wind was blowing up rain, none were to be seen; they had doubtless started off on another stage of their long journey. This was the fourth of August. On the sixth, when no Swallows had been seen for a day, a flock of five or six hundred appeared on the wires by the farmhouse, another invoice from the north, as I imagined.

Covering two wires between poles they sat facing the north wind, in places sitting so close together that the borders of their tails made a regular pattern. The next night at 7:10, when two hundred and fifty or three hundred were on

the wires, part of them broke away; but instead of flying toward the lake as I expected them to do, flew up in the sky, flashing white and going higher and higher until, before my enraptured gaze, they actually went up out of sight in the blue! The next division of the flock flew about erratically at first, but calls as of command from above apparently drew them together and they too rose higher and higher till they went out of sight in the sky, leaving me thrilled and awed by this translation of a winged host.

During the short interval between the visits of the two great flocks of Bank Swallows—on August 4—a flock of migrating Wilson Phalaropes appeared on the lake. On my way home from the cove of the Ruddies, I had just looked back at the western shore where a glittering sunpath was starting across the water. When out on the lake my attention was arrested by a compact flock of small Snipe-like birds that came swinging in to alight on the smooth glistening water. Their slender necks, nodding heads, and their quick nervous manner of turning from side to side to pick insects from the surface proclaimed them Phalaropes, and I welcomed them with peculiar delight after my experiences on Phalarope Slough during the summer. Perhaps my friends were among them! In any case, it seemed a rare privilege to be visited by a migrating flock of the exquisite birds. The water appeared covered with them. Overhead white-breasted Gulls wandered about, and twittering Swallows came out of the blue sky, while on lake and in sky the scenes were being shifted for the last act—the beautiful close of the day, well fitted to celebrate the coming of these spirit-like wanderers.

Two days afterwards, late in the afternoon, I found the quiet surface of the lake alive with them. Looking across the water I could place them by dots heading short hair-line wakes. From one spot I counted fifty of them, and that was only a fraction of their numbers. They rode like miniature Franklin Gulls, with wings tight at their sides and tails up, while their long-billed heads nodded and picked to right and left. Though generally feeding from the surface one would sometimes give a quick jab so deep below that its tail tipped up. When they rose and flew, they made a close flock with white retreating spindles, and wheeling, went on with swift aerial evolutions till I stood amazed. For how do they get their training? Who calls "Fall in?" Who drills their troop to acquire such perfect efficiency?

As they re-lit, their long wings pointed forward a second in beautiful pose. Sometimes a pretty picture was caught as a delicately modelled head and neck was reflected in the still water. Before sunset the lake presented a beautiful water color in soft gray and silver. On the gray water of the east side of the lake, each Phalarope's wake had a silvery sheen; between the tule islands were long silvery lines, while beyond, the main body of the lake was a sheet of silver; and away at the end of the field of vision, soft gray cloud lay along the horizon. Over this rarely beautiful water color, softly tinted Gulls flew about, harmonizing, bringing together all the delicate elements of the picture.

The next morning at eight o'clock when Swallows and Black Terns were skimming over the surface of the lake and large flocks of Ducks were coming in from the east, the white bodied Phalaropes were down at the south end of the lake, showing well in the dark reflections of the trees. At six o'clock that night over three hundred of the little creatures were gathered in the same place, suggesting close set pins in the smooth water, small flocks of them at times rising and swinging around in beautiful white-flashing formation.

Although this was the largest number of Phalaropes observed, smaller flocks were noted on the lake for about ten days, seventy or more being found in the cove of the Ruddies the middle of August. A small band was discovered one afternoon when the lake was lovely with the reflection of blue sky and creamy clouds, the spirit-like Phalaropes swimming around among the mirrored clouds.

So many rare pictures were exhibited in this lake region, alive with water-fowl and with its swift alternation of sun and cloud, its broad mirror and its resplendent sunsets whose canvas hung to the level prairie horizon, that it was difficult to say which was the most beautiful; but two striking pictures stand out from among them. One was of a sunset when, with a clear sky above, three great thunder head masses of creamy cloud stood out on the horizon—northeast, east, and southeast. One mass with concave, shell-like salmon and pink interior suggested the Flight from Pompeii, the robe drawn protectingly high above the heads of the tender fliers. While no storm came from the thunder heads, lightning played over their salmon surfaces, and the sunset as it grew, painted them with delicate tints of cyanic pink and blue.

In the other sunset, the west showed the clear red tone which is a familiar home-like background; but in the east, horizontal parallel lines of gray blue cloud carried the mind far out over the ocean. Then gradually the warm tones spread from the west by roseate slanting scorings till, growing rich and ragged, the color passed on, softly permeating the gray blue of the east, producing exquisite color harmonies on the face of this cloud-born ocean.

(To be continued)

NOTES ON THE LIMICOLAE OF SOUTHERN BRITISH COLUMBIA

By ALLAN BROOKS

THESE NOTES were inspired by Mr. J. H. Bowles' paper on "The Limicolae of the State of Washington" (*Auk*, vol. xxxv, 1918, pp. 326-333). No group of birds has been so neglected by the ornithologists of the western states prior to the last ten years or so, and the paper cited is the best evidence of the increase of interest in these fascinating birds.

In the notable work on "The Game Birds of California", recently published, the authors deal in full with all the shorebirds known to occur in that state; and the impression to be gathered is that they consider the state to have been fairly exhaustively worked. With all deference, it would seem to the present writer that a great deal of work is still needed to bring the records of the Limicolae up to anything like the standard of those of the birds in all the other orders. If a few collectors and observers of the caliber of Mr. R. H. Beck could work the coast-line and inland waters of California as Beck worked the waters off Monterey, not only would a number of species now considered scarce be proved to be of regular occurrence, but several species would be added to the state list, and in all probability stragglers from Asia would add species to the North American list.

Of the species to be added to the Californian list the Semipalmated, Stilt,