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Bird Gossip

A SERIES OF BIRD-LIFE SKETCHES

—BY—

MARY B. MUNROE



*The Nighthawk,
Whip-poor-will and
Chuck-will's-widow*

(Continued from September Number)

The Whip-poor-will and the Chuck-will's Widow

THE two birds are so nearly alike that a description of one will almost answer for the other; and yet they do differ in various minor points.

The chuck-will's-widow is the southern whip-poor-will. His notes are louder, less rapidly uttered and each call has an additional syllable. The wide-open mouth of an adult bird measures full two inches, and for this reason he can, and does, swallow much larger objects than either the night-hawk or whip-poor-will, small birds having been found in its stomach, while the food of the night-hawk and whip-poor-will consists only of all kinds of insect life.

The chuck-will's-widow and whip-poor-will also resemble each other so closely in size, color and markings, when seen in the woods, that there is little wonder that they are mistaken for each other.

The Seminole Indians call the chuck-will's-widow "Suc-belan-beia," and consider him a bird of good fortune. An Indian boy can so perfectly imitate its call that even the birds themselves are deceived. Torrey in his Florida sketch book writes the "Chant of the Chuck-Will's-Widow,"

a name which the owner himself pronounces with a rest after the first syllable — "Chuck—will's-widow"—"Chuck—will's-widow."

Like his cousins, the night-hawk and whip-poor-will, he builds no nest. The two eggs are laid on the ground, sometimes near a fallen branch or protecting rock. They are a dull white, with pale lilac markings and grey spots. The eggs of the whip-poor-will are also two in number, with the same general markings, and laid in the same carelessly made nest.

The chuck-will's-widow has been known to carry her eggs, and even the young birds, in her great mouth to a different hiding-place when disturbed, and in an effort to attract attention away from her nest, she will limp away from it, trailing her wings and displaying every symptom of being injured.

Both birds seek their food nearer the ground than does the night-hawk. They fly low in the bushy fields and catch their food by leaping after it in short flights.

"They have a way," says Pearson, "of balancing themselves near a tree trunk or barn wall, and picking ants and small insects off the bark, and

they even hunt for worms and beetles on the ground, turning over leaves to find them." And it is not until their first hunger is satisfied that the bird begins his long chant.

The whip-poor-will is not heard in Southern Florida, so our bird is the chuck-will's-widow. He begins his wierd song late in February and keeps it up until June. One year he was reported as giving his call off and on all summer. This year there have been fewer birds and they have not been nearly so noisy; there seems to be no special reason for this as the birds are not hunted.

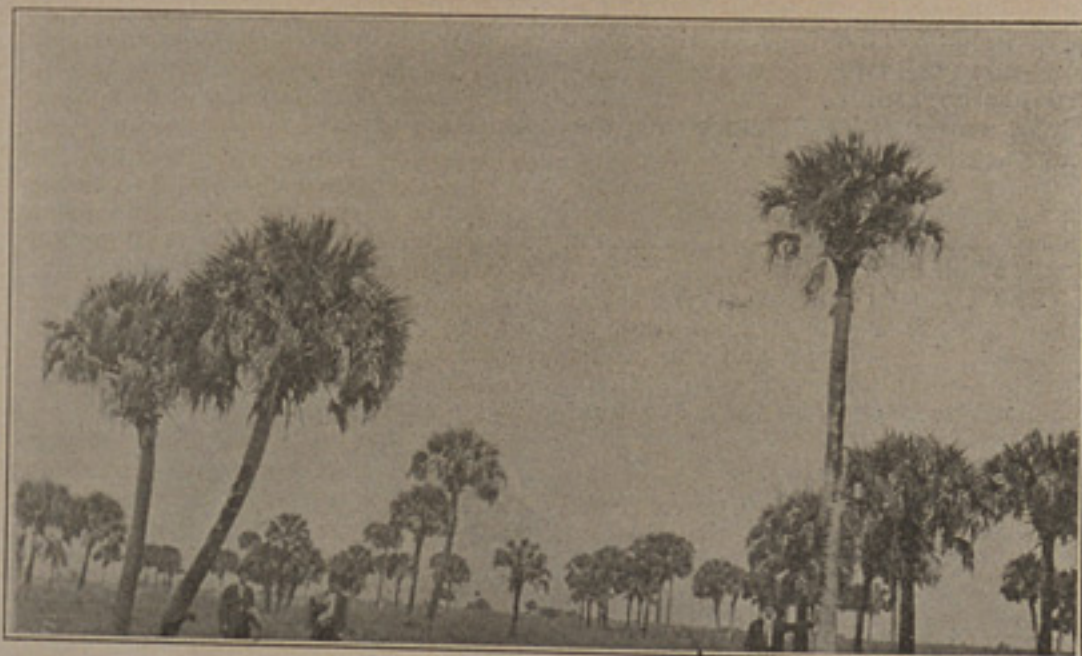
Mathews says that the call of the whip-poor-will is a perfect rythmical metallic whistle. He also thinks that no two birds sing exactly alike and that there is a distinct quaver on the syllable "poor." The chuck-will's-widow rarely varies his song, excepting at times to hurry it.

Once I tried to count the number of times one called, but lost track when near the hundred mark. There were three of them calling at once and each one was doing his best to outdo

the others. The moon was full and gloriously bright, and the air was sweet with the scent of orange blossoms, all of which inspired the bird orchestra to a magnificent performance, composed of the songs of the chuck-will's-widow, mocking-birds, screech owls, marsh hens, night herons, and the honk of the crane as he flew southward.

The night-hawk, whip-poor-will and chuck-will's-widow are all night birds and spend the days in resting lengthwise on the branch of a tree or lying flat on the ground.

The chuck-will's-widow has a white throat-band and the outer tail feathers are white. Very beautiful specimens may be seen at the Florida State Museum at Gainesville, but a careful hunt among the underbrush in any of the hammocks in this part of the state, is likely to be rewarded by finding Mrs. Chuck-will's-widow's home, and either her spotted eggs or two downy balls of feathers with big open mouths. But do not disturb her, for it is a home—even if only a Bird Home.



Scene Near Lakeport

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