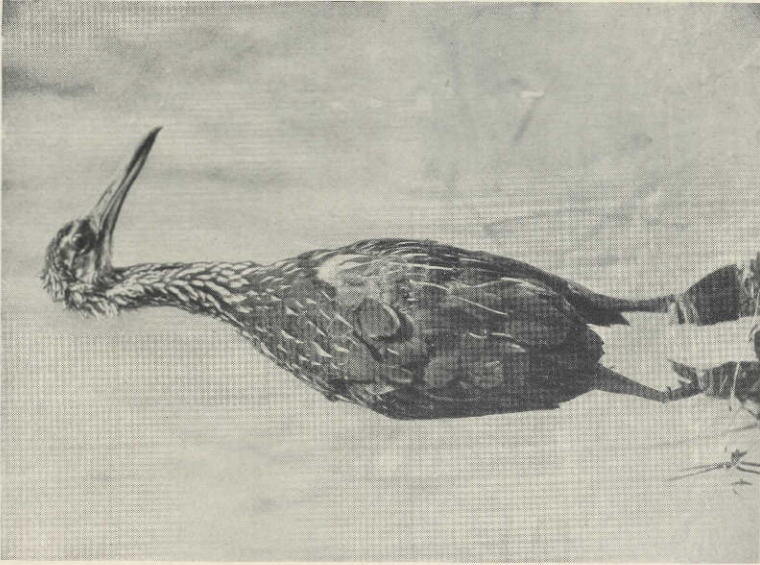


LIFE IN A BIRD ROOKERY



In the Glades, behind the rookery, were young limpkins.



Near the entrance to our estate, lived our friends, the pelicans.

CHAPTER XV

LIFE IN A BIRD ROOKERY

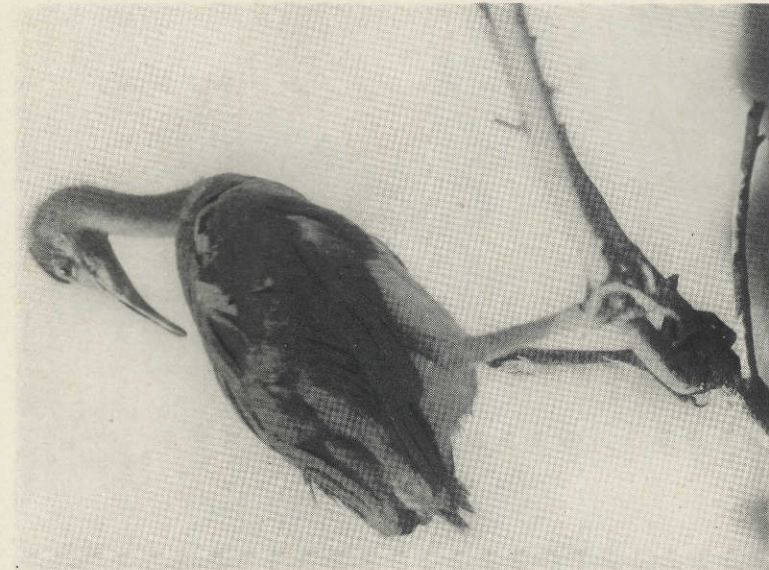
WE were spending a week on our estate, on the loveliest river of the Ten Thousand Islands, which we owned, from its bonneted head up among the white lilies of the Everglades, down through the labyrinthic bay that unites its two sections, to its mouth on the Gulf, which is so modestly hidden from the world outside by a tiny key.

We held it by no crude parchment title, warranting trouble about taxes, timber thieves, squatters and questions of drainage. Our rights were the natural ones of acquaintance, appreciation and possession. No chart of the government, railroad map, or steamship folder ever came nearer than a bad guess at the extent or course of our river and you could count on the fingers of one hand the white men who could find their way to its source, even if placed within its mouth. No one else knows the local names, or the where and why of Little Tussock, Tussock Bay, Otter Point, The Meadows, Lime Camp, Tarpon Pool, Manatee Cove, or even The Nursery, where we spent that week, among fifteen thousand nests of squawking infants. When the anchor chain of our boat ran out beside the rookery, the air was filled with a snow squall of frightened birds. As the stern

Florida Enchantments

of the boat swung within fifty feet of the bank, where branches of sweet bay, myrtle, custard-apple and mangrove, were breaking beneath the weight of birds and nests, there was another flight, but the birds soon returned to their homes and when, a few days later, we wanted to photograph the birds in the air we couldn't frighten them from their nests. A single shot would have created a panic, but during our stay not a grain of powder was burned on the river and upon this foundation rested the purpose and pleasure of our visit.

We lived upon our boat, sleeping on the cabin roof under the stars, soothed to slumber each night by the composite *chack, chack, chack*, resulting from the mingled cries of thousands of birds of many species. The note changed at dawn, when the colony awoke to the duties of the day, and from every home the breadwinners departed, with little farewell endearments that were intensely human, and set forth by twos, threes, dozens and scores, the white ibis for the shrimps and fiddlers which his family prefers, the little blue heron for frogs, the big white for minnows and the snake bird for the bream and perch which it regurgitates in chunks so big that it strains the rubber necks of its progeny to dispose of them. This unpleasant method of transfer becomes so instinctive in the young birds of a rookery, that when enemies threaten their nests they resort to it in surrender of their possessions, as promptly as the passenger in a stage coach empties his pocket in the presence of a road agent.



Young Curlew, brown in his first year.



Madame Curlew keeping house.

Life in a Bird Rookery

At night we watched the growing specks on the horizon as they became flocks of birds returning from the Glades, the Gulf, the bays and rivers, within a radius of thirty miles. When the home of a returning bird was near us, we could hear and almost understand the expressive inflections of the family conversation. Sometimes a bird returned with low-hanging broken leg and we sorrowed at the thought of his days of suffering before the over-lapped bones would knit firmly in response to Nature's surgery.

Once a parent bird reached his home in the nest nearest us, flying heavily and so sorely stricken that he could scarcely cling to a branch beside the nest. The tones from that nest that night were mournful ones and when in a few minutes the dying bird fell from the branch to the ground I wondered, with sorrowful apprehensions, if I had ever been responsible for a tragedy like that. Day after day we paddled our canoe in the little sloughs around and through the rookery and each day the birds grew tamer. The Camera-man waded and climbed trees, cut poles and made long legs for his camera, until he got the views he wanted of eggs and young birds, while the mother birds fussed around him and scolded at first, but sometimes came back to their nests before the work was finished.

Nature worked daily miracles with these young birds. One day they were egg-shaped parchment pouches, stuffed by their parents with lumps of dead fish, and in a few hours by processes so rapid as to be almost visible, they had converted the offensive mass

into living flesh and feathers, and in a few days evolved form and beauty from a chaos of corruption.

When the Camera-man wanted young birds that had graduated from their nests, they had to be chased through the swamp and followed up the trees, and our hunter-boy went up the latter like a squirrel and thrashed through mud and water like an otter, sometimes for a long distance, but he always brought back his bird, even if he had to cross deep sloughs to get him. He taught the birds he caught to pose, by petting them and putting them on the branches chosen by the Camera-man, and when they scrambled away, by catching them again, scolding them, folding their heads under their wings, patting, petting and putting them back on the branches.

The system never failed at the time, but when afterward we paddled among the nests certain vociferous young birds scrambled in haste from their homes to the tops of the tallest trees, and curlew matrons croaked from their nests:

“Johnny can’t pose to-day; he isn’t feeling well.”

Birds too young to get away were very friendly and from many nests our approach was hailed with cries of welcome and mouths were opened wide for the fish and frogs that often went with us. Mother birds, too, grew unfearful and as we fed their babies looked on with complacency, if not gratitude. One snake bird, or water turkey, which on our first call dropped from her nest into the water in the clumsy fashion of her species, on our later visits simply stepped aside and viewed with approval our per-



The young water turkeys were like blubbery, cream-colored goslings.

formance of her duty. Her two youngsters used to stand on the extreme edge of the nest, with wide open bills extended for the delicacies we brought them, until one of them fell into the water and when we tried to rescue him gave a full-grown exhibition of aquatic skill which was his inheritance. That night he disappeared and we thought we knew the hawk that got him, but couldn't afford to destroy with a gun the confidence of our feathered cronies, even to avenge one of them.

We were often sorely tempted in this direction. A hundred crows cawed from near-by trees and when a nest was left unguarded a crow plunged swiftly down and flew away with an egg impaled upon his bill. I couldn't shoot the wretches at the time, but rejoice to remember that I murdered a few of their family subsequently, which, considering all things, was mighty illogical but "some comforting."

It was a sociable colony and a curved-bill white ibis, locally called curlew, in a nest near us, used to talk to me in the most confidential way. Her voice was as ugly as she was beautiful and when her little family chipped in I could never tell whether they were trying to whistle or shriek. I have heard that ibis matron, by her inflection of the final vowel of the single syllable, "Qua," convey connubial expressions of endearment, express maternal affection, and say "*Scat!*" to an encroaching youngster from another nest as she took him by his neck and chucked him overboard. I tried to learn her language because I wanted to ask her why all her babies were

black, while she was pure white. The phenomena were so common that she couldn't have taken umbrage at the question, for the children of the little blue herons are all white and the progeny of the slim, black, snake bird are blubbery, cream-colored goslings in appearance. The "Qua Qua" of the heron could also be so varied in respect to the accent on the "a" that an educated member of that family could thereby announce his species to outsiders or maintain conversation at home.

We had little chance here to study the egret or long white. The plume hunters had visited the rookery before us and of fifteen thousand nests not fifteen were occupied by these birds. I trust no reader of this article will wear the plume of the young long white, whose photograph is used to illustrate it.

Two hundred yards from our boat, through a narrow slough, could be seen a submerged meadow, the beginning of the Everglades, over which we pushed our canoe to the near-by keys and saw birds and nests of other species. It was here that our hunter-boy pointed out to me a hawk, black and short of body, with some white marking about the tail, saying "There goes fifteen dollars," and looked reproachful when I shook my head. We ran down a pair of young limpkins, or bitterns, in the Everglades, by superior tactics and the judicious combination of a canoe and three pairs of legs. While the hunter-boy was supervising their artistic education and persuading them to pose, the mother limpkin fluttered around with the same kind of broken wing that



Baby Blues, one egg yet unhatched.



Baby Blues, a few days old.

afflicts the ruffed grouse when she believes her brood in danger.

The nursery had its visitors from the outside world. The fork-tailed kite, the most graceful of birds, swooped down and around in friendly fashion, scooping in an occasional tree frog from a high branch without change of speed in its flight. Of nearly equal grace, the man-of-war hawk, with royal dignity, floating high in air, sometimes circled slowly above the rookery in great numbers as if warning the colony of the storm which their high soaring presaged.

The busy little bee bird, the king bird of the North, and the shrill trill of the kingfisher, repeated with each flight, carried my thoughts to the North Woods, and as I heard the evening cry of a chuck-Will's-widow, I wished he could get a competent Northern whip-poor-will to teach him to talk.

There were visitors, too, of ill omen, owls among the thickest leaves, estimating with their big eyes the fatness of the baby birds and black buzzards on hand for mischances of any sort, either to the bipeds with feathers or to those without.

Tarpon leaped in the water around us; sometimes the round head of a wary otter appeared on its surface, with its bright eyes regarding us distrustfully; turtles were always in evidence and alligators floated near, with one grave eye fixed suspiciously upon the intrusive craft and the other longingly directed upon choice morsels in near-by nests.

Once there shot past us a long Indian canoe, with

an erect, bare-legged shirt-waisted Seminole at each end, poling rapidly, with eyes fixed straight ahead, but absorbing every detail of our outfit. In the middle of the canoe sat a squaw with a dozen pounds of beads on her neck, partly compensated for by lack of costume elsewhere, holding a squab of a papoose, which turned beady eyes wonderingly upon us.

The fly in our ointment was the need of keeping to windward of our wards. In other respects the week of our residence in the nursery was of unalloyed pleasure. There were events worth recording in every waking hour and minor incidents of interest filled up the minutes. Yet I now look back upon that bustling colony of beautiful birds with the painful knowledge that it is doomed. The tourist-with-a-gun will destroy what the plume hunter has left. Fathers, seeking to educate their sons along manly lines, will continue to provide them with cruising outfits and automatic weapons for the murder of innocents. I am happy to be able to quote from a splendid exception who presented his son with a rifle and said to him: "Don't shoot anything from your boat, and never kill a bird not recognized as game. Go out in the woods and earn the right to shoot a deer, bear, or panther, by first finding him and then if you kill him I'll be proud of you."

The network of rivers, chains of lakes, beautiful Everglades and ten times Ten Thousand Islands of Southern Florida, will be all-the-year playgrounds of the coming generation. Their most conspicuous charm, which has departed, might be restored if the



Baby Blues, ready to leave the nest.

Life in a Bird Rookery

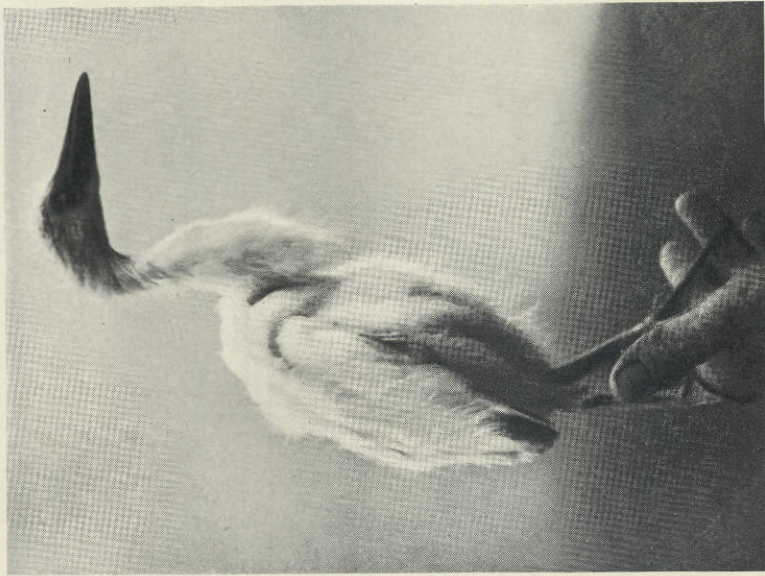
birds of Florida could secure the same protection as the beasts of the Yellowstone National Park.

Within my own recollection of the west coast of Florida alligators slept upon the banks of every river, great white and blue wading birds stalked across every flat, solid acres of waterfowl covered the bays and streams, the trees were burdened and the skies darkened by great flocks of birds of gorgeous plumage and by others of the purest white, the most beautiful of created creatures.

There is just one power that can bring back the glory of that lotus land: restock its waters and people again its forests for the education and enjoyment of the whole people, to whom it belongs. That power is an active public sentiment. And public sentiment in the concrete means YOU.



Louisianas on a small mangrove.



Baby Blue, old enough to fare for himself.

