

CHAPTER XV.

HERONS AND ALLIGATORS.



WE stayed in the vicinity of Lake Washington for nearly a week, thoroughly exploring the region, and then packed our belongings into the boat and descended southward to the body of water known as Salt Lake.

The surroundings of Salt Lake are of that unutterably dreary character which oppresses one like a nightmare; on every side stretched miles and miles of marsh and creek; nothing that indicated land could be seen except a circling line of trees dim in the distance.

But we had not come to Salt Lake in search of beautiful scenery; our object was to find good alligator-hunting and to add to our stock of information regarding the water-birds of Florida, especially the herons.

We pitched our tent in the pine-woods, about a mile from the landing, where there was everything needful except good water. It seemed a veritable paradise for marsh and water fowl; for the lake margin was covered with snipe and shore birds and the marshes were full of heron, while the lake itself was alive with trout or black bass, and dotted with the black forms of numerous alligators.

The instinct of the naturalist became rampant at sight of so much good game; and as soon as camp was fairly set in order we instituted a systematic search for the most desirable varieties of fish and fowl.

The second afternoon found us starting out on a heron-hunt; Jim Scobie being familiar with all this region and desirous to lead us out to a heron-roost which he declared to be the biggest in all eastern Florida.

Rowing across to the north side of the lake, we entered a creek which led us into the marsh, beyond which was a pond, and which we reached after hard

rowing, poling, and wading through the half-submerged canes. The heronry, on the farther shore of the pond, was reached about sunset; and as we pulled towards it clouds of white herons flew up silently and made their way to the opposite shore.

Jim landed us on the muddy shore of the island, and then went off trolling for bass. The trees above us, and for a long distance around were covered with great nests of sticks, many of them over two feet in diameter, but so carelessly constructed that we could look through them all, and at times see the eggs that a few of them contained. Looking back upon that heron hunt, I can say that it was a shameful thing to do, — to shoot unsuspecting birds as they came winging their way joyfully home to their nests. It was a most inexcusable act; yet we did it, in the thoughtlessness of our search for the rare and curious, not giving heed then to the chidings of conscience — until we had shot the birds.

Since that time many a bird-collector has visited Florida, and the heronries and even the woods and fields have been terribly ravaged. I know of one worthless dealer in bird-skins who has in his collection hundreds of mocking-birds and cardinals, which he and his emissaries have killed. The most contemptible of these so-called naturalists are those who kill birds for the "hat trade," encouraged thereto by the prevalent fashion among females of wearing the skins of bright-colored birds in their hats. For the supplying of this demand, also, of feathers for the fair sex, the miserable collectors have visited and ravaged the heronries, shooting the birds and stripping off the beautiful plumes.

As the sun sank down behind the pines, scattered groups of herons came flying towards the island where we were concealed, — now a great white heron, now a small blue one, and occasionally a night heron.

The sun disappeared; the moon came out and shed a faint light over the marshes and the lonely island, disclosing to the watchers there the hurrying dusky forms in the sky, many of which fell at the fire of the marauders stationed beneath the trees.

It is a singular fact that a heron will take no notice of a still object, approaching it without suspicion and alighting close by, even if that object be a man; so we had many opportunities for observing the shape and action of the birds at close quarters.

When we left (I now grieve to state) we had nearly a score of herons of various kinds. Jim had caught a number of noble black bass, by trolling in the lake, and had thus provided for the morrow's breakfast. We again made our way over the marshes, almost waist-deep in water, until the creek was

gained, when an hour's pull brought us to the landing-place. Gleaming white in the moonlight, our back-loads of herons appeared more like sheeted ghosts; and verily, if all wicked deeds are requited in kind, the slayers of those innocent birds deserved to have their nights disturbed during the remainder of their lives by the apparitions of their victims.

The excuse urged by the hunters is that they are working "in the interests of science;" but that is too flimsy a pretext for this intelligent age, and I sincerely trust that all those who do likewise will be unceremoniously bundled into jail, in the interest of humanity!



GREEN HERON.

During our camp near Salt Lake we found nearly every variety of heron native to Florida; and perhaps it would interest our readers to note the list of species mentioned below, according to their size:—

The Great White Heron (*Ardea occidentalis*) is a resident in the southern part of the State. The Great Blue Heron (*Ardea herodias*) is found everywhere; as are also the White Heron (*Ardea alba*) and the Snowy Heron (*Ardea candidissima*). This latter is one of the most beautiful and graceful of the family, with its dainty form, its delicate curling plumes, and garb of purest white.

A rarer bird is the Purple Heron (*Ardea rufescens*); while a very common variety is the Night Heron (*Ardea nycticorax*), also found throughout the Northern States. The Yellow-crowned Night Heron (*A. violacea*) is harder to find, seeking the depths of dismal swamps.

The Little Blue (*A. cærulea*) and the Louisiana (*A. ludoviciana*) are as

graceful of form and dainty-stepping as the Snowy; while the Green Heron is seen everywhere along the rivers and swamp-margins.

To complete the list, the Bittern (*Botaurus minor*) should be mentioned, and the smallest of all, the *Ardetta exilis*; the former found here every winter, and the latter all the time.

If we were to try to present a complete list of all the water-birds we found, it would convert the remainder of this volume into a mere catalogue; but we must not omit the Great Ibis (*Tantalus loculator*), nor the White Ibis (*Ibis alba*) both of them recalling to mind pictures of the sacred ibis of Egypt. The Scarlet Ibis, which more nearly resembles the Egyptian, is not now found in Florida, though in Audubon's time, some fifty years ago, it was said to come to the Keys in flocks.

Most curious of all Florida's water-birds is the so-called Snake-bird (*Plotus anhinga*), which may be seen on the St. John's, and which very much resembles a snake when swimming in the water.

It was at Salt Lake that we finally broke camp, paid Jim Scobie his wages and sent him home, and brought our tent and boat life to an end by paddling northward to the St. John's. A chain of lakelets connects Salt Lake with Snake Creek, through the crooked channel of which the great river is reached.

Before our departure, however, we had a last adventure with some alligators, that may perhaps be worthy of mention. Each of us wished for a pair of alligator boots, and at various times had shot and skinned a "gator;" but the great reptiles were so numerous at Salt Lake that we could not forego an endeavor to add to our trophies.

One clear morning, just after sunrise, I poled away from the landing in our skiff, and skirted the southern shore, with an eye open for saurians. The glossy-backed grackles and fish-crows were cawing and cackling on the beach, and hundreds of heron were wading the still waters of the shallow lagoons.

My companions had gone out hunting for deer, and I was tempted to follow them; but hearing a distant shot, I concluded that they had found their game, and so, as it was too late, I kept on my way. I found out later that they had shot at a coon, and that while they were at breakfast the dog had started the deer, running them directly in front of the camp, the Antiquarian coming out just in time to see an antlered buck and a doe run by him within easy shot.

I saw an alligator, apparently asleep on a sand-bar and, rowing up within thirty or forty yards, placed a charge of duck-shot through his most vulnerable spot, just behind the eye. This stretched him out, to all appearances lifeless; and I left him there, clawing the sand spasmodically, while I moved farther down the shore looking for another.

This 'gator would measure all of nine feet, and his hide was large enough to furnish leather for several pairs of boots; but, unfortunately, not all the hide is available for boots. It takes a pair of alligators for each pair of boots; owing to the extreme thickness of the skin and its horniness, only the under portion is good for the purpose, and that, too, for but a limited distance from the under jaw, running backward towards the middle of the body. The best boots are made by taking the skin of the throat for the toe and "vamp," and that portion on the under side of the forelegs for the quarters and heel. By using the skins of a pair of alligators, the boots can be made to match each other in the size and shape of the scale-plates; the smallest and most flexible at the toes and running up larger and larger to the top. Boots made in this way from skins properly tanned, are very handsome and extremely durable; those I had made from the alligators shot that day lasted me longer than any others I ever possessed. But I anticipate, by this *post-mortem* statement, the shooting of the other 'gator.

I had proceeded but a quarter of a mile or so, and had rowed half-way round the lake, when I saw a black object floating on the water a little distance ahead. It resembled a gnarled pine-knot, worn by the water and blackened by the sun; but I knew it in an instant for an alligator. Judging by the length of its head, which was the part thus exposed, I concluded it to be a very large one, not less than ten feet in length.

Propelling the skiff a little nearer, I could see its evil-looking eye gleam sullenly, and a slight ripple behind it warned me that it was about to sink itself beneath the surface. At this I threw up my gun and sent a heavy charge of buck-shot directly into that glassy eye. Contrary to my expectations, the 'gator, instead of sinking or floundering about, remained perfectly quiet, after a few spasmodic efforts to escape.

The water shallowed rapidly at this point, and so, getting a line over the saurian's snout, I quickly towed him ashore. It was a long distance to our landing-place, and to tow the alligator across the lake would prove a laborious undertaking. I then concluded to roll him into the boat, and after great labor succeeded in getting his bulky form inside. Then I stepped in myself, and began to paddle shoreward.

Just at this period I noticed with alarm certain signs of resuscitation in the great reptile; first a leg began to quiver, then his uninjured eye twitched, and the great tail began to move about ominously.

By this time I was in deep water, and certainly in a not-to-be-envied position; but I kept on plying the paddle, though the perspiration broke out all over me at the thought of the fix I was in.

There was next a more ferocious gleam in that single eye, a quicker movement of the legs, and the tail came down on the bottom of the boat with a decided whack! I was astride the tail, in the stern, the alligator filling it completely, — for the boat was only twelve feet in length, — and every time that tail came up against the seat I would leap a foot or more, at the same time industriously doing my best to force the boat through the water.

At last the immense head began to move, and the jaws to snap; the tail struck so vigorously against the seat that I thought it would be splintered; still I kept on paddling, with one eye on the 'gator, another on the shore, and



"I WAS ASTRIDE THE TAIL, IN THE STERN OF THE BOAT."

an occasional anxious glance at my gun. If matters came to a crisis, I *could* shoot the 'gator a second time, but it would be at the risk of blowing a hole through the boat at the same time.

Realizing the danger involved in this contingency, I dug desperately at the paddle till my back seemed about to break. I neared the shore; by the vicious look in the 'gator's eye, and the writhing movement throughout his whole body, I saw that he was gathering himself for a last, desperate effort, and that there was no time to lose if I would save my own life.

Realizing this, I threw all my strength into giving impetus to the boat,

dropped the paddle, seized my gun, and leaped into the water. How deep it was I did not know till I struck it, but soon discovered that it was up to my arm-pits, though the shore was but a few rods away.

I had left the boat not a second too soon; for into the air flew the seat I was sitting on, and the head and one leg of the alligator were raised over the side. The boat had not lost its impetus, however, and while the 'gator was struggling to get clear, it glided into shallow water and stuck fast on the sand.

At this moment Mr. Alligator overturned it and plunged into the water. "It is my turn now," his whole action seemed to say; and I surely thought it was, for I was even then waist-deep in the water, and my enemy was between me and the shore, though a little to one side. But I had held my gun clear of the water all this time, and there was a charge in the left-hand barrel; had there not been, I hardly know how this episode would have ended.

As the alligator fell clear of the boat, I levelled my gun at his ear-drum and fired. The smoke hid him from sight; but there was a terrific splashing, and although I felt an apprehensive prickling in my legs, I thought the 'gator had received his quietus. And so it proved, when the smoke cleared off; for there he lay, back downward, the white skin of his under parts shining in the sun.

I lost no time in dragging him ashore and in righting the boat, and was glad to find that the splintered thwart was the only damage, besides the wetting, — to which I was used.

After resting awhile I set off for the other 'gator, and an hour later had him stretched beside his brother; two "bull alligators," one measuring nine feet in length, and the other ten.

I skinned them that afternoon, and the vultures came and cleaned the skins next day; and this is the way I secured the hides for my alligator boots.