

A Pensauken Diary

BY CHRESWELL J. HUNT

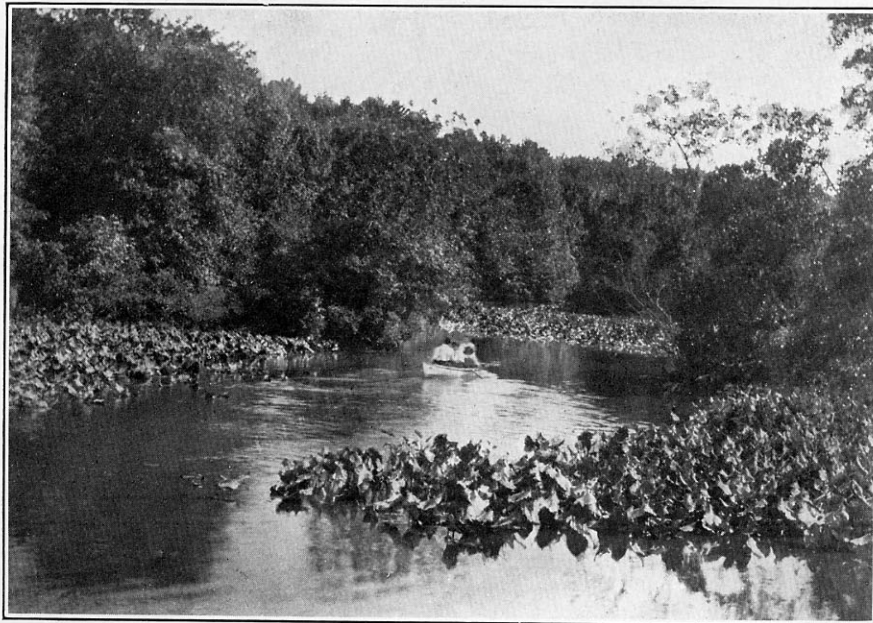
The tributaries of the lower Delaware on the New Jersey side are tide-water streams. There are mostly high, wooded banks on the north side, with an expanse of alder swamp and spatterdock marsh on the other, which is more or less covered by the high tides.

Such a stream is Pensauken Creek. This creek forms a part of the boundary line between Burlington and Camden Counties, New Jersey. Both branches rise near the little settlement of Evesboro in Burlington County and wind in crooked northerly courses for some ten miles when they unite at Fork's Landing. Then the creek turns and flows more to the west, emptying into the Delaware near Palmyra.

For some eight miles it is navigable for a small boat. Here the fishermen find fairly good sport, and the ornithologist finds birds in abundance. During the past four years I have been on this creek in all seasons and weathers and at all hours of the day and night, and at all times—whether the tide was at ebb or flood, whether it was midday or midnight—I have found birds.

In the fringes of woodland which here and there skirt the creek the chestnut oak predominates, while several other oaks, Jersey pine, beech, sycamore, chestnut, ash, sour gum, persimmon, hackberry and red maple are abundant. In some places the banks are covered with thickets of alder, button-bush, arrow-wood, *Viburnum dentatum*, and sweet pepperbush, over which clammers a tangle of green brier, making an ideal retreat for Cardinals, Brown Thrashers and Catbirds.

No matter how often we visit this creek we shall never find it the same. The tide will be different if nothing else is, and when one is limited to weekly visits these changes are most striking. To-day we may paddle with ease over the marshes



VIEWS OF PENSUKEN CREEK, N. J.

where we walked about last week with dry feet. Thus a trip to these marshes is always savored with the thought of a new discovery, and one rarely returns disappointed.

There are no extensive patches of woodland along the creek. For the most part there is merely a fringe of trees. Go a short distance back at almost any point, and we come directly to cultivated fields and orchards, and in many places these come right down to the creek bank.

But the marshes of the upper creek are wilder to-day than they were a score of years ago, and are looked upon by the farmer as a "has been." Thirty years ago these marshes were well ditched; there were high banks furnished with flood-gates, and hay was harvested where now there is an expanse of wild-rice and alder thickets. The flood-gates are gone, and what remains of the banks is fast disappearing. The lower creek, too, may be considered a thing of the past; that is commercially. Up to five years ago there were a good many canal-boats towed up as far as the little village of Parry, where they were loaded with building sand taken from the creek's bank. Since the abandonment of this industry, the creek is given over entirely to the fishermen, gunners and pleasure craft, with the exception of an occasional scow, laden with fertilizer, which is drifted up with the tide. The old sand banks near Parry are of interest, as here is found quite a colony of Bank and Rough-winged Swallows. The Kingfisher also finds here a good nesting ground.

The marshes of the upper creek furnish favorite feeding grounds for the Great Blue, Green and Night Herons, and during the spring and fall great numbers of Sandpipers, Yellowlegs, etc., are to be found.

I believe that we find more marked changes with the seasons in a fresh tide-water marsh than anywhere else. During January and February these marshes are rather desolate-looking places, covered as they are with the remnants of last year's aquatic vegetation. At this season, however, they are the hunting grounds of the big Hawks, while Grebes and Wild Ducks may be found about the creek. A few Kingfishers usually spend the winter, and during the winter of 1906-7 a

Great Blue Heron stayed throughout the entire season. Then when the creek is under ice and the marshes snow covered, the Crows congregate there by hundreds.

The first warm touch of spring seems to sink deeper into the marsh than elsewhere. The plants push their young leaves rapidly forward, and after the first of April what changes transpire within a week! One can almost see the spatter-dock and water arum (*Peltandra*) grow. Before we can realize it the marsh is again green with pointed leaves, tussocks of muskrat-grass and clumps of calamus, while the banks are carpeted with violets and a white flower of the mustard family, and in damp places the marsh marigold attracts our attention. Now the Redwings make merry and the Swamp Sparrows sing all day and most of the night, while Warblers throng the thickets.

Almost before we know it, and long ere we are ready, the scene has changed. The marshes are now a wealth of wild roses, to which clumps of viburnums, with a profusion of white bloom form a fitting background. Now the Long-billed Marsh Wrens are busy building their many nests, and Least Bitterns skulk about among the cat-tails and wild rice.

Again, what a change! We now look across a moving sea of blue—the blossoms of the pickerel-weed (*Pontederia*)—a floral display unequaled save by that of the thousands of pink and white mallow blossoms as seen from our cabin doorway in August. Now when on the creek we are hemmed in by walls of the wild rice, and if we notice the *Peltandra* we will find that already it is sticking its own seeds deep down in the mud. Swamp Sparrows and Marsh Wrens furnish the only bird music that comes from the marsh. As we listen to them we hear a faint “pink, pink,” and we realize that the first Bobolinks have arrived, and only a few days remain before the gunner will take possession of the marshes.

Up to now the aquatic vegetation has been advancing almost steadily. The first crop of spatter-dock leaves died down about the middle of July, but the second crop is now at its best. With the advent of the gunners a decline begins. The gunners make this more noticeable by tramping down the fields of wild rice, so that we can now see the distant bank with its persimmon

trees, now leafless but laden with little golden spheres—"plums of the gods"—then with the frosts and the high autumn tides the marshes are once more the abode of desolation.

From my year's journal I quote some of the more interesting bird notes:

April 15, 1907.—Found a Cardinal's nest, containing three eggs, in a small laurel. On April 29 there was only one young bird in the nest. Another Cardinal's nest in greenbrier tangle containing three eggs, and by April 22d three young birds. Also a Mourning Dove's nest and two eggs, one of which hatched by April 22d, and on April 29th the two young birds were about half grown.

April 21st.—Saw a good many large flocks of Goldfinches. They are beginning to show a few yellow feathers interspersed among the olive of their backs. They seemed rather noisy, and a few were singing this morning. An Osprey put in an appearance to-day. A pair of these birds spent the summer of 1905 about here. Where did they nest?

April 22d.—Cardinal's nest in greenbrier with three eggs, which had hatched by April 29th.

April 27th.—A pair of Carolina Chickadees were carrying feathers into a hole in a button-bush stub. Found a Bluebird's nest and four eggs in a small cherry tree in the orchard.

April 29th.—Found a Vesper Sparrow's nest on the ground in a pear orchard containing four eggs.

April 30th.—A considerable number of Bank Swallows were going in and out of their nesting holes in the sand bank.

May 4th.—Heard a Robin utter a shrill note at 9:30 p. m.

May 6th.—Foundations for a Yellow Warbler's nest just started. Also found a Song Sparrow's nest with five eggs. A White-eyed Vireo was seen carrying nesting material. Foundations for nest started in viburnum bush some four feet from the ground.

May 7th.—Another Yellow Warbler's nest started and a completed nest found.

May 11th.—Late this afternoon I saw a Maryland Yellowthroat mount into the air, from the top of an alder, with a burst of song. He flew to quite a height and poured forth his melody

—a lot of twitters ending with the familiar “Wichery, wichery, wichery”—then he dived earthward and disappeared among the vegetation of the marsh.

May 26th.—A Least Bittern was singing this afternoon. Although these birds are common, this is but the second time I have heard the song in these marshes. Perhaps I was not here before at the right time.

May 27th.—I was drifting along in my boat at 10:30 p. m. Everything was quiet, when all at once a Yellow-breasted Chat burst forth with a volume of scold notes. Something had disturbed his slumbers.

May 28th.—Found a Least Bittern’s nest with five slightly incubated eggs.

May 29th.—Found a domestic duck’s nest out in the marsh. The nest was built of the dead stalks of aquatic plants and well lined with down, which partly covered the ten eggs. To all appearances it was like the nest of a wild duck.

May 30th.—Two Yellow Warbler’s nests found, each containing four eggs. Also a Blue Jay’s nest with four well-fledged young. Saw an American Bittern to-day. It certainly looks as if he were a breeder hereabouts.

June 15th.—Was standing in front of our cabin when a Virginia Rail crossed our ditch and disappeared among the spatter-docks, where it uttered some cluck notes and out came four young Rails, and one by one they swam the ditch. About five minutes after they had disappeared a weasel made his appearance from almost the very spot where the young Rails had entered the marsh. Luckily he was traveling in the other direction.

June 22d.—While going along in my boat this evening I flushed several Kingfishers from bushes overhanging the water. On several occasions I have flushed them after dark from such places. It would seem that they roost there. Just at dusk a Whip-poor-will sang. This is my only summer record for Pensauken.

July 8th. Have been throwing crumbs to a pair of Catbirds which have a nest somewhere near the cabin, and they have grown so tame that whenever I put in an appearance they come

almost within reach. A white-footed mouse, which has taken up quarters under the cabin, has also gotten the habit of foraging for cracker crumbs.

July 9th.—Flushed a Black Duck on the upper creek. Can this bird nest among these marshes? Twice to-day I saw a Yellow Warbler in pursuit of a Kingfisher. Found both Kingbirds and Yellow Warblers feeding upon a black slug that infests the leaves of the spatter-dock.

July 20th.—Bobwhites were whistling this afternoon. This bird seems to be increasing about here. This evening I saw a mink swim across the creek.

July 21st-22d.—Spent the night on the creek. Marsh Wrens sang at intervals, and at eleven o'clock a Swamp Sparrow sang with much vim. At 11:30 a Cuckoo called. By midnight the last-quarter moon was just appearing above the trees, and a Screech Owl welcomed it with a mournful wail. Just before dawn a Spotted Sandpiper flew past with a whistle. The first bird to usher in the day was the Song Sparrow, then followed the Swamp Sparrow, then the Kingbird, then the House Wren, Cardinal, Redwing, Wood Thrush, Carolina Wren and White-eyed Vireo in order.

August 13th.—This afternoon I had the luck to be out in a very heavy thunderstorm. It had been a warm day and the birds were not very active. I stood upon the bank watching the approach of the storm. Great numbers of butterflies (*Anosia* and *Papilio*), which had been clinging listlessly to the pontederia blossoms or fluttering lazily across the marsh, now sought shelter among the leaves of the chestnut oaks along the bank. Just before the storm broke a large flock of Red-winged Blackbirds circled round and settled down in the marsh. If not upon the ground they were certainly close to it, not one being in sight. For over half an hour the rain fell in torrents, the wind blew, leveling the wild rice, and the lightning zigzagged its way across the sky. When the storm passed and the sun shone forth once more, these Redwings were to be seen perched upon the bent stalks of the wild rice spreading their wings and tails and drying off. Why did these birds take refuge in the open marsh? The thickets along the bank would seem to have furnished a better shelter.

August 19th.—The Redwings are now going about in flocks. The immature plumage predominates. Most flocks seem to have one or two adult males, the rest being females and birds of the year.

August 25th.—Maryland Yellowthroat, Indigo Bird, Swamp Sparrow, Wood Pewee, and Tufted Tit still in song.

September 10th.—Gunnars showed me two Sora Rails which they had just taken.

September 30th.—One of the boys shot a Pied-billed Grebe this morning. A single Marsh Wren heard singing to-day.

October 15th.—Now the Robins congregate in large flocks in the sour gums to feed upon the purple berries. Swamp Sparrows still in song. Saw quite a number of Pied-billed Grebes. Watched three for some time. Saw one of them catch and eat a small eel. Also saw a Coot (*Fulica*) among a small flock of domestic ducks. It took wing very reluctantly.

October 27th.—Night and Great Blue Herons still about the marshes.

November 3d.—With the last week of August the Cardinal becomes inconspicuous. How he manages to conceal himself so well I am unable to say, but certain it is if you want to see Cardinals during September and October you have to search for them. Perhaps the gunners are his reason for keeping under cover. To-day, however, Cardinals were much in evidence. I counted twenty brilliant males in sight at one time.

November 18th.—Beside our boat-house stands a willow. To-day at dusk I saw a Downy Woodpecker climbing about in it, occasionally calling. At last he worked out to the end of a broken limb, disappeared, and all was quiet. On going to the tree and throwing a stick against the limb, he came out in a hurry. He had evidently taken up his quarters for the night in a hole in the end of the broken limb.

November 19th.—Heard a Screech Owl hooting at 3:30 p. m. Large hawks are becoming common about the marshes.

November 23d.—A small flock of Redwings is still about.

November 26th.—A Northern Shrike put in an appearance to-day. Also saw a Mallard drake in company with a flock of domestic ducks. We approached within fifty feet before he took wing. A few Killdeers are about the marshes.



NEST OF RED-WINGED BLACKBIRD IN PELTANDRA
PENSAUKEN CREEK, N. J.

December 8th.—Heard a hammering which I took to be a Downy Woodpecker, but upon reaching the spot I found that the noise was made by a Tufted Tit, which was picking away at a piece of bark, and thereby producing a noise that any Woodpecker might well have been proud of.

December 10th.—George Sperber shot a Night Heron in the immature plumage. I think they spend the winter here occasionally.

December 24th.—Saw a Marsh Hawk about the creek to-day.

SUMMER BIRDS OF PENSUKEN CREEK

(Those marked * have actually been found breeding.)

- Anas obscura*, Black Duck.
Aix sponsa, Wood Duck.
Botaurus lentiginosus, American Bittern.
 **Ardetta exilis*, Least Bittern.
Ardea herodias, Great Blue Heron.
 **Butorides virescens*, Little Green Heron.
Nycticorax nycticorax naxivus, Black-crowned Night Heron.
 **Rallus virginianus*, Virginia Rail.
Philohela minor, Woodcock.
 **Actitis macularia*, Spotted Sandpiper.
Oxyechus vociferus, Killdeer.
Colinus virginianus, Bobwhite.
 **Zenaidura macroura*, Mourning Dove.
Cathartes aura, Turkey Vulture.
Circus hudsonius, Marsh Hawk.
Accipiter velox, Sharp-shinned Hawk.
Accipiter cooperi, Cooper's Hawk.
 **Falco sparverius*, Sparrow Hawk.
Pandion haliaetus carolinensis, Osprey.
 **Megascops asio*, Screech Owl.
 **Coccyzus americanus*, Yellow-billed Cuckoo.
 **Ceryle alcyon*, Belted Kingfisher.
 **Dryobates pubescens medianus*, Downy Woodpecker.
Melanerpes erythrocephalus, Red-headed Woodpecker.
 **Colaptes auratus luteus*, Flicker.
Antrostomus vociferus, Whip-poor-will.

- Chordeiles virginianus*, Nighthawk.
**Chaetura pelagica*, Chimney Swift.
Trochilus colubris, Ruby-throated Hummingbird.
**Tyrannus tyrannus*, Kingbird.
**Myiarchus crinitus*, Crested Flycatcher.
**Sayornis phoebe*, Phoebe.
**Contopus virens*, Wood Pewee.
**Cyanocitta cristata*, Blue Jay.
**Corvus brachyrhynchos*, American Crow.
Corvus ossifragus, Fish Crow.
**Molothrus ater*, Cowbird.
**Agelaius phoeniceus*, Red-winged Blackbird.
**Sturnella magna*, Meadowlark.
**Icterus spurius*, Orchard Oriole.
**Icterus galbula*, Baltimore Oriole.
**Quiscalus quiscula*, Purple Grackle.
**Astragalinus tristis*, Goldfinch.
**Poocetes gramineus*, Vesper Sparrow.
**Spizella socialis*, Chipping Sparrow.
**Spizella pusilla*, Field Sparrow.
**Melospiza cinerea melodia*, Song Sparrow.
**Melospiza georgiana*, Swamp Sparrow.
**Pipilo erythrophthalmus*, Chewink.
**Cardinalis cardinalis*, Cardinal.
Cyanospiza cyanea, Indigo Bunting.
**Piranga erythromelas*, Scarlet Tanager.
**Hirundo erythrogastra*, Barn Swallow.
**Riparia riparia*, Bank Swallow.
**Stelgidopteryx serripennis*, Rough-winged Swallow.
Ampelis cedrorum, Cedar Waxwing.
**Vireo olivaceus*, Red-eyed Vireo.
**Vireo noveboracensis*, White-eyed Vireo.
Mniotilta varia, Black and White Warbler.
**Dendroica aestiva*, Yellow Warbler.
**Seiurus aurocapillus*, Ovenbird.
**Geothlypis trichas*, Maryland Yellowthroat.
Icteria virens, Yellow-breasted Chat.
**Galeoscoptes carolinensis*, Catbird.

- **Toxostoma rufum*, Brown Thrasher.
- **Thryothorus ludovicianus*, Carolina Wren.
- **Troglodytes aedon*, House Wren.
- **Telmatodytes palustris*, Long-billed Marsh Wren.
- Sitta carolinensis*, White-breasted Nuthatch.
- **Baeolophus bicolor*, Tufted Titmouse.
- **Penthestes carolinensis*, Carolina Chickadee.
- **Hylocichla mustelina*, Wood Thrush.
- **Merula migratoria*, Robin.
- **Sialia sialis*, Bluebird.