

Some Birds of a Maurice River Farm

BY CHRESWELL J. HUNT

On the afternoon of June 6th we left Millville, N. J., on board the *Duma*, a forty-foot cabin-launch, and ran nine miles down the river to Buckshutem, where the owner of the boat has a little hundred-acre farm. It was my first trip on the Maurice river below the Millville dam, and I was surprised at the marked difference in both the character of the stream and the country bordering it, the crookedness of the river and the amber color of its water being the only things that the river below the big dam holds in common with the river above Union Lake.

Now the pine-barren country had disappeared, and the river was bordered by high sand-banks or wriggled its snake-like course through stretches of tide-marsh. I have never traveled a more crooked stream. We were always it seemed retracing our course.

The twenty-eight-foot dam-breast at Millville also marks a distinct change in the bird-life. The little trill of the Pine Warbler, so common about Union Lake, was no longer heard. Its place was now filled by the gurgling song of the Long-billed Marsh Wrens, while great numbers of Bank and Tree Swallows skimmed over the river. Fish Hawks were fairly common, and several of their huge nests could be seen in the tops of dead trees. Spotted Sandpipers were abundant, King-birds much in evidence and a Turkey Buzzard always in sight. The trip to Buckshutem was not conducive of a large list of birds, for as the *Duma* drew three feet of water it was necessary to keep well to the channel; also, two eight-horsepower gasoline engines going full tilt make sufficient music to render indistinct the bird songs that might be heard from the shore.

On reaching Buckshutem the *Duma* was headed into a sort

of little inlet, where the farm came down to the river. This little natural harbor proved an ideal retreat, for when within the river with its passing boats was entirely hidden by a thick fringe of trees and alder bushes, from which Yellowthroats, White-eyed Vireos and Red-winged Blackbirds scolded at our approach, while in the other direction stretched a grassy meadow.

As the *Duma* nosed her way up to the bank and came to a stop, my attention was at once attracted to this green meadow, for my ear caught a familiar little bird note—a song that once heard is not likely to be forgotten. Almost a year had passed since I last heard it, and I was glad to renew my acquaintance with Henslow's Sparrow. The little meadow seemed full of them. At least a half-dozen birds were in song at the time. It was almost sundown, and a host of birds were singing—Orchard and Baltimore Orioles, Robins and Brown Thrashers—but as I recall that evening aboard the *Duma*, it is the little two-syllabled song of the Henslow that made the deepest impression on my memory. The song is usually described in the books as "che-tick." Mr. Rhoads (CASSINIA, 1902) has likened it to "amen," while Mr. Pennock (CASSINIA, 1907) thinks "switch-em" more nearly fills the bill. To my ear none of these words give a correct idea of the song, except as they convey a two-syllabled utterance. Indeed I think them rather misleading, for to me "che-tick," "amen" and "switch-em" imply that the accent should be upon the first syllable, while the *second* syllable should be the stronger of the two. I believe Mr. Ernest W. Vickers (*Wilson Bulletin*, Sept., 1908) comes nearer the real thing when he describes this song as resembling "tis-zeek," the accent upon the "zeek." When singing the bird throws the head back with a jerk and seems to fairly fling out the song. It is claimed the bird also has a longer song, more like the song of the Yellow-winged Sparrow, but I have never been fortunate enough to hear other than this little two-syllabled one.

The night was spent aboard the *Duma*, for one of my friends is somewhat of a bird enthusiast, and we were to be astir before sunrise to hear the morning chorus. So when the mosquitos

became unbearable upon deck we retreated to the cabin, which was rigged mosquito-proof, and climbed into our bunks, while outside the Night-hawks skimmed about and the Whip-poor-wills still sang. In that evening chorus there had been one bird-song missing—there were no Wood Thrushes. I had never before failed to find them in such a locality. They are found about Union Lake, but below Millville they were absent.

The following morning (June 7th) we were greeted with the usual bird chorus enjoyed by early risers in similar localities about Philadelphia, with three marked differences, no Wood Thrush, no Swamp Sparrow (similar marshes along the Delaware would be full of them), and the whistle of the Bobwhite played a major part in it. I have never seen so many Bobwhites in so small an area, but I later found that they were not so plenty on the adjoining farms, which was no doubt due to my host's strict game laws. All day of June 7th was spent upon the farm, with the exception of a short walk to Buckshutem Pond, in the hopes of finding a Wood Thrush there; but although I would consider it an ideal Wood Thrush country none were found. I have never seen so much with so little effort as I did that June day on that little hundred-acre farm. Birds were everywhere, and surprises in wait at every turn. The ground here is low, the highest spot on the place being scarcely twenty feet above sea level. They never suffer drought. Indeed, it is necessary to have the fields ditched to carry off the excess water supply. Song and Field Sparrows were found everywhere; Vesper Sparrows were common about the cultivated fields; Chipping Sparrows haunted the orchard and shade trees about the house; Yellow-winged Sparrows were found in a grassy field just over the line on an adjoining farm, and Henslow's Sparrows abounded in the low meadow land near the river.

One of the features that contributed toward the making of this red-letter day was the finding of a nest of the Henslow Sparrow. Of course I had more or less hopes of finding a nest, but when I recalled the unsuccessful expeditions of D. V. O. C. members on a like quest, it seemed almost like wishing for the moon. So it was with little hope of actually finding a nest that I started across a field where several Henslows were singing. I had got-

ten to about the center of the field and was trying to locate one of the singers when a bird shot up almost from under my feet. I marked the spot and followed up the bird to identify it beyond all doubt, although I was so close when it took wing that I could see distinctly the reddish back and greenish head. Close observation with the field-glass proved it to be a Henslow, so I retraced my steps to the spot from whence it had taken wing, and to my delight there was the nest and five eggs. The nest (now in my collection) was placed upon the ground among the thick grass which was *not* arched above it.

I was told about a nest, containing three eggs, that a bird had built in the strawberry patch and had deserted, probably on account of its being so near the lane where the wagon was frequently passing. It proved to be a Spotted Sandpiper's nest, and was scarcely more than a hollow in the ground, lined with next to nothing, placed among the strawberry vines. Later in the day, while passing the strawberry-patch, I flushed a Spotted Sandpiper from a nest and four eggs. This nest was similarly placed in a strawberry row, and only about twenty yards from the abandoned nest. When I flushed the bird from the nest she flew out across the strawberry rows with tail spread and the feathers on the head raised in a pronounced crest.

The note of the Red-headed Woodpecker was a characteristic sound, and Downy Woodpeckers and Flickers were much in evidence.

A Tree Swallow had a nest in the trunk of an old apple tree, and Black and White Warblers came to the shade trees near the house.

One Little Green Heron, one Hummingbird, a pair of Tufted Titmice, and a family of Carolina Chickadees were found.

A trip to the scrub-oak woods on the back of the place added the Chewink and Ovenbird to the list; Cardinals, Indigobirds, Chats and Yellow Warblers frequented the alder thickets; the orchard harbored Bluebirds, House Wrens and Crested Flycatchers; Phoebes and Kingbirds ornamented numerous fence posts; Wood Pewees and Red-eyed Vireos sang from the shade trees; Barn Swallows circled over the fields; the sky seemed filled with Swifts and Martins, and Goldfinches dipped here

and there, while tuneful Meadowlarks and harsh-mouthed Grackles voiced their sentiments.

The Bobwhites were everywhere. They were always exploding from under my very feet, and in a dry spot under a row of trees near the Henslow's meadow they had dusted themselves so persistently that the ground looked much like some sunny corner in a well-filled chicken yard.

Two weeks previously I had found the Hooded Warbler at home in Cape May County, and had heard its song for the first time, so when I heard a somewhat similar song coming from a small patch of wet woods, I went over expecting to add this bird to the list, but instead I found a male Redstart. A late migrant no doubt, but when on August 7th I found a male Redstart near the Maurice River near Porchtown, I began to wonder if the bird could have spent the summer hereabouts. Most likely this was an early fall migrant. Be this as it may, one might count on seeing Redstarts in this country during four months out of the twelve : May, June, August, September.

Down near the barn was an alder thicket surrounding a spring. While passing this spot I heard an entirely new bird-note. I found it to be made by a Sparrow of some sort, but continued observation failed to enlighten me as to the identity of the species. There were two of them. They would divide their time between the alder bushes, a young apple tree near by and a pile of fence rails near the barn. I must have spent several hours that day watching these birds, for after each of my many foraging expeditions to the different parts of the farm I would return and make another try at identifying this unknown Sparrow. I jotted in my note-book all the markings—I had never before made such elaborate field-notes on plumage—then I went down to the boat, where I had a couple of handbooks, and wasted an hour in trying to make my notes fit the book's description, but it was difficult work with extremely unsatisfactory results. The only thing that would at all fill the bill was the Savanna Sparrow. In fact, the book's description of the Savanna's habits fitted these birds admirably. I could not believe them to be Savannas, but the more I studied the book and the more I watched the birds the more Savanna-like they be-

came. I had now come to that point when Bird Lore's motto that "A bird in the bush is worth two in the hand" seemed decidedly untrue. One of those birds would be worth twice as much in my hand as were the two of them chirping in that alder bush!

On one of my returns to the house I was asked for about the twentieth time if I had identified the bird. When I stated that I had not, and that after the time I had spent in the endeavor, if I had a gun I would feel entirely justified in collecting one of the birds, to my surprise my host handed me a repeating shotgun and a couple of shells and told me to go and get one of them. Well, I must admit I did not need much coaxing, and a few minutes later there was a loud report down by the barn and I walked back to the house with the coveted specimen. The Sparrow proved to be an immature bird. The skin was given to Mr. Stone, who pronounced it a young Song Sparrow.

I am glad I collected the bird. All of my uneasiness over committing the murder has disappeared, for the gun had revealed to me a new chapter in the life history of the Song Sparrow. I have seen many young Song Sparrows, but apparently I had never before observed them at the age when, like the young man of twenty-one who starts out into the world, they had become of age and entirely broken the home ties.