Glimpses of the Promised Lands

BY JOHN D. CARTER

To those of us whose lot has been cast in thickly-settled country included in the Carolinian life-zone, certain localities hover in the back of our minds as Promised Lands. To be sure, we would not trade our sprightly Carolina Wren or jaunty Cardinal, our restful Wood Thrush or gentle Rose Breasted Grosbeak for any but the finest birds in the world. Interesting problems are not lacking at home. For instance, how and where do most of our birds spend the night? Can a Chimney Swift fly straight up from the bottom of a chimney? Is the Robin on the lawn, looking or listening, when he stands with head cocked on one side? If listening, what can he hope to hear with the March wind whistling past his ears? No one need wish to see finer mastery of the air than is shown by the Duck Hawk as he plunges and rebounds over his chosen cliff. And for those who fancy a gruelling search, the Black Rail and its nest stand second to none.

Nevertheless, the great forests of the north and the wide prairies of the west beckon from the dim distance. It may be well known that silence and dearth of living things are often striking features of the endless woods, but the thought that a brood of Canada Grouse and their deliberate mother may be behind the next spruce bush, or that the silence may be broken by the snort of a buck, the wild call of the loon, or the tinkling melody of the Winter Wren, lures one to go and see and hear.

"Something lost behind the ranges,
Lost and waiting for you. Go."

The heavy train of Pullmans grinds to a stop. St. Paul, Minnesota! You have a few hours of precious daylight before business begins. Where can you find a "slough"? Of course the Information Office does not have that important item. However, there is a local train on the Northern Pacific which will take you into the country somewhere, and bring you back again before night.

A few miles out, you see a man working the black earth with a team of horses. That is not out of the ordinary, but what is that cloud of wheeling, dashing birds all about him? They are too large for swallows and too small for gulls. Just as the train passes you see what they are—Black Terns. Lakes, larger and smaller are passed, but all have the forbidding look of resorts. Presently, over a bank beside the track, you catch a glimpse of reeds, quiet water and beating wings. At the next station you jump off and walk back. It is a "slough" sure enough.

In a wide depression between low hills, there is a shallow lake, without evident inlet or outlet, surrounded by a wide fringe of reeds and water-loving grasses. The Black Terns come in full force to meet you, dashing at your hat and squeaking in a way which is doubtless intended to be very terrifying. They are interesting at first, but when they refuse to be reconciled to your presence they become a nuisance. Yellow Headed Blackbirds are everywhere, making their strange calls. A Bittern is pumping somewhere in the reeds, "Boob-to-cook, boob-to-cook." From the lake comes the call of the Pied billed Grebe, surprisingly loud and powerful, "Kow kow kow kow kow kow kow kow, kow-ugh, kow-ugh."

You wade in and find the bottom satisfactory. The first nest is one of the Black Tern,—the top of a little ridge of old grass-stems, rising just out of the water. Never before did you see tern's eggs so highly colored. The Yellow Headed Blackbirds fasten their deep, grass-built nests to the stems of reeds, or place them in little bushes growing in the water. If they have eggs, the spotted color prevents any confusion with those of the Red Wing. Where the water is a few inches deep, you spy the eggs of a Sora Rail, in a bunch of grass with the tops neatly drawn together. Presently you see another and another. You wonder whether yon pile of trash can be a Grebe's nest. A closer look shows that something has been mussing the top of it. You lift the damp blanket, and there are the seven stained eggs, not beautiful to look upon, but they are what they are.

The bittern's nest remains undiscovered. It is probably

not over the water, nor on very dry ground. You select a zone of medium wetness and follow it around the lake. Presently, from a little to one side, there comes a complaining, whining sound, somewhat like that made by a brooding hen. With wings raised a little, every feather on end and yellow eyes gleaming, the bittern on her nest looks twice her normal size. A stick thrust in front of her is struck viciously, time and again, with mandibles open about a half inch. You must know what is underneath so you insert the stick carefully under her body, lift her up, and toss her to one side.

The four pale brownish eggs are laid on a thin layer of grass-stems, barely covering the ground. The bittern looks daggers at you, but remains flat on the ground. And so you leave her and go back to work, realizing as never before why the bittern is called "Indian Hen."

A week later, and a hundred miles west of St. Paul, there comes another free day. Yellow Headed Blackbirds, temporarily deserting their marshes, move about on the lawns beside the street, as robins would at home. The Western Meadow Lark sings from the top of a telegraph pole, the song which seems so unexpected from a bird which looks exactly like our eastern form. At the edge of a fair-sized lake, the field-glasses show a fringe of reeds along the far shore. Those white-bodied terns, are they Commons or Forsters? The black birds with white bills, riding the dancing waves, must be Coots, and those tiny black dots alongside must be their downy young. If you can believe your eyes, there sits a male Ruddy Duck.

A long walk around the end of the lake brings you to the reedbeds, which are much more extensive than they appeared to be. The usual mob of Black Terns come to meet you. Two Mallards speed away, and a long search reveals their nest, hidden in a great expanse of waist-high grass. Lovely little Blue Winged Teal permit you to come within a few yards. The Ruddy Ducks are almost as tame, so you can watch their peculiar, wriggling, head and neck motion. It looks as though they were trying to scratch their throats with their chins. While swimming, the stiff tail points straight up. With the

neck doing the same at the other end, the shape of the bird is nearly that of a capital U, shortened vertically.

A clucking Coot swims past, with a train of tiny chicks. Blackbirds' nests in the reeds are too numerous to mention. From just in front of you, a female Ruddy Duck dashes away over the water and through the plant-stems. Where she came from there floats a nest, but if it is not a grebe's there never was one. The three eggs are so white that they must be very new. Several other nests of the same type are found, one of them probably belonging to a pair of Horned Grebes which are out on the lake.

Another sort of nest is made of the old stems of reeds, laid up to form a low mound. The first one is empty. The next has four eggs, and another is full of them,—clay-colored with dark dots. They belong to the Coots. As you wade slowly along, the gleam of white eggs catches your eye. In a frail basket-like ring of stems, partly supported by leaning stalks of dead reeds, you see four or five eggs as large as a Mallard's or larger. Preposterous as it may seem for them to have been laid by so small a bird, their nearly white color declares that a Ruddy Duck is responsible. Below the top layer of eggs you find another lot, and below those still another,—twelve in all,—with the lowest in the water. Perched on top of enough eggs to fill a turkey's nest, how does she manage to make them hatch? Yes, Minnesota has the ear-marks of the Promised Lands.

Another year has come and the scene has changed. Dawn is breaking over North Dakota. From the train's observation platform you are watching things take shape in the growing light. What an odd-looking country. What is the matter with it? Oh yes, there are not any trees. In your first sight of a treeless landscape (water-scapes do not count), you are surprised at the difference which their absence makes. Now for a whole day of "sloughs" and water-fowl. Unfortunately, a severe drought has dried up most of the "sloughs" so that not more than one or two appear in forty miles. Some are so far away that they yield nothing. A few are so close that by the time you have noted Mallard, Blue Winged Teal, Pied-Billed

Grebe and Pintail, they are past. In the dry country you welcome the first Lark Bunting. That brown form in the parched grass must be a Sharp Tailed Grouse or a Prairie Chicken.

For a long time the train follows one of those strange western streams which are just the same size for a hundred miles. Presently the stream broadens into a long lake. Aha, there's a Red Necked Grebe! Is that great white bird with black wing-tips, circling in the sky, a stray Wood Ibis? No, it is a White Pelican, the first you ever saw in a wild state.

Then there comes a stretch of country where there has been abundant rain. Coots, grebes and teal are right under the car windows. Greater Yellow Leg Snipe are further away. In the distance are shimmering pools and the glinting wings of waders. Those black headed gulls must be the Franklin's, and that gray snipe, who when he flies, suddenly becomes as blotchy as a shrike, must be the Western Willet. You do not wish any ill luck, but if the locomotive would only go lame for an hour or two! But it does not. The train rolls steadily on and on. Jack rabbits begin to appear as gliding, shadowy forms, and night closes down, slowly, over the boundless plains of Saskatchewan.

Again the scene has changed. The sting of punkies on your face slowly brings you back to consciousness. You reach for the citronella and then listen. A Barred Owl in the forest asks "Who who are you, who who are you-all?" A voice which you never hear at home says "Zweee, zwee, zwee, day! day!" That is the Brown Headed Chickadee. In the distance you hear "Quork, quork, quork" rapidly coming nearer, passing swiftly overhead and dying away in the distance. Those are American Mergansers, flying down the lake for early morning fishing. This is the Adirondacks.

A Mourning Warbler has located in a bushy place just outside of camp. In the edge of the clearing you hear the whining cry of the Yellow Bellied Sapsucker, or its characteristic drumming. In a wet spot where flat, upturned root-masses are frequent, or where some playful hurricane has piled the giant birches in hopeless confusion, you may hear, but not

often see, the Winter Wren. In no way resembling the powerful whistle of the Carolina Wren or the bubbling outburst of the House Wren, the song of this forest recluse is thin and shrill, but sprightly and surprisingly long. It seems to fit perfectly with the sound of a little brook trickling over the mossy rocks.

In the swamps you may catch the song of the Brown Creeper,—resembling more than any other, the song of the Canadian Warbler, but with only a fraction of its power and speed. It may be distinguished from warbler voices by the fact that it begins with the beady squeak which is the bird's normal call during the winter.

If you tire of tramping the wide forest, you may take to the water in a strong canoe. As you skirt the shore, the Myrtle Warbler sings from the spruces, and the Olive Sided Flycatcher shouts at the top of his voice from the top of a stub, "Three Cheers!" Presently from a dark nook in the bank, with croaking and great splashing, a female Merganser dashes out, followed by a troop of downy ducklings, all beating the water with furious energy. On a small island you may surprise a Black Duck on her well-feathered nest, and on a mere nose of rock a pair of Herring Gulls have their home. As you peep over a bush, a Loon leaves her nest at the water's edge and dashes out into the deeper part of the lake with great splashing. Or it may be that her two dark eggs have hatched and the whole family is swimming about. If you approach then, the parents seem to go wild with anxiety. They dive and rise again. They crawl about over the water, using their wings as if they were legs. Occasionally one stands up on its tail, and with body held at an angle, dashes over the water, knocking the top from every wave in its path All the while, the echoes ring with their wild, staccato trumpeting. Such a scene holds its place in memory through many years of ordinary toil.

Each year may add to one's experience and push a little further back the boundary between the known and the undiscovered. But to every nature-lover there always remain the lure and the hope of the Promised Lands.