

# CASSINIA

No. XXXV

PHILADELPHIA

1945

## FOUR DAYS WITH J. FLETCHER STREET\*

NORTHEASTERN NICARAGUA

*Thursday, April 20, 1922.*

Off with Huber and MacKensie to Great Falls, Pis Pis River. We take the Falls Trail which heretofore we have traversed for only a mile or two. We must now travel on muleback for seven or eight miles over a narrow way, rocky in places, muddy along its lowest reaches and at times overlooking steep declivities. This forest is typical of the most attractive which we have visited.

The trail leading to it from the Staff House lay through isolated trees and shrub growth, a second growth which springs up after the original forest has been cut. Immediately upon penetrating the forest along a narrow mule trail, great trees tower up, carrying their crowns out of sight among a canopy of foliage with lianas wound about every trunk and hung from every bough, passing from tree to tree and entangling the giants in a network of coiling cables. One's first feeling upon entering the high woods is one of helplessness, confusion and awe. One is afraid to venture in fifty yards. A man may become hopelessly lost in the first ten minutes. You can only wander as far as you dare, letting each object impress itself on your mind as it may only to carry away a confused recollection of perpendicular lines, all striving upwards in fierce competition towards the light far above. One is forcibly reminded of Wallace's simile "that a walk in a tropical forest is like one in an empty cathedral, while the services were being celebrated upon the roof." There may be monkeys up there over your head, burly red howlers, or tiny, peevish sapajous peering down at you but you cannot peer up at them. One must not be careless and put his hand out incautiously to rest against a tree for fear of sharp thorns, ants or wasps.

To the general influence of the ever present heat and moisture one must ascribe the infinite varieties of trees. They do not grow in masses of single species like our oaks or beeches; every tree seems different from its neighbor. They crowd upon one another in unsocial rivalry, each trying to outstretch its neighbor; so, we see great white trunks rising a hundred feet or more without a branch.

\* From the Journals of J. Fletcher Street.

The forest is green and dense excepting, perhaps, where individual trees are enjoying their annual period of rest. These for the most part are bare or heavy with fruit, which falls at times dangerously near the water boatman, or the wanderer along the trail. Yet unknown are the autumn tints as we know them, the bright yellows, scarlets and crimsons of our woods. Unknown is the cold sleep of winter, unknown the lovely awakening of vegetation when spring lays her gentle touch upon a waiting world. A ceaseless round of ever active life weaves the tropical forest into one monotonous whole of which the component parts exhibit in detail untold variety and beauty.

There are high trees with small leaves and small trees with large leaves. There are trees with bare fleshy limbs, forming the bulk of the undergrowth, many bearing sharp curved spines which render access among them practically impossible.

Individual trees rise from one hundred and fifty to two hundred feet, straight and tall, some with round boles, others with surfaces fluted or corrugated as if made of great bundles of giant creepers. The taller trees are generally heavily buttressed at times ten to thirty feet across at the base.

Sometimes a tree appears covered with beautiful flowers which do not belong to the tree but to one of the lianas that twines up through its branches and sends down great rope like stems to the ground. Some of these are thick as a man's thigh; others, as slender as a lead pencil for a length of one hundred feet. Climbing ferns cling to the branches, orchids perch on every bough and stem, but they are not, with three or four exceptions, in flower now.

Among the undergrowth several species of palms, varying in height from two to fifty feet and occasionally among them magnificent tree ferns send forth their feathery crowns twenty feet from the ground, delight the eye with their graceful elegance. Along the trail one finds great banks of lopsided begonias. Some damp spots are carpeted with a beautiful, variegated, velvety leaved plant (*Cyrtodeira* sp.).

Frequently the ground is strewn with flower petals; purple, pink or gold, that have fallen from some invisible tree top or the air is filled with a delicious perfume, for the source of which one seeks in vain, as the flowers that give it forth may be far overhead lost in the great overshadowing crown of verdure. Numerous brooks and streams intercept the forests. The sparkling pools are the favorite haunts of the hummingbirds, and like an arrow one will come upon you unaware, poise before you, clothed in purple, bronze or emerald, then with a sudden jerk of its tail, disappear like a flash of light. When the footing along the trail is uncertain or precipitous I leave the guidance entirely with the mule. My only concern is to give the mule its head; my only precaution is not to slip over his tail, and up he goes splashing, clawing, slipping, stumbling but never falling down, pausing now and then to get breath for a fresh start. The horseflies are very annoying to my mule. I lean down over him and slap those in reach with my hand. This brings relief but occasionally startles the beast for the slap is unexpected and reasonably sharp. Another method I

employ is to brush them off with a palm or fern leaf. Generally I ride with a loose rein to the better pleasure of the mule as he cannot be hurried for his gait has been acquired over a long period of years and cannot be altered; besides the mule knows the forest and the pitfalls of the trail much better than I might ever hope to.

At length we ascend the steep hill, below the Pis Pis Falls and from this descend into the valley, arriving at the Fall's Staff House at 12:30 P. M., having been five hours in the saddle.

After lunch we cross the river on a rickety suspension bridge that sways like a hammock. On its opposite bank I find the climbing *Marcgravia*, mentioned by Belt as a favored flower of the hummingbirds when in bloom. Unfortunately, it is now at its rest period. Its flowers are disposed in a circle hanging downwards like an inverted candelabrum. We follow the edge of some low bush, attain a dense forest on a high hillside where we find waves of birds in spots, then areas of absolute silence. Secure the Golden-rumped Myiobius, Tawney-crested Tanager, Yellow-thighed Manakin, Mountain Hen and a quail which a native brings in.

#### THE JERSEY SHORE

*July 23, 1922.*

Clear. Hot with strong N. W. wind. From Cape May to Jarvis Sound and Two Mile Beach. With Stone and Hand.

Birds noted:

1. Herring Gull—50.
2. Black-billed Gull—100.
3. Common Tern—100 (one flock on Two Mile of 74. Another of 20).
4. Black Terns—4. Associated with above.
5. Spotted Sandpiper—10. Scattered at edge of pools and marshes.
6. Least Sandpiper—5.
7. Semipalmated Sandpiper—100.
8. Semipalmated Plover—5.
9. Curlew—100. One flock of 65.
10. Dowitcher—about 30 altogether.
11. Great Blue Heron—8
12. Little Green Heron—4.
13. Black Duck—1 in pool on meadows.
14. Summer Yellow-legs—10—scattered.
15. Clapper Rail—1. Calling.
16. Eagle—1. Over Jarvis Sound.
17. Flicker—1.
18. Kingfisher—1.
19. Kingbird—3.
20. Crow—10.

21. Fish Crow—5.
22. Meadowlark—N.
23. Red-winged Blackbird—1.
24. Grackle—3.
25. Chipping Sparrow—2—S.
26. Field Sparrow—1.
27. Grasshopper Sparrow—3—S.
28. Song Sparrow—5.
29. Cardinal—noted by Hunt.
30. Martin—Common
31. Barn Swallow—Common over Basin.
32. Maryland Yellow-throat—2 or 3 singing.
33. Yellow-billed Cuckoo—noted by Hunt.
34. Catbird—noted by Hunt.
35. Robin—1.
36. Fish Hawk.
37. Vulture.
38. Piping Plover.
39. Killdeer.

To Jarvis Sound with Stone and Hand by rowboat from Schellenger's Landing. On the way up the Thoroughfare noted Spotted Sandpipers at edge of mud banks and an occasional Yellow-legs flying over meadow. A Black Duck rose from a small pond and flew away across the meadows. Green Herons and an occasional Great Blue Heron were noted with outstretched necks, extending above the meadow grass. Some of the Great Blues with necks drawn back look like bleached stakes.

Reaching Jarvis Sound, Hand directs us to a patch of sedge extending above the water, indicating a shoal. We pull in over this and find that we have about a foot of water on a fast ebbing tide. Out over the marshes we note scattered flocks of curlews, dowitchers, ox-eyes and others, apparently restless.

Thirty feet before us is the highest point of the flats. The birds are aware of this and the Semipalmated Flycatchers in bunches of twos and threes are occasionally flying over this and hesitating, as if anxious to alight. At 8:45 a single bird alights in the water up to its flanks, remains a few seconds and flew off with a "*whit-a-whit*" call.

8:50 Two Least and three Semipalmated Sandpipers arrive, crowding close together on a narrowly exposed ridge. An excellent opportunity for a comparison of the two species is afforded. The Semipalmateds are decidedly larger and heavier, with back feathers a richer brown than those of the Least. The underparts are much lighter, the shading on the side of the neck not so dark and extending not so far towards the middle of the breast. The legs of the Least are light olive green while those of the Semipalmateds were dark. The Semipalmateds seem to stand higher in the water.

8:53 Dowitchers fly in and join the flock. They are in full summer plumage with backs barred darker brown over ochraceous buff with pale rufous throats and breasts, fading to ashy on lower breast and belly. Some of them stand motionless with bills extended forward. Others already have their heads turned backward with their bills buried beneath their wing. All species of birds seem more anxious to rest than to feed.

8:54 A Ring-necked Plover flies down but does not stay. There are now 15 dowitchers, 1 Least and 15 Semipalmateds.

9:00 An area of flat 15 feet by 60 is exposed. The Semipalmateds are now feeding and as they walk among the exposed clams these respond in closing by squirting little jets of water 18" into the air.

9:04 Four Ring-necks join the company. Some of the dowitchers start feeding with a probing motion of the bill occasionally burying it up to its base and in shallow water frequently submerging the head.

9:10 A Herring Gull flies in, scares many of the dowitchers away and some of the Semipalmateds. Another gull is down on its breast on another exposed patch. The area is fast narrowing. Probably 100 Semipalmateds are now here feeding somewhere over the exposed mud, stretching out in all directions. These come in in small groups. The falling tide compels us to recede from time to time from our original position and we retreat towards the deeper water of the Thoroughfare.

9:28 Four curlews fly in but only one stays. The one hundred or more that we saw earlier must be feeding elsewhere. The remaining bird scratches its head, preens its head and bathes with a peculiar bobbing motion. Across the Thoroughfare the Herring Gulls now occupy a narrow exposed strip. We count 25. We are forced to return all the way to the Thoroughfare, the bank dropping off steeply from the edge of a mussel reef over which the shallow water is receding with a strong current. As we anchor here dowitchers and Semipalmateds fly down and feed among the mussels within twenty feet of us.

9:40 We look up the Thoroughfare and note an eagle over the water, its white tail a conspicuous identification mark.

Shortly we row away on the still ebbing tide to the lower end of Two Mile Beach.

On the broad beach of Two Mile we note but few birds. Two flocks of terns are seen, one including 20 Common Terns and another 74 Common Terns and 4 Black Terns.

On the drier upper beach we count one collection of 16 Piping Plovers with 2 others towards the surf, the greatest number of these birds that I have seen at one time.

#### THE PENNSYLVANIA HILLS

*April 15, 1923.*

Cloudy, threatening and cool. Arrived at Spruce Creek, Pa., with Stuart and Scoville at 6:30 A. M. The ground and trees covered with a 6" fall of

soft snow which enmantled the hemlocks and white pines with soft downy patches and outlined all the twigs and branches of the deciduous trees.

The village of Spruce Creek is composed of twenty to thirty houses flanking both sides of a road apparently leading back into the mountains. It is dwarfed by high mountains on every side, rising to a thousand feet above the railway level.

At one end of the village runs a branch of the Juniata River, a swift, purling, mountain stream, flowing eastward. Into this at a point slightly below the bridge enters Spruce Creek from which the town has derived its name, but not by reason of spruce trees lining its reaches for the evergreen growth that frequents its banks is of hemlock with an occasional white pine.

We breakfasted on bread and tongue under the shelter of a near-by mill, where feeding upon the grain carelessly dropped about the shed were numerous Chipping Sparrows, Song Sparrows, Tree Sparrows and juncos. Grackles were feeding down in the road.

After breakfast we crossed the bridge spanning Spruce Creek. The bridge was 8" deep with snow and the view from here up Spruce Creek was a view into fairyland. A dark, winding line of gray, tortuous water ran swiftly through snow covered banks densely crowded with hemlock bearing upon their recumbent branches great patches of soft snow. The delicate tracery of birch spray laden with snow contributed its own peculiar beauty. The air was still, save for the twittering of goldfinches, siskins and juncos feeding upon the opening buds of the willow. The song of the Song Sparrow was an occasional offering. A kingfisher, undoubtedly as dissatisfied as any of us with the freakish turn of the weather, sounded his startling rattle and passed upstream.

The walking was unpleasant, the snow soft, but we labored through it as we pursued the river road downstream towards our objective. Presently we came to where the river made a broad horseshoe with a high, steep, rocky mountain thrust out into its apex.

We passed fine growths of giant yellow willows, showing an occasional last year's goldfinch's nest upon an outlying branch. The siskin and goldfinches were feeding here. Even the juncos have taken to feeding on buds. There is no bare ground. A Brown Creeper seeped weakly as he ascended the trunk of a roadside tree.

Up at the head of the horseshoe the landscape is most beautiful. Hemlock and pine are abundant. Bird song was frequent. Now we hear a Song Sparrow, a Cardinal or a Flicker. Once or twice a beautiful clear song rang out, pure and liquid. It was that of the Purple Finch and yet it has much the quality of the Solitary Vireo.

On the return bend of the horseshoe we began to note frequent cliffs or rock chimneys flanking the mountain side on our left. We surveyed these in hope of seeing falcons, but none were revealed. Dickey's very excellent photograph at length established the identity of the cliff which the Duck

Hawks had occupied three years ago. The spot is marked by a sentinel tree at the edge of a promontory three hundred feet above the river. The face of this particular escarpment drops clear for fifty feet, then it is buttressed by steep inclines and gradations to the river road below. We cannot ascend it from the front. We were forced first to follow up a rocky ravine above it, climbing upon a stream bed filled with irregular boulders. These were hidden by deep snow rendering progress difficult and precarious. A step upon an inclined rock would pitch us forward upon all fours, a step between rocks would mean water to our shoe tops, as it was present below the loose snow. Progress was slow and uncertain. First we climbed at an angle of twenty degrees, then at forty and at length at sixty. Scarce hand hold was afforded by small trees and saplings. If the strain upon these was too great we would uproot them and slide backward. We pushed far up the ravine, far beyond its projection, in order to reach the level of the cliff. This attained, we worked backward, depending largely upon the security of rhododendron and mountain maples to which we clung along the steep mountain side.

Finally we reached an eminence at the edge of the cliff. We had gained a shelf twenty feet above the Duck Hawk location. We had heard no birds during our ascent and were beginning to doubt that the ledge was occupied.

Stuart and I stayed above. I took photographs of the beautiful panorama of river and hills lying before us. Scoville climbed down the steep snow-covered rocks to reach the lower ledge. Very carefully he approached its edge. He got a hand hold of a slender black birch, let himself down a little lower and viewed the ledge. There were no birds but he noted indications of a nest being occupied the year before by the presence of the feathers of a flicker and other birds. Two distinct nest locations, situated a few feet apart, were in evidence. Thus we were destined to be disappointed in our search for Duck Hawks. In lowering himself to this shelf he noted a squeaky note and upon removing the snow from a rock cranny found a small brown bat frozen to the rock. It appeared to be in a dormant condition but responded later in the day under the warmth of Scoville's pocket.

Retracing our steps we reached the road without incident.

I was anxious for photographs of the cliff from its best aspect so followed the road downstream. Looking back towards the cliff I noted two crow-like birds flying back and across the top of this. They seemed no larger than do crows but there was nothing by which to make comparison yet their peculiar manner of sailing, and their widespreading rounded tail suggested ravens. Half believing and half hoping, I called Scoville and Stuart and they both agreed that my guess was a correct one.

It was necessary for us to retire to a roadside clump of hemlocks where we might observe the birds unseen, for a raven is among the most wary of birds and will not approach its nest if it suspects danger of any kind.

The soiled surface of a rock seemed to focus our attention. Then Stuart announced that he could detect a dark mass like the structure of a nest below

it. Viewing this with a glass we all agreed that it must be the nest of a raven and if such it proved to be that fact in itself would be a sufficient reason for the Duck Hawk being absent, for the Duck Hawk seems to have profound respect for a raven and does not place his aerie near by.

Presently from our place of hiding we saw the bird return and alight upon the cliff within ten feet of the supposed nest. Then it sailed out again only to return shortly, alighting this time within six feet of the nest. Then it walked quickly to the nest location and settled down upon it. Stuart contended that he could see the bird but I could not confirm this. One thing was settled, we had found a raven's nest. Whether the nest contained young or eggs was the next question to be determined. All the times that we had observed the two birds neither uttered a call. We built a fire in our hemlock grove to dry our feet after our descent from the Duck Hawk's cliff.

After a half hour's rest Stuart and Scoville determined to make the climb. I was afraid on account of a weak back, which I had badly strained ten days earlier.

The cliff was a part of the same ridge which held the Duck Hawk's nest, but the site of the raven's nest was distant from one hundred to one hundred and fifty feet down river from the former nest but at about the same elevation.

Stuart and Scoville started their ascent directly below going up the mountain side at a steep grade. Both birds were cognizant of their presence and frequently called "*cr-u-u-ck, cruuck,*" nervously circling low over the edge of the cliff sometimes within twenty to thirty feet of Scoville and Stuart.

After a half hour I noticed from the road that George and Sam were making uncertain progress. Sam had reached the cliff. I saw him climb up and around it, but apparently he was unable to reach the nesting site.

A certain anxiety and curiosity possessed me and I determined to join them in spite of my back. At length I reached them at the bottom of the cliff. Stuart was for giving up the quest, not caring to have Scoville entertain the risk of a dangerous climb. Scoville was reluctant about accepting failure. I joined him and Stuart went down the hillside to the road. Scoville and I discussed every possible way of approaching the nest which we could see, the ledge being not more than twenty-five feet above us. Scoville tried to reach it from a main ledge on its right flank but a tantalizing projecting mass of rock was in the way. There was a possibility of getting down from the top so by a wide circuit we reached the cliff above it, only to our discouragement. We decided, however, to let down a rope as a possible assistance to another attempt from below. We secured it to a 3" cedar, the staunchest tree near by.

Once again at the base of the cliff Scoville gained the ledge and by the use of the rope was able, after great difficulty, to get about the projecting point of rock. Beyond this the shelf was not as favorable as it seemed. It was not a flat ledge but a sloping one, and soaked by the melting snows, now quite slippery. Only by a great effort in clinging to the rocks wherever he could find a depression or angle to fit his fingers did Scoville work up to the edge of the nest.

He found four young birds, probably not over two or three days old, without feathers and of a pinkish clay color with large heads and bills. Their eyes were unopened. The nest was a loose bulky one of small sticks, and was lined with shredded skunk hair and deer hair.

The return was most difficult. To work down the shelving rocks without positive foothold was precarious. Once Scoville lost the rope, which was his only safety. It was only after several attempts that I was able to whip it in far enough under the cliff for him to grasp it. Bearing heavily upon this he was able to get back to the area of shelving rock. Where before this was difficult to get around, Scoville now found it absolutely impossible to return in the same way. The only course was to lower himself down twenty feet of sheer cliff. This could be safely accomplished if the fifty feet rope was sufficient to hold his weight. I held fears that it might prove inadequate. However, no other course was now open. Sam endeavored to get a firm hold upon the rope, winding it about one leg. He hoped to work carefully from crag to crag down the rocky surface. This was not to be. Of a sudden he shot downward to the narrow shelf where I was stationed. With his wet gloves he could not hold the rope securely. Fortunately he did not lose it entirely and by keeping his balance averted a bad fall.

His eyeglasses were swished off and lost in the deep snow. His hands were burned by the rope and his body was slightly rubbed by the rough, rock face. It was a great relief to me to get him back to my safe level.

We returned to the camp fire where Stuart awaited us.

The Hermit Thrushes were quite abundant all along the river valley. Where we built our fire one and sometimes two or three were to be seen close by, picking up small food morsels from the surface of the snow along the roadway.

By the end of the afternoon most of the sun had melted the snow from the hemlock boughs and deciduous trees.

The rocky cliffs were rich with columbine growing in their fissures with early saxifrage along their flatter reaches. *Polypodium vulgare* was frequent.

Left for return at 6:20 P. M.

List of birds observed:

1. Dove—2.
2. Osprey—1.
3. Kingfisher—2.
4. Downy Woodpecker—2.
5. Flicker
6. Phoebe—1.
7. Crow—a few.
8. Raven—two pairs (one pair across river).
9. Purple Grackle
10. Goldfinch—few.
11. Pine Siskins—few feeding in willow bush.

12. Vesper Sparrow—2.
13. White-throated Sparrow
14. Tree Sparrow—1.
15. Chipping Sparrow—1.
16. Junco—abundant.
17. Song Sparrow—S. 10.
18. Fox Sparrow—C.
19. Cardinal—23—C.
20. Carolina Wren—2.
21. Brown Creeper—1.
22. White-bellied Nuthatch—2.
23. Golden-crowned Kinglet
24. Hermit Thrush
25. Robin

CENTRAL ALBERTA, CANADA

*May 30, 1923.*

Cloudy. Arose at 5:00 A. M. In the morning we hunted about Red Lodge as far as the Little Deer River. We first photographed and collected the nests of the Brewer's Blackbird. The eggs and nests vary considerably. There is quite a colony of them in Thomson's meadow. Stuart found a Song Sparrow's nest with four eggs. We hunted for nests of the Clay-colored Sparrow without success; shot a male for identification. It is the most abundant sparrow here. It abounds amid the shrub growth of the meadows. Stuart found a Canada Ruffed Grouse on her nest at the base of a clump of willows. The sitting bird was very trustful, allowing us to cut away the branches to afford a better opportunity to photograph. After this we went further up the meadow and photographed the eggs and nesting site of the Sharp-tailed Grouse.

Thomson had collected them on the 20th.

From here we crossed over to a low marshy place to photograph the nest of the Jacksnipe, found on the 28th. We found the birds sitting upon the eggs which were well concealed by overarching sprays of grass. Approached within six feet before the bird flushed.

Now we reach a small stream, a tributary of the Little Deer River. Stuart takes a set of flicker's eggs (for locality only, as Dr. Hughes says, when taking a duplicate set). Further down the stream we flush a Golden-eye duck with her brood of six young. The little ducklings, though apparently quite young, make great progress, and when particularly exercised, although not able to fly, fairly skim the surface of the water by a quick motion of their wings. The duck, on several occasions, took wing whenever we approached too closely, flying in a wide circle and again joining the fledglings above or below us as the case might be.

Upon approaching the Little Deer River we discovered a nest of the Western Great Horned Owl. First one of the adult birds scolded us from across the river but returned to near-by trees when Thomson climbed the nesting tree.

He brought down the young in my camera box together with the hind quarters of an adult snowshoe rabbit and an entire young rabbit as well.

In the afternoon we drove two miles N. E. of Red Lodge to an open slough surrounded by broad grassy meadows. We saw upon this as many as twenty-five Yellow-legs but could not locate any nests in the district. Collected one set of Killdeer eggs, one set of Long-eared Owl eggs and one set of Long-tailed Chickadee eggs.

Upon first approaching the slough we saw a Canada Goose lead her brood of six young out as far as a reedy island where I believe they hid for I saw them no more. Here as well were noted Mallards, Pintails, a pair of Shovellers, a pair of Golden-eyes, Wilson's Phalarope and six Dowitchers.

On a raised hummock of a bog were numerous droppings of birds. Towards evening the reason for these was explained when we saw several Sharp-tailed Grouse collecting there. Thomson calls it a parade grounds where the birds indulge in peculiar and interesting antics during the breeding season. Heard the Western Night Hawk upon our return. More or less showery all afternoon.