Walks and Birds, a May Morning at Tinicum

George Spencer Morris

EDITOR'S NOTE: The following article was read at the November 15, 1894, DVOC meeting by its author, George Spencer Morris, a club founder who was then president (Proceedings of the DVOC, Vol. 2, 1892-97:14). It was one of 16 such presentations Morris made to the club, nine original manuscripts of which are now housed in the archives of the Library of the Academy of Natural Sciences (this one being Academy Archival Collection 42 #9). Edward D. Fingerhood wrote a short article about Morris and his collection that appeared in Cassinia, *Vol. 65, 1992-93:12.*

Silence and loneliness seem as a rule to brood over the halls and waiting rooms of the Baltimore and Ohio depot at 24th and Chestnut Sts.

The building is one to be recommended as a spot well suited to quiet meditation. This seems especially true in the early hours of the morning, say at about six o'clock.

A week or two ago a brother ornithologist and myself arose at dawn and breakfasted before the sun was fully up. Then with guns and game bags we sought the depot of the "B and O" and kicked our way through the heavy swinging doors.

We had no very clear idea of where we were going, we only knew that the spirit of unrest was upon us and that our ears were itching for the sound of gunshots.

There was however the dim, underlying consciousness that we must be back at our respective places of business before noon.

We went down the broad stairway to the lower waiting room. A few yawning parties were almost the only occupants. Two of them were listlessly pushing the dust about on the floor with long-handled brushes.

The ticket agent watched us from behind his bars as we approached. Seeing us armed to the teeth he doubtless looked upon us as bound for western wilds. Possibly a vision arose in his mind of a lucrative sale of tickets. How must such hopes have been dashed when we began asking about Tinicum, Essington, Philadelphia Yacht Club, etc.

The region round about Tinicum is one not unfamiliar to us. In past seasons we have tramped through the boggy country that lies along that portion of the river's western bank. It is a fruitful ground for the ornithologist to work in.

In the spring migrations, the birds follow up the river in their northern course; then they seem to see the great black city crouched between the Schuylkill and the Delaware a few miles ahead. Before ascending for the lofty flight across the city's smoky width they drop to earth awhile and rest in the meadows and woodlands of Tinicum.

On the morning above alluded to, we decided after some discussion to buy tickets for South Essington. Soon after, we boarded our train which consisted of but two cars drawn by a wheezy old engine. As you doubtless know, the railroad runs for a short stretch along the Schuylkill's eastern bank, then crosses the river down by Grays Ferry, running in back of the old Bartram Gardens. The road which we took follows along near the Delaware to Chester.

The lowlands which we went through were very lovely in the early morning light. There were ideal studies for the watercolor artist. Broad streams crept out across the meadows to meet the river not far away. There were spatterdock ponds and cattail pools. Straight rows of willows followed

the ditches that drained the flat fields. All the lines which met the eye were horizontal — how jarring to the sense of sight is the pert vertical when it intrudes itself on such a scene! There was a faint mist on the meadows; it softened outlines but did not obscure them. Thin wisps of cloud, dropped by the night, lay here and there like lacey scarfs to drape the marshlands. Brown and white cattle gave color to the landscape as they stood knee-deep in the long grasses. Sometimes we passed old houses of evident colonial date; the back yards heaped full of pink apple trees, while purple lilacs lolled over the fence, with perhaps a Lombardy poplar or two out in front.

We left the train at South Essington. This place is near to a certain large tract of woodland which we have before visited. On previous occasions however we have approached it from the opposite direction. Standing by the railroad we now saw it lying to the westward a couple of fields distant.

We slipped in through someone's back yard and out past the barn and wagon sheds; then a cart road went straight back through the fields and along by one side of the wood.

The tall rye stood on either side as we went down the lane; the dew drops sparkled on the gray-green heads and the swallows swept around us. The sounds of singing birds came from the fruit trees scattered through the fields, the larks were in the short grass and the chats sang in the hedgerows.

I know full well one's downy couch may be a pleasant place at six a.m., yet we never wish to return thither after we have climbed the first fence across our morning walk, have kicked our way through the first dewy field of clover and have heard the first few strains of nature's glad good morrow.

An oak tree stood in the field by the point at which the cart road reached the edge of the wood; a small brown bird was singing on one of the lower branches. We did not recognize the song, neither could we identify the bird from the distance at which we stood.

Now an unrecognizable species is a source of excitement to an ornithologist, an excitement which often results in the death of the bird. So on this dewy May morning, a gun went quickly to the shoulder; there was a puff, a bang and a dead bird fell in the rye.

We were over the fence in a moment, scratching around in search of the prize. Then one held up a small brown-feathered body, and a look of disappointment came across the faces of the hunters.

"Swamp sparrows' notes always do fool me," growled one.

"I have to learn 'em all over again every spring," grunted the other.

"Light was so bright behind him I couldn't make out what he was," explains the man who shot him.

"Take him home and make a skin of him anyhow," says the other.

And now, kind readers of the Review, be not horrified, I beg of you, because of this early morning murder and the cold-blooded conversation which followed it; believe me when I say that in the intelligent study of ornithology, a certain number of such sacrifices are a necessity.

We who watch the birds a little more closely perhaps than the average observer find it impossible always to identify a species at sight. If it be unfamiliar to us we must have it in our hands; perhaps comparisons with previously collected specimens may be necessary, sometimes the aid of books or men more learned than ourselves must be called in.

The ornithologist delights not in the taking of life. So far as his sentiments are concerned the bird in the bush is always worth more than the bird in the hand, but the transference of the bird from the bush to the hand seems to him a

necessity when by so doing some grain of knowledge is added to his mental store of bird lore.

It is the instinct of the true naturalist always to take a long step when by doing so he can avoid treading on the tiny flower that smiles up at him; the true naturalist as certainly plucks that tiny flower if by so doing he adds a needed specimen to his herbarium. Heart and head must work together in the study of nature. The love of beauty and the thirst for knowledge must offset one another. I know there are many who are closer observers and ardent lovers of nature who do not and would not take life. From an aesthetic point of view their opinions may be interesting and of some value; from a truthfully scientific standpoint they are hardly worth considering; they are about as valuable as the opinions of a doctor would be who had never entered a dissecting room or studied anatomy.

I knew the bird at once as the golden-winged warbler; it is a rare species in this region; I never saw but one alive before.

After the swamp sparrow tragedy, we went into the wood. It was a large square tract of timber with a few cart tracks running through it; certain portions were swampy and there was much underbrush.

The great migratory wave of bird life was then at its fullest — sweeping everywhere over the country. When we entered the Tinicum woods it seemed as though the air was all atwitter with the notes of birds. The twigs on every side were trembling at the clasp of little claws; there were dainty dabs of color slipping through the fresh green leaves; there was the quick peeping glance of small black eyes and everywhere the fluttering of little wings.

It is at such an early hour that one can best watch the warblers, the most interesting group of all the migrants. They had a large "working majority" in the great leafy house the morning we were down at Tinicum.

The myrtle bird or yellow-crowned warbler was much the most abundant; he almost always is. There were also great numbers of black polls, while black-throated blue and black-throated green warblers were equally common. The redstart was everywhere. He too is a warbler as you doubtless know. He is the daintiest little coxcomb that ever comes this way; his feathers are flame colored mixed with black; he spreads his tail like a tiny turkey; he waltzes out along a limb snapping his bill at passing insects, then he falls off forward as though he were making an elegant bow to someone out in space.

The Canada flycatching-warbler was quite abundant; he is a near relative of the redstart; he has a throat and breast of yellow, with a necklace of black dots.

Magnolia warblers fluttered through the lower branches of the trees. Parula warblers were abundant. Black and white creepers went up and down the rough bark. Now and then a flash of flame color showed that a Blackburnian warbler was passing. A very fine specimen of this handsome species was secured by my companion.

We separated soon after we entered the wood. It is a rule best to work alone when studying nature.

For a while I watched the antics of a waterthrush. He was stepping about with a bobbing motion through a bit of boggy thicket. He too is a warbler and not a real thrush; he merely gets the name because of his mottled breast. He is a near relative of the ovenbird or golden-crowned thrush. This species also was abundant throughout the wood. You may readily recognize birds of this group by their movements. They keep close to the ground or upon it. They neither hop nor run, but they walk and the tail keeps constantly bobbing with the motion which we associate with sandpipers and other small water birds.

There is something excessively dainty and ladylike in all their movements. We find them in moist places, but they always walk with careful, cautious step, as though fearful of soiling their skirts or getting their feet damp.

Every stroller in the woods of summer is familiar with the cheerfully monotonous song of golden-crowned thrush. It consists of a series of shrill repetitions, each one getting higher till the singer suddenly stops, as though for want of breath, without having time to give even a falling inflection by way of termination.

I was working my way through a bit of tangled underbrush when I heard a chirping across on the edge of the wood which attracted my attention. I moved cautiously over and came out on the lane. On the other side of the cart tracks ran an old fence much grown about with high weeds and low bushes. The unfamiliar chirping was in this thicket. Now, an unknown bird note is a source of great excitement to the ornithologist, and the sight of a rare or unknown species sends positive thrills down his back. This is an age when thrills are in great requisition. The average person of leisure when in pursuit of pleasure is simply looking about for thrills from varied sources. We seek for them in books, in conversation, in travel and in adventure. Our brains and nerves seem to need them as a stimulant. The innocent thrill is surely a harmless thing; the ornithologist constantly meets with them in the pursuit of his favorite study.

The bird in the bush across the lane continued to chirp, and the thrills increased in magnitude. I could see the leaves and twigs trembling;

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it was undoubtedly a small bird; it was active and was probably scolding at me, although I could not see it. Suddenly it darted into view, swung forward on a spray, snatched at an insect, then fluttered back to the thicket and out of sight. But the momentary glimpse was all that was necessary for recognition; I knew the bird at once as the golden-winged warbler; it is a rare species in this region; I never saw but one alive before, and that was twelve years ago when I secured a fine male in a swampy thicket near my home.

Again there was a fluttering among the leaves

nearest to me and the bird came once more into view. I saw by its comparatively dull coloring that it was a female. All the movements were swift and sprightly; it glanced gracefully along from spray to spray. It attempted none of the gymnastic evolutions of the redstart; it did not assume the dainty airs of the waterthrush or ovenbird. I watched it with intense delight, but all the while I knew that it was the fate of that little bird to lie for years to come in a dark drawer by the side of that other one shot twelve years ago; that its little feet would be folded together and that a label would be tied to them giving its name, sex, date of death and where shot.

Somehow the gun went off; I suppose someone must have pulled the trigger. The feathers of the little golden-wing were hardly spoiled at all and it really made a very good specimen.

Later on, my friend and I came together again on the far side of the wood. We each had several little feathered corpses done up in paper cornucopias.

The sun was now high in the sky; it shone hotly on you while in the fields; it was fast drying the dew on the grass. The whole world seemed teeming with life; the air was full of sound, color, fragrance, freshness. The wood appeared to be more crowded than ever with birds. Warblers like great bright insects were everywhere dancing among the young leaves; migrating thrushes of various kinds were moving stealthily about in the underbrush; tanagers flashed like fire for an instant in the sunlight near the treetops; woodpeckers beat their morning tattoo on dead branches and a Carolina wren sang sweetly over among some fallen logs in the north corner of the wood.

There were a number of blue jays screaming about, or making a shrill creaking noise as though their voices needed a lubricant. Wheelbarrow bird is one of the common names of the jay, his notes at times sound so like the squeaking of that homely vehicle.

Once or twice we startled night herons out of the tree tops, where they had settled among the thick foliage for the day's siesta.

They flapped away sullenly, clumsily and half blindly through the bright sunlight. We found no nests, though I think it probable that a few may breed there. The marshy land lying all about and the river so near at hand make the neighborhood a good one for the long-legged races of birds.

After a time we left the wood. Separating again, we wandered through the flat fields and along by the fences where grasses and weeds grew high, with blackberry thickets here and there.

One finds the yellow-breasted chats in places like these. They are beautiful in color, but grotesque in action. They fly through the air with upright wings and legs dangling loosely; their breasts are bright yellow; their backs are olive green and a white ring is round the eye; their voices are remarkable, they have the powers of mimicry to some degree and should rank high as ventriloquists. They have harsh, chattering, chuckling notes; they make gurgling sounds like water running from a bottle; sometimes they warble a few sweet bars. When we went out into the fields, the songs of the chats were coming from along the woodside and from the fence-row thickets.

The sun in the fields was hot on our heads as we pushed through the nodding rye; gauze-winged insects buzzed in the warm air; butterflies tottered about on uncertain wing. Far overhead a few rolling clouds drove up across the sky like great white chariots. Swallows went sweeping through the middle air. One seems for a second to see the mark that a swallow makes when he cuts swiftly across the sky.

We look at our watches and behold, it was almost train time. Then we went regretfully over through the fields to the station. The puffy old train came back from Chester and took us up to town, together with a few stray milk cans that were standing on the platform. ❑