

# A Day in the Salt Marshes Near Atlantic City

GEORGE SPENCER MORRIS

*EDITOR'S NOTE: The following article was presented as a paper that was read at the November 2, 1893, DVOC meeting by its author, George Spencer Morris, a club founder who was then president (Proceedings of the DVOC, Vol. 2, 1892-97: 10). 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 #10). Morris' companions were DVOC founder Witmer Stone and I. Norris De Haven, who was elected to the club in 1891. Edward D. Fingerhood wrote a short article about Morris and his collection that appeared in Cassinia, Vol. 65, 1992-93: 12.*

It was on the 20th of July that I received a postal which stated:  
Dear Morris.

How are you fixed for Saturday next at 4:30 P.M. train. Reading R.R. to Atlantic. Come up on Monday morning. Yours, De Haven.

And I replied that I would be there or perish in the attempt and that I was: His, Morris.

So it came to pass that on the afternoon of the 22nd I wended my way with gun and grip to the foot of Chestnut Street and, having kicked my way through the swinging doors of the Reading depot, I was delighted to find the dim interior irradiated by the bright smile and sunshiny locks of our well-beloved Stone.

Then we went across the river and held all the seats we could until De Haven's arrival, which was by the last boat. This was the first time that I had ever had the pleasure of being Captain De Haven's guest over Sunday — great was my appreciation of the privilege, and naturally I want to tell about it, but others abler than I have already written for your benefit of the pleasant Sabbath-breaking existence which is to be found in the neighborhood of De Haven's cat boat. So I'll just give you a page or two, with all due brevity, telling of what we saw in a feathered way during that cruise on the day which comes between Saturday and Monday.

The boat lay just above the railroad bridge, and

we were soon aboard her. Stone knows almost as much about sailing as I do, and I can manage a boat fully as well as I can run a locomotive or ride a bare-backed camel, but De Haven is lenient to the seafaring defects of landlubbers.

We soon found ourselves slipping smoothly up the thoroughfares to the north of the city, with the sun sinking in great splendor over beyond the level meadows.

The seaside finches were singing all about us in the long grass, and every now and then one would fly across the stream in front of us, apparently hardly able to keep his pot-bellied little carcass out of the water.

Small bunches of least or semipalmated sandpipers dodged here and there across the marshes. A flock or two of curlew went by across the yellow sky, a few young laughing gulls were seen, and four or five great blues went plodding off across the meadows with long and lazy flaps.

The breeze came up a little fresher from the south as the twilight crept across the level landscape. Morris, who was steering, ran the boat onto a sandbar, but we got off without mishap, and De Haven did not swear any more than was absolutely necessary.

It was almost dark when we came to anchor — and having brought our appetites with us, we lost no time in getting to work with knife and fork upon the supper which De Haven had been prepar-

ing in the little cabin. Soon after, we made up our beds, which are comfortable canvas contrivances arranged upon the floor.

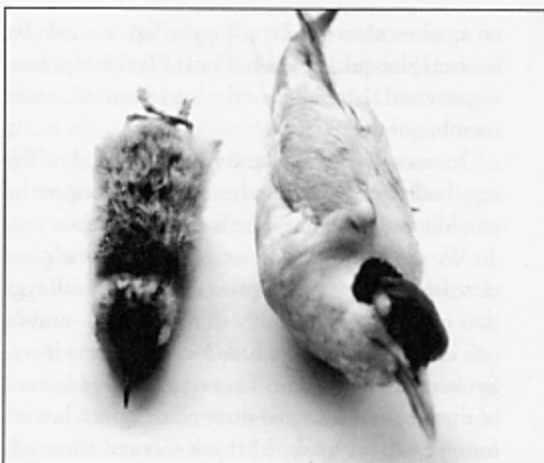
Outside, the small waves made a soothing noise. They sounded like little hands patting softly against the side of the boat. The other things were out there, too, but they could not get in, for there were wire screens in every opening to the cabin. We could, however hear their deep-toned roar as they fanned the night air with their myriad wings. There was evidently a strong migratory movement among them, the lines of flight being wholly in the direction of De Haven's cat boat. They were also numerous upon the meadows next day. Stone shot one that he mistook for a mudhen, but of course the mistake was a natural one.

It was a little before sunrise next morning when we stuck our heads out of the cockpit. It was partly cloudy and the sky to eastward was a yellowish gray. Atlantic City lay to the southward, making a toothlike line along the horizon of pointed roofs and spires, while the lighthouse stood boldly up at the end of the town nearest to us. The grasses of the meadows seemed full of singing seaside finches. A few white-bellied swallows swept by across the level stretches. Mudhens were cackling in among the sedges. A couple of Wilson's [Common] terns went past us up the thoroughfare with springing flight.

The water was of a dull gray leaden hue; there was no sun as yet to bring the colors out. It looked cold. But when a thing has to be done, there is no use making it harder by putting it off and thinking about it, so overboard we all go, headfirst, and find it after all to be most delightful and refreshing. He who has never dived into cold salt water before breakfast still has a very pleasant experience in store for him.

A brisk rubdown, with just a suggestion of a shiver as the chilly morning breeze strikes you, then into your clothes and breakfast into you, and if De Haven don't know how to make omelet and coffee, then I don't know omelet and coffee when I see them.

By the time that breakfast was over, the sun was well up in the east, and after dishwashing, we went ashore. We thought we would attend service on



Common Tern adult and chick shot on Morris' expedition July 1893. The skins were prepared and brought to the DVOC meet at which this paper was read. The specimens remain part of the collection of the Academy of Natural Sciences, where they were photographed.

Photo by Sandra L. Sh

land, for it was Sunday morning, you know, and like the old pilgrim fathers, we took our guns with us.

De Haven and I have double-barrel twelve-bores; Stone has a curious little contrivance which he calls a gun; in reality, it's kind of a cross between a pea shooter and a slingshot, but when handled by an expert like the owner, it becomes a deadly weapon and carries havoc into the ranks of swallows and seashores. It has many good points (this is a tribute to Stone's marksmanship) and goes up the sleeve nicely; it is well-suited to suburban collecting; its gentle crack is doubtless not an unfamiliar sound in the wild back yards of Germantown, and for ought I know, it may have made the welkin ring [*Ed. note:* made a very loud noise] in the trackless wastes of Logan Square.

We waded ashore through the mud and long grass. Stone straightaway began shooting swallows — Stone always was bloodthirsty. Morris, after a careful stalk to windward, succeeded in getting one least sandpiper out of a flock of six — he didn't want to shoot them on the wing for fear the fall might hurt them. With this one *Tringa minutilla* as a nucleus, we started subscriptions for a bird pie.

De Haven had walked but a short distance when

an aged mother mudhen flopped up from under his feet. She quickly fell, a shot-riddled lump, having received the middle of the load from the senior member of the party.

It was a sitting bird, and De Haven said he felt very badly about having shot her, but I suspect he would have felt worse if he had missed her.

We soon found the nest and eggs in the grass close by. We found one or two other nests with eggs that morning — probably third broods — and in one instance there were little birds. I believe it was Stone who found them. They quickly tumbled out of the nest and scattered through the grass, but we followed them up and I think secured them all, though we set some of them at liberty afterward. They were ugly little black bunches of down, with beady eyes and pale feet and bills, upon the latter were the small hornlike excrescences which are found on certain young birds and are used for nicking the eggshell from the inside when hatching time comes.

There were, moreover, at the angle of the wing the little hooks which Mr. Stone has already mentioned before the club in his talk on rails, the use of which we will be only too glad to have explained to us.

Stone spent the morning on this stretch of salty grass land lying southward of the boat. Toward ten o'clock, De Haven went a-fishing. We could see him sitting in the little skiff out in the thoroughfare, snatching viciously at the line from time to time, and frequently pulling in a flapping weakfish, all glistening in the sunlight.

The thoroughfares ran all around the bit of land over which Stone and I were strolling — the grass was not long, there was but little swampy ground; there was plenty of bird life, though no great variety. I went and sat on the seaweed which lay along the eastern side of the island. 'Tis always pleasant, basking in the sunlight in such a spot as this. There were little bare places and small brown muddy patches here and there in the surrounding grassiness; on each of them, a few least sandpipers were feeding.

It is startling to think that since the early months of spring, these small things with the slender wings have traveled thousands of miles — going perhaps



Academy of Natural Sciences label reads, "Coll of Witmer Stone *S. hirundo* Atlantic City, N. J. July 23, 1893.

Photo by Sandra L. Sherman

to Greenland's dreary coasts — to lay their eggs and hatch their broods, coming back to Jersey meadows before July is over. It was only the old birds that had reached us then; the young ones come later.

Sitting on the seaweed, I saw spotted sandpipers also out along the edges of the thoroughfare, singly or in pairs. Few birds were more abundant on the meadows; they always take to the salt water at this season of the year.

A marsh hawk was balancing his way along over the level land across the water, and what appeared to me to be a couple of fish crows flapped listlessly about at no great distance. Several young laughing gulls were high overhead — a great blue stood at the water's edge a hundred yards or more away, and a single Wilson's tern was diving for fish close by, quite unmindful of me.

Now, concerning the family group of terns before you, I have something to say. I see that my name is honorably associated with Mr. Stone's on the label, but to him belongs all the glory of discovery. I was, however, there, aiding and abetting, and had moreover my trusty, rusty twelve-bore with me, which comes in handy when distances are too great for coat-sleeve or bootleg firearms.

You are doubtless aware that it has recently been rumored that the Wilson's tern no longer breeds upon the coast of Jersey. Certain it is that with the feathered hat craze, it became almost exterminated as a breeding bird, though perhaps not so ruthless-

ly sought after as the least tern.

I remember that in the collecting days of my boyhood, ten or twelve years ago, I used to find their nests in different localities, especially on the more lonely parts of Beach Haven Island. Up toward Billy Crane's and across from West Creek, where there was much drifted seaweed and rubbish lying on the grass of the marshes.

The least tern eggs we used to find out on the open beach just beyond the reach of the waves — no attempt at a nest was made beyond the mere scooping of a slight hollow in the sand.

But later on, I used to see the gunners doing their deadly work, especially in the time of migration, when the birds were passing in great numbers. Toward evening, you might see men standing on the meadows up beyond that far-famed house the "Hotel deCrab" — and as the birds went over in swiftly succeeding flocks of from fifty to one hundred, they fired steadily into them until each gunner would have a pile as high as his knees of the lovely white-breasted things — and they sold them at five cents apiece, and for all I know, we may have taken some of them to the theater during the succeeding winter.

Certain it is that the birds became exceedingly scarce on the meadows while their numbers increased on Broadway and Chestnut Streets. Then the craze died out to some extent, I think, so that now the terns are probably holding their own if not actually increasing in numbers on the Jersey coast.

But to return to our Sunday in the swamps above Atlantic City.

I had left my bed on the seaweed and was wandering back toward the boat when Stone met me and asked me to follow him with the artillery to the other end of the island, where he thought there must be a tern's nest, judging from the actions of the birds. On reaching the point, we were greeted by the harsh scolding-screaming cries of several of the terns, which were circling over us at a considerable height.

There was drifted seaweed on the grass left by winter storms — the place was similar in every way to the locations in which I used to find the nests on Beach Haven Island. We searched diligently along

the brown drift, but for a long time were unrewarded, though the birds overhead never ceased their clamorous protests. At length, I shot one of them after much pointing and following around with my gun, for they kept quite high most of the time. Soon after, Stone was rewarded by finding a nest and eggs which we must have passed closely a number of times; but such is the harmony of color, that it takes the sharpest scrutiny to discover them.

A strange fact connected with the nest was that besides the regular set, we found an additional egg buried in the body of the nest or roofed over, and upon this second story, the others were laid. I confess I am quite at a loss to account for this curious action on the part of the birds, for the egg seemed like the others, with nothing objectionable about it. We know that small birds will sometimes roof over a cowbird's egg, but the cases are hardly parallel.

Soon after the discovery of the nest, Stone made yet another find in the shape of a young bird which was squatting in the grass by the side of some drifted rubbish. When he picked it up, it quickly expired without any good reason for doing so, so far as we could see, excepting that it save us the trouble of squeezing it.

This evening, his embalmed skin squats before you.

After this, I shot more terns to the number of three or four, but we were unable to come upon another nest. I doubt if there were others just there — but the fact that the Wilson's tern still breeds on the Jersey coast is unquestionably settled, and I imagine that it does so in quite considerable numbers in the least-frequented parts of the meadows; probably from this time on, it will increase to some extent.

It was now well on toward noon, so Stone and I went back to the boat, for our inner clocks were telling us that it was dinner time.

De Haven had been fishing all the better part of the morning and had pulled in 35 or 45 weakfish. We scaled and cleaned enough for dinner and before they were fairly dead, we had them in the pan — there is nothing like having your fish fresh, you know.

After dinner, we skinned birds for an hour or

more and then heaved the anchor, heading the boat southward again. A strong wind had sprung up. Gray clouds were twisted about the sky, and the birds flew low.

During the day, we saw a few yellowlegs, singly and in small bunches; several small flocks of curlews and a few medium-sized birds which I think were black breast snipe or dunlin in the fall plumage.

It was our intention to do a little more shooting before we ended the day. (That prospective bird pie needed adding to.) We also wished to try the fish again, but we wanted, while the wind lasted, to get down nearer to the town so that we might not have so far to go to anchorage when the night came.

Our efforts with hook and line were not crowned with success, though we tried in two or three places. Not a nibble could we get.

Finally, we ran the cat boat up a narrow stream to the northwest of the city and making her fast, we went ashore with our guns. Then we separated and strolled off in the direction of Pleasantville.

We were bent on securing meat as well as specimens, and so it was that our guns cracked more frequently as the noble quarry from time to time sprang up before us in the shape of least or semipalmated sandpipers.

It remained for Morris, however, to especially distinguish himself as a sportsman that afternoon.

The humble chronicler of these events had wandered inland somewhat farther than the others when he saw two or three small snipe start up at some distance ahead of him.

I watched as they darted off in zig-zag lines across the meadow, then suddenly they dropped upon a bare and muddy place — and lo, the brown flat was already covered with a multitude of their fellows. I was down on my knees in an instant — not in supplication, but in fear of being seen by the birds. The place was probably 150 yards away — but by careful crawling, I could approach it closely without startling the birds, for there was some rather high and bunched grass between them and me.

And so, my dear fellow members, I commenced to crawl. I am sure I have your sympathy. We all know what it is like when one is tired, hot, and per-

spiring to get down on bended knees and creep through grass that cuts your hands and through salty, black mud that gets into the cuts and makes them worse, and to have a halo round about your head of buzzing bloodsuckers — with business ends to them. But you must not brush away the halo: The movement might alarm the birds.

I crawled and crawled until I knew that I was within range of the snipe — the latter part of the trip was performed on knees and elbows. I halted behind the last bunch of grass — I was still unobserved. I had not dared to raise my head high enough to look at the birds, lest I should frighten them.

I cocked my gun noiselessly — there was No. 10 in the right barrel and No. 7 in the left. My heart beat exultantly; my mouth watered as I thought of bird pie for breakfast.

Then I rose up suddenly and fired — two small tilt-ups flew away unharmed; one fluttered off with a broken wing. The large flock of white oyster shells remained just where it had been all the while.

Distance oftentimes lends enchantment to the scene.

I chased the wounded bird about for a while and after two more shots secured it, then I went back to the boys and the boat, shooting a mudhen on the way.

By this time, the sun was setting over back of Pleasantville. The sky was a blaze of glory, the light shooting up in long lines to the zenith from behind dark clouds that were piled together in wild confusion beyond the marshes.

There was a soft little breeze to drift us down the remaining reaches of the thoroughfare, and soon we came to our anchorage for the night, just above the railroad bridge.

"I believe I feel a little chilly and tired this evening," said De Haven as he tried to get the cork out of the bottle.

"Yes," said Stone, "I am afraid that I have caught a little cold myself."

I don't remember that there was anything particularly the matter with Morris — but he hates to hurt other people's feelings by being unsociable when they have a cold or feel chilly. ■