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A WATERFOWL CENSUS IN 1928

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My friend the publisher called me on the telephone one snowy day in early March, saying: "We are making a waterfowl census on Barnegat Bay next Sunday. Won't you come along?" Now, such an invitation from my friend the publisher should always be accepted when possible, I have found, as a result of many memorable and pleasant similar excursions in the past. So I promised to take the late afternoon train Saturday to Barnegat and meet him at the village hotel. He – with several companions – was to motor down during Saturday, stopping on the way at various points of interest (from a naturalist's standpoint) in the New Jersey pine-barrens and along the shore of Barnegat Bay.

Saturday dawned mild and clear. The wet snow which had fallen the day before melted rapidly under the early spring sun. "We shall have pleasant weather for the census tomorrow", I thought. But as the day wore on, delicate, feathery clouds, known as "mare's tails" and often presaging a storm, arose out of the southwest, and the whole western sky assumed a soft, blurred appearance which, to the weather-wise, suggests the approach of rain. However, after packing all the warm and waterproof clothing I possessed in a bulging suitcase, I boarded the train and was soon being carried at a very moderate speed through a maze of tracks covered with freight cars, past ugly factories, coal-yards, dump-heaps and other unattractive evidences of civilization until, at length, we reached the

Raritan River. Here we were on the edge of real country, such as all naturalists, who have to spend the greater part of their lives in a city, long for; and, as we skirted the shore of Raritan Bay, a few Herring Gulls that had been feeding on the mudflats flew up as the train approached. The snowfall, which had been quite heavy inland near the city, was noticeably scant on the marshes, and as we continued southward and finally entered the pine-barrens country at dusk, only small patches of white were visible here and there on the ground.

Arriving at the old New Jersey town of Barnegat, I found the publisher and his three companions waiting for me in the automobile. Although it was already filled with four sizable persons and four suitcases, the publisher insisted I must in some way insert myself and my own grip into the center of the merry company, which, after much exertion, accompanied by grunts and groans from everyone present, I finally managed to do; whereupon the car was backed a distance of a hundred feet or so to the door of the Barnegat Hotel and we proceeded to disentangle ourselves.

Having deposited our luggage in our rooms in the hotel, we drove to the docks to see Oscar E. – a guide and hunter, who was to take us out on the bay in his motorboat the following morning. The night was mild, the sky clear and the air perfectly still. Bright reflections of the stars shone on the quiet waters of the bay. Oscar informed us that

countless thousands of ducks had been seen during the early part of the week, but most of them had departed just before the storm on Friday. He thought, however, that “there might be a few fowl left” for us to see, if we cared to meet him on the dock at half-past eight in the morning. This we agreed to do and returned to the hotel, where a council was held and plans for the next day were outlined.

Shortly before five o'clock the following morning we heard the cheery voice of the publisher outside our doors, telling us to dress as quickly as possible in order to arrive at Barnegat Light by sunrise and see the dawn flight of ducks through the inlet. Dressing before daylight on a chilly March morning is no joke; but, if one really hurries, one often experiences a pleasant sensation of warmth before the process is completed.

Dashing through the hotel corridor (fortunately there were few other guests in this house!) and down the stairs, we piled into the car and were soon being driven south along the main road to Manahawkin. Here there is a long bridge, or rather, a series of bridges, across the bay, connecting the mainland with the outer beach strip, which latter extends more than fifteen miles between the bay and the ocean from Barnegat Light and Inlet south to Little Egg Harbor Inlet. Stopping the car in the woods in the woods beyond Manahawken to listen for possible owl cries, we heard a woodcock calling nearby. Crossing the bridge in the dime light just before dawn, we saw no signs of waterfowl and so continued on toward the lighthouse, whose revolving flash seemed to beckon us ever on.

This “outer beach strip”, as we call it, merits description. Back of a rather steeply shelving sandy beach, upon which the little waves ceaselessly advance and recede, lie the sand dunes with their covering of beach-grass, sandwort and hudsonia - all brown and sere at this season. Beyond the dunes the higher ground is covered with clumps of bayberry bushes, in which hardy Myrtle Warblers spend the winter, while the lowest spots contain either small freshwater ponds or cranberry bogs. Scattered among the bayberries, one

sees occasional stands of holly and, less frequently, of its near relative the inkberry, so called from its black fruit. Both are evergreen plants and most welcome to the eye among the other gray and brown vegetation. On the mainland nearby the holly grows to be a tree twenty or thirty feet high, but here near the sea it is rarely much taller than the bayberry bushes. Red Cedars, usually of small or moderate height, also flourish in this area, - as do catbriers, we have found through sad experience! Stretching westward then, to the edge of the bay, are the wet saltmarshes, or meadows, in some places narrow, in others broad and traversed by many little creeks and channels and dotted here and there with brackish ponds.

During the night the wind had shifted around to the northeast and the sky had become overcast. This change in the weather dampened our spirits somewhat, as we did not look forward with much pleasure to several hours spent in an open boat on the bay, with no sun to warm us and a chilling breeze blowing from off the ocean.

Near the lighthouse we separated - two of the party crossing the marshes to the bay, two searching the Red Cedar groves back of the dunes and one walking the outer beach to the inlet. The “dawn flight” of the ducks proved disappointing, only about a dozen Oldsquaws flying into the bay from the ocean. In the dunes, however, we found several siskins and a redpoll - two northern finches that visit us in winter, the latter only rarely.

Returning to the Manahawkin Bridge, we found quite an assemblage of waterfowl on the waters of the bay, which were already somewhat ruffled by the northeast wind which had set in at dawn. Sitting at our ease in the car and protected from the cold, it was a pleasure to observe through our binoculars the flocks of ducks and geese on both sides of the bridge. Several hundred Canada Geese and an even greater number of Brant were in view at the same time, some swimming slowly and gracefully, heads to the wind, others rising with strong, smooth wing-beats, to circle in the air and then descend on out-stretched pinions to some more inviting feeding

ground. With the geese, but keeping a respectful distance from them on the water, were small flocks of Black Ducks; and here and there we could distinguish the small forms of “baldpates” or widgeons, the whitish crowns of the drakes showing conspicuously.

As by this time we were beginning to feel the pangs of hunger, we hurried back to our hostelry of the previous night and there consumed a most delectable breakfast. Then, donning all the clothes we had with us – including sweaters, woolen socks, waterproof boots, leather jackets, mufflers and raincoats – we sallied forth to meet Oscar E. at the dock. We found him ready and waiting for us, in oilskins and sou’wester. I asked him what he thought of the weather. “Well,” he said, in his mild-voiced drawl, (one would never imagine, to hear him speak, that his nickname among his cronies is “Wilder”), “I’m figurin’ it’ll thicken up later and come on to rain. But,” he added, with a slow smile, “we got here first!”

We had left the docks hardly a hundred yards behind us when we sighted a small company of Canvasbacks – about a dozen, all told – on the water ahead – the drakes tossing their heads from time to time, as is their habit. They allowed us to approach fairly close, but finally rose against the wind and flew northward, up the bay. A few minutes later we came upon a “bed” of several hundred scaup ducks, (commonly called “broad-bills” or “blue-bills”); and, as we drew nearer and the birds rose with a great whirr of wings, the sun, which had been trying to break through the clouds at intervals, suddenly illumined the great mass of flying waterfowl with a flood of light and etched their forms in clear-cut outlines against the dark background of water and sky. Meanwhile, small flocks of Buffleheads and an occasional Oldsquaw had been passing our boat, while higher in the air goldeneyes, usually a duck and a drake together flew over us on whistling wings.

To us, the keen eyesight of Oscar, the bayman and hunter, was remarkable. Not only could he see a distant flock of ducks with his naked eye as soon as any of the rest of us were able to with the aid of our field-glasses, but he also distinguished one species from

another with almost unvarying accuracy. The size, shape, manner of flying and other characteristics of each species apparently meant everything to him. “Them are all big broad-bill”, he would say. Or, “There’s a little bunch of Redheads in the front of that flock”, as a long string of scaup ducks appeared, almost on the horizon. And, sure enough, as the birds came closer, we found it was as Oscar had said.

Putting the boat about and heading toward the lighthouse and Barnegat Inlet, we soon enjoyed the most impressive sight of the day. An immense black cloud of Brant, which we estimated as containing several thousand birds, was moving out through the inlet toward the ocean. “Them Brant are sanding,” remarked Oscar, meaning that the birds were heading for some sandbar or spit where they would rest and fill their crops with sand, as an aid to digestion, before returning to their feeding ground in the bay.

As we had been running into the wind most of the time and were all pretty well chilled, Oscar stopped the engine, and the publisher, as official census-taker, produced pad and pencil and with numbed fingers put down the estimated numbers of each species seen. The sky by now was completely overcast and rain threatened to fall at any moment, but the wind having shifted to a few points south of east was less penetrating.

Starting the engine again, Oscar headed for Love Lady Island on the outer side of the bay. Buffleheads and goldeneyes and a few Red-breasted Mergansers got up as we approached, and small groups of Horned Grebes rose with difficulty from the water and fluttered away on weak and unsteady wings. Two large flocks of Brant and a smaller one of Canada Geese circled about us, honking, while over near the east shore of the bay we could see many Black Ducks resting on the mudflats and feeding in the shallow water.

As we neared Love Lady Island, Oscar suddenly put the boat about and stopped the engine. “Thar’s a sea-dog! Thar’s a sea-dog!” said he, in his quiet, drawling voice, but with a note of restrained excitement in it. We looked and saw, not more than a hundred feet from

the boat, the head of a Harbor Seal bobbing about in the water. Several times we tried to get closer to the “sea-dog”, but each time it dove and came up again at a safe distance. At length, giving up the chase, we made for the mainland side of the bay again. Where vast salt meadows below Barnegat village stretch eastward and are traversed by numerous channels. The largest of these, Gunning River, we entered for a short distance; then Oscar ran the boat to the bank and we jumped ashore.

It was a relief to stretch our cramped legs and start the sluggish circulations in our bodies by tramping half a mile or more over the wet meadows to several ponds we had seen from the boat. From one of these arose several pintails and a few Black Ducks and in another were about a dozen American Mergansers. This last species prefers the brackish ponds and channels through the meadows, while its relative, the Red-breasted Merganser, is usually found on the open bay. With the mergansers and Black Ducks were also a few goldeneyes and Buffleheads.

To get to the ponds, it was necessary for us to jump across a couple of narrow creeks. The two younger members of the party negotiated them in fine style, but the three of us belonging to an older generation, encumbered as we were by rubber boots and rain-coats, experienced more difficulty and had to be grabbed by those already across on the far side of each creek and hauled up on the bank. Returning to the boat, thoroughly warmed by our exertions, we continued up the meandering course of Gunning River, putting up small flocks of ducks of various species at almost every bend, and finally emerged into the open bay opposite the Barnegat docks, our morning’s boat trip at an end.

Bidding farewell to Oscar, we snatched a hasty luncheon in the village, returning afterwards to the docks. It was our plan, in the early afternoon, to cover the country between Barnegat and Waretown; so we divided our forces – the “younger set” heading somewhat inland through the marshes – I, deemed a victim of old age and obesity, being assigned to the easy three-mile walk along the shore of the bay, while the publisher and the

fifth member of our party drove in the car to Waretown, where they were to explore the woods and uplands and meet us later at the “old house in the cedars”.

As I started up the beach, the rain, which had held off until now, began in the form of a fine drizzle. The wind had dropped to a light breeze out of the southeast – warm, moist and bearing with it scents of the sea, the bay and the salt marshes. The far side of the bay was enveloped in haze and mist, but the blurred outline of the lighthouse stood out and seemed to have assumed gigantic proportions.

Scanning the surface of the bay with my binoculars, I could see several hundred scaup strung out parallel to the shore and not far from it. A little further on, a small party of Canvasbacks was swimming with some scaup, perhaps the same birds we had seen flying in this direction in the morning. On my left, the boys in the marsh had just put up a flock of Black Ducks from a small pool, and I could distinguish the pale coloring of a female Mallard among them. Coming to a little point of land on the far side of a cove, I heard ahead of me the sound of many geese in earnest conversation. At almost the same moment about fifty Pintails appeared above the point, gliding on out-stretched, down-bent wings to the surface of the water, as pretty a sight as any bird-lover could hope to see! Keeping well under cover of the reeds and bushes along the shore, I finally reached the end of the point, and there in front of me swam several hundred Canada Geese and fully a hundred Pintails. At sight of me they rose, almost in a body, with splashing of many feet and musical honking, and were soon lost to view in the rain and mist over the bay.

By this time the rain was falling in earnest and, as we met on the porch of the old deserted “house in the cedars”, wet and bedraggled, but healthy and happy, we decided to “call it a day” – one of the very best days ever!

[The above account by Dr. Janvrin was sent in by his daughter, Mary Janvrin. The waterfowl count took place on March 11, 1928 with Charles A. Urner, Allan Frost, John Kuerzi and Irving Kassoy.]

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