

Birds of the Northland

There is a difference between awaking in the morning to gaze out at a field of clover with a cow grazing contentedly, and looking out of a porthole to see a mild-eyed, round-headed seal peering inquisitively out of the waves, or a whale blowing spray.

Like many people whom one cannot judge by first appearances, Unimak is not so forbidding as it looks at first. Its green slopes are carpeted with many wild flowers in the short summer. And it is a summer host to many joyous birds. Here we met the Alaska longspur, bobolink of the northern meadows, and the Lapland longspur which circles the world of the North wherever the ice sheets of the polar are found. Wherever we went over the tundra, these birds, rising for their aerial songs, chanted on the wing for lack of trees on which to perch. We found a nest of thick grasses lined with feathers, just behind our tent. Four eggs, heavily blotched with brown, were guarded by the brown-clad mother until we came too close. The father, striking in his raiment of jet-black on head and breast with a white stripe back of the eyes, his upper neck a bright reddish-brown and back streaked with black and brownish, seemed constantly in ecstasy of song.

Lingering northern
Our camp on Unimak was treated to a continuous concert almost all day and night, for the lights in the northern country give vigor to life and inspiration to the songs of birds. Little Savannah sparrows, snowflakes, rosy finches, and other songsters of the North are at home in the fields of wonderfully colored Arctic flowers. Food is abundant, and the days joyously long. As adventure piled upon adventure, with the progress of the expedition, we were often wont to forget the treelessness of the tundra tundras and the Arctic barrenness amid these beauties of the northland summer.

*Mail went out once
a month.*

(2)

Wherever we went over the tundra, longspurs were rising for their aerial songs. In this respect, they are like bobolinks and the skylarks, singing on the wing because there are no branches upon which to perch.

Often during the day I noticed the sandpipers or plovers flitting along close over the surface of the sea. Sometimes a male, apparently following a female, and he must have been led a merry chase if he followed on, for at the rate they were going they could soon be several hundred miles from the nearest shoreline. Occasionally a small, black bird with long wings and darting flight like the petrel or Mother Carey's chickens, went flitting too far from the vessel to determine the species.

While out with the whale boats, I heard the men speak of whale birds. They said where they found the whale birds feeding, there were sure to be whales. I had often seen the goonies or sooty albatrosses following the boats and one day while drifting in the fog, several of these alighted and came up close within a few feet of the stern. They were hungry but did not like crackers or bread. We tried bacon and this they ate greedily. Then one of the men pointed out the whale bird that was sooty colored and had long, pointed wings like those of the albatross and with similar flight, curving along with grace over the waves.

Later in the day we were out in the Bering Sea off Akun Head when a flock of dark birds was seen in the distance. They were rising, circling, and dropping down. "Those are whale birds," said some one, and sure enough not far away we sighted two whales. The water was scummed with small crustaceans, ^{mistakenly called} or "brit". These are minute animal life that drift with the tides and winds perhaps from the Asiatic shores. A whale swims along submarine-like with just his back showing, ~~opens~~ opens his ten-ton jaws and skims the surface, sucking in a dinner of small fry. Hanging from the roof of his mouth is a giant Fuller brush of baleen or ^{heavy fringe of} whalebone which catches the tiny creatures when the water is strained out. Thus the largest of all animals lives on the smallest.

When the whales are not around, the "whale birds" ^{or shearwaters} usually are on the watch to gather in a meal. As we steamed slowly up, we saw a great mass of these dark birds that resembled a dark cloud swirling just above the water, pitching and diving into the floating crustaceans. Literally acres of wings were massed together as if they

could only move in unison the same way. I watched one bird. He curved down until within a foot or so of the water, and partly closing its wings slipped under the surface without a splash. Thousands more were disappearing, and more thousands were hobbing up without apparent effort to join the big band circling around. Some of the birds were so stuffed with food they had difficulty in rising and swam flapping out of our way as the boat passed them.

By far the greatest number of birds were ^{found} in the Bering Sea off Unimak Pass and to the west of Akutan and Unalaska. There ~~must have been~~ must have been a hundred thousand birds feeding in an area of a few acres of water, summering here to breed and feed off the fat of the waters. As they are of the petrel family, they breed in burrows on the tops of the rocky islands and return to their nesting places only at night as the petrels do. These shearwaters have queer little faces with tube-like nostrils on the upper part of the beaks, and they have the peculiar oily odor of the petrels also.

Words are inadequate to describe the numbers of sea birds that summer in the northland. The Pallas murres filling every niche on the crags of Bogoslof, that steaming Jack-in-the-box that is so unpredictable, the clouds of shearwaters off the coasts of the Aleutians, the several auklets crusting the cliffs of the Pribilofs, the ducks of ~~the~~ all the little rivers and coves, and myriads of small land birds nesting on the tundra. The bird and animal life of the northern waters and the craggy, fog-bound islands is more than abundant; it is overflowing.