Chapter 1

Following The Trails.

All morning we plodded the level stretch of sand and sage in the heat that danced and quivered over the floor of the valley. In the afternoon we reached the base of the high headland that cuts into the heart of Harney Valley like the prow of a huge ocean liner. The trail cut straight over a shaled-off pile of bowlders and zigzagged up the slope.

"What a day for rattle snakes!" panted my companion as he paused to mop his face. I was on the point of answering when a gray streak flashed almost under my feet. I heard a swish that sent fear shivering through every nerve in my body. I thought the great-grand-father of all big rattlers had struck me in forty-nine places at once. With a thundering whir, a sage hen broke from cover and sailed down the slope.

When we swung the cameras from our backs at the summit, the whole valley rolled out before us. Off to the south lay the land of our quest, the marshes of the Malheur. The wide wastes were silent in the summer sun, hazy, far-away, mysterious.

When a boy, I had watched the wedges of geese cutting southward each fall, and the other flocks of wild fowl winging silently on their way. Each spring I saw the bands returning. How these sights kindled my imagination, these processions so full of mystery that moved up and down the highway of the clouds! The land where these flocks lived lured me like the 'castles in Spain'. It was a lure I have never forgotten; it was deeper than childish fancy. Now, after many years of waiting, I stood looking out over this land of

innumerable flocks that lay far beyond the northern rim of my home hills.

It must be a part of Nature's plan to mold each person with individual tastes and give him a hobby of his own. She mothered the Anglo-Saxon. She breathed into his nostrils the breath of the wild out-door. She led him to adventures. She taught him to play. His spirit thrived and waxed strong in open-air games, in cruising unknown rivers, in exploring untraversed lands, in luring elusive fish, in trailing wild animals, or even in a quiet walk along some woodland path. But it must all be in the spirit of fair play. The satisfaction of life is in the living, not in death which is said to bring its reward. So in the chase. The camera tests the mettle more than the gun. Success is more difficult. Reward is more lasting. It is truer sport. Where once there was the desire to possess the skin of every bird, one finds himself set with eagerness to photograph these creatures at home, and the fancy grows so strong that it fastens one's soul in a grip that makes the hobby an essential part of his life's aim.

For the past ten years we had spent every summer season hunting with the camera. We cruised rivers and inland lakes, camped by the seashore and on the ledges of distant rocks and tramped through the western mountains to picture some of the rarer and wilder birds. We had a longing to photograph the white heron at home in the marshes.

"You nevaire git dose w'ite cranes 'les right away. Ah 'ave seen t'ousans dose long w'ites; dey all gone," an old

trapper had told me. And we had begun to think his words true. We had spent a whole summer in southern California where the birds formerly nested. For another whole summer we explored the great Klamath marshes of Southern Oregon. We cruised up Klamath River, circled Lower Klamath Lake twice, paddled down Lost River and traversed Tule or Rhett Lake from end to end. We sloshed through mucky flats of alkali, waded treacherous mosquito-infested bogs where one might think no human being had ever been. But long before we had traveled these apparently unknown regions, hunters had gone before. We followed their trails. We camped where they had camped. The white heron colony in the willows at Clear Lake had been shot out a few days in advance of us just three years ago. We had traveled hundreds of miles exploring the haunts where white herons used to live, but had not yet seen a single one of the birds.

The shooting out of the Clear Lake colony had prevented us from getting white heron photographs that season, but we turned our attention to the great grebe colonies at the north end of Tule Lake and the southern shore of the Lower Klamath.

One of the cowboys of the Big Bend Ranch had told me he had heard "poppin' like a Chiny New Year festival" along the north shore of Tule Lake. I was not surprised. The next morning we bought a week's provisions and set out down Lost River. We camped that night in an old stack yard near the mouth of the stream. We poled on down the Lake several miles till we came to the wreck of an old cabin on a grass island, sans doors, sans windows and a part of the roof.

~~"They have been here," I said as I climbed out over the bow of the boat into the shallow water. Here was the~~

We climbed out over the bow of the boat into the shallow water and dragged her to shore. ~~One glance told us they had been here~~ The empty shells and feathers scattered about the ashes of the camp fire told me it was where the grebe hunters had camped. At the side of the cabin I picked up the end of a broken paddle. It was marked with a peculiar brand that joined the two letters H. A. On the smooth surface were marked some numbers, 267, 22-, 208 and some other figures that added up to over twelve hundred. Fifty feet beyond the ashes of the camp fire, I found the skinning place. A square chunk of wood had served for a chopping block. I saw three piles of wings each of which would have filled a wash-tub; enough others were scattered about to make a cartload. Here were the bodies of dead grebes tossed aside after the plumage had been stripped from their breasts. Each was marked by a buzzing throng of flies that swarmed up at our approach and settled back. On the left, I counted a hundred rotting carcasses in one place. All the winds of heaven could hardly ventilate such a spot. I turned back, sickened at the sight.

Out through the tules where we had expected to find birds thick about their floating homes, we began to find deserted nests. Along both sides of a narrow slough in the space of fifty yards, I counted forty-seven platform nests. Most of these seemed deserted. In some, I saw eggs never to be hatched. Beside several nests, I picked up dead grebe chicks that had climbed out in search of food, dead parents could never bring. I saw other homes where young grebes were starving to death and burning in the sun. Gray chicks were piping faintly for food. Worst of all, were sights that

brought the tears. I saw a grebe mother that had been shot and not been found by the plume hunters, a mother lying dead beside her home. In a small bunch of tules, I saw a grebe baby trying to crawl under a dead mother's wing, -- cold, helpless, starving. I can hear him yet.

Thus it was we had seen the passing of the great grebe colony along the northern end of Tule Lake. Many another colony of grebes, terns and white herons had met the same fate. But there were still many lakes further to the east. Greatest of all, were the Malheur and Harney Lakes two hundred miles away, which we determined to visit in search of white herons.

It was now several years since we had hunted the Klamath country. Two weeks ago, we had landed at The Dalles and had covered a stretch of almost four hundred miles. This was our first general survey of the Malheur country. Here spread at our feet was a domain for wild fowl unsurpassed in the United States.

This is historic ground for the bird man. In the early seventies, the well known ornithologist, the late Capt. Charles Bendire, was stationed at Camp Harney straight across the valley from where we stood on the southern slope of the Blue Mts. He gave us the first account of the bird life in this region. He saw the wonderful sights of the nesting multitudes. He told of the colonies of white herons that lived in the willows along the lower Silvies River. There was the River itself winding across the valley through sage, rye-grass flats and tule marshes, its trail marked by a growth of willow and alder.

Two days ago we had followed this trail and searched

out these places to photograph the white heron. As we approached the place said to be alive with birds, all was silent. "we're on the wrong trail again," my companion had suggested, but pushing on through the willows, I saw big nests in the trees on both sides of the River. Strange to say, not a single bird. I clambered up to one of the lower nests and found a rough platform of sticks upon which lay the bleached bones of two herons. I climbed another and another. Each home was a funeral pyre. "Epidemic?" said my companion. "Yes, of plume hunters!" I retorted. Here was a great cemetary in the silence of the marsh. But one nest was inhabited. A long-eared owl was in possession, sitting on five eggs. As I approached, she spread her wings and left without a sound! Ill-omened creature brooding eggs and bones!

We picked up our cameras and set off down the trail leading toward the Lake. Somewhere down in that distant sea of green tules, we knew the white herons were nesting.

From a distance, the marsh was a level sea of green. absolutely deceptive of its real character. The ocean surface tells nothing of a thousand hidden wonders: so the marsh. The charm is in the untrodden stretches. The plain yields to the plow, the forest to the axe, but I hope the unmeasured extent of the tules will defy civilization to the end. It looked like a primeval wilderness, as wild as when the first white man blazed a trail into the Oregon forest. I knew that hunters and trappers plied the streams and the waters of the lake itself. But the tules looked untouched, a maze that was forbidding, impenetrable.

After searching for several days, we found a leaky boat

on the south side of the Lake. ~~that~~ ~~[illegible]~~ caulked, ~~we were able to caulk and use~~. Here ~~at the south shore is~~ a large spring ~~that~~ rises at the base of a gravelly hill and winds out through the meadow land. For a ~~while~~ moon it meanders along until it comes to the main part of the tule marsh,-- thousands of tule islands between which flow narrow channels that are endless in their windings. The main body of the Lake is still a mile beyond the place where the spring branch enters the tule jungle. The tules grow from eight to twelve feet high, so that when one enters the mass, he has no land marks unless, perchance, he can read the signs in the heavens above.

We launched our flat-bottomed boat in the Spring Branch and set out, anxious to ~~make a preliminary survey~~ seeh the lay of the land and see some of the birds. We passed from the Spring Branch into the serpentine meanderings ~~of~~ among the tules.

The formation of a tule island in its first stage is nothing but a few green stems extending up through the water. Each winter the green shoots die down and this decaying vegetation collects about the roots that gradually enlarge. The heavier growth comes up the next season and dying down, gradually adds to the tule raft. This in time forms a springy floating foundation.

In one place I heard a pair of Sora rails chattering anxiously. We shoved the nose of the boat into the tule mass that covered the water like an immense haycock. As I crawled out over the bow and stepped on the springy mass, the footing seemed safe, for I did not sink in above my shoes. One needed a pair of snow shoes to walk on the surface. By throwing

myself forward and gathering under me an armful of buoyant tules, I made my way for twenty feet with the excited pair of rails leading me on. Suddenly I struck a weak place in the tule floor that let me drop into the muck beyond my middle. With the aid of an oar that was thrown me, I struggled back to the boat.

A little further on, I left my handkerchief on top of a bunch of tules for a sign post. Still further I stuck up a pole we had in the boat to mark our way back. "We'll pick these up on our return," I said.

We swung around a tule island, working back in the direction from which we had come. "I am beginning to lose my bearings," said my companion. But I had already reached the conclusion that I needed an inspired sense of direction to know anything.

My first trip in Boston that took me under ground, over ground and up and down crooked streets was as clear as wandering down a country lane in comparison to the embarassment I felt when I tried to find my way in the narrow, walled-in Venetian streets that circled the islands like a maze for about ten miles east and west.

"The thing to do is to go back over the same track we came," I ventured; so we immediately turned about and spent the rest of the afternoon in ~~not being able to do it~~ trying to do it, but we never succeeded: ~~nor did we ever find~~ the handkerchief or pole again.

We had no food, nothing to drink but alkali water and were wet with no chance of getting dry, so we had to find our way out. The sun was setting so we knew east from west.

We paddled as nearly as possible in the direction we came.

When at last we ~~came to~~ reached the end of a blind channel where the foundation of the tules seemed firmer, we decided to cut for shore by the shortest route. We floundered through the tules, sinking in the black muck of the marsh for some distance. We were suddenly confronted by a deep slough. "Even the old tub of a boat looks better than this," said my companion. We turned back again.

As the clumsy craft floated out into the channel and I sat straddling the bow, dangling my feet in the water to get rid of the mud, I thought Nature had surely done her best to make the tule swamp unfit for man. The rails ran lightly through the jungle, the blue herons stood fishing in the marginal water, the red-wings and tule wrens clung to the swaying stems, the muskrats paddled homeward with tails waving contentedly to and fro; they all had places to sleep, but we poor creatures had no where to lay our heads.

Darkness settled over the marsh. The stars glittered, the wind whispered above us in the tule tops, the birds were asleep.

It was almost noon the next day when by chance we struck the channel that led us out of the maze and back to camp. We had learned the art of blazing a trail that we could follow through the tules.

After resting a day from our initial efforts, we outfitted for a week's trip and set out down the Spring Branch. This time we kept a straight course to the north until we reached the main body of the Lake. All day long we hunted and

watched the birds, lining them with our field-glasses as they flew back and forth over the Lake. We saw no signs of white herons. We knew of no way out where we could strike a camping spot without returning the way we had come. As night came on, we located a good big muskrat house. I never knew just what a muskrat was good for till I crawled out rather gingerly upon the roof of this house. I flatened the top. ~~of it~~ It made a raft large enough for both of us to stretch out upon. As we couldn't sleep in the boat, we spread our blankets on the rat house. The question uppermost was how long the dwelling would float with such heavy tenants upon the roof. "If the rats decide to remove the underpinning during the night, the laugh ~~would~~ will be on us," said. However, the rat house lasted till daylight, but after spending the night ~~in~~ somewhat in suspense in such wobbly, incommodious quarters, I crawled out of my blankets and by a misstep slipped into the cold muck to my middle.

That day we found a colony where the great blue herons nested. White herons were formerly common here, both species nesting together. Not a single white bird left!

We returned at night to our rat quarters, but the roof was several inches out of plumb. We slept till about two o'clock in the morning when it began to rain. We were in the predicament of having too much water above as well as below. Covering our boat and equipment with canvas, we arranged a small shelter for ourselves. We spent the rest of the night sitting back to back with knees up and toes out, wondering why we were not built like muskrats.

The morning of the third day, the rat house showed

wear. We cut a lot of dry tules and tried to patch the roo f, but one side began to sink, so we set out hunting for another flat.

We spent the next four days hunting here and there through the vast extent of tule islands and water, enduring hardships, searching and keeping watch all day trying to find white herons. Late in the afternoon, we came to a place where another big colony of blue herons were nesting. (~~The great blues and the long whites nested here together in former days.~~) We had been seeking this place. Malheur Lake is divided into several parts by the long lines of tule islands. We were in the northern part. The colony was on two long tule islands that lined up with Pine Knob and the east end of Wright's Point. On the north end is a big cane break.

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We sat in the boat at the edge of the cane break and watched the big birds as they ~~dropped~~ sailed over, dropped in and departed. We were tired from the long day's search. I did not then know the story as I know it now, but hidden in the end of this cane break was where a hunter had his blind just ten years ago.

The summer of 1898 was eventful in white heron history here on Malheur Lake. Early in the season two men had arrived at Narrows, bought lumber and built a flat-bottomed double-ended boat. They set out from Narrows with a small outfit. They fought mosquitoes day and night as we had, they drank the alkali water, they slept in the boat or on muskrat houses while they hunted up and down ~~in~~ the waters of the Lake and the tule islands. They saw ~~white herons~~ the great flocks of white pelicans, cormorants, terns, gulls, grebes and other birds. They saw the white herons in slow stately flight wherever they went, but it was not till after several days that they located the big colony here on the islands by the cane break, the greatest colony they had ever seen. What a sight it must have been, thousands of these birds, dazzling white in the sun, coming and going from the feeding grounds

and hovering over their homes!

~~Each plumer built himself a tule blind~~

On all sides were the homes built up a foot or two above the surface, each having three or four frowsy-headed youngsters or as many eggs. At each end of the colony a plumer sat hidden in his tule blind. At the first crack of a gun, a great snowy bird tumbled headlong near its nest. As the shot echoed across the Lake, it sounded the doom of the heron colony. Terror-stricken, on every side white wings flapped till the air was completely filled. Shot followed shot unremittingly as the min tes passed into hours. Still the heron mothers came to hover over this scene of death and destruction. Mother love was but the lure to slaughter.

By two o'clock in the afternoon the day's shoot ended. It took the rest of the day for the hunters to collect the dead and take the plumes. Stripping the plumes is rapid work. It takes but a slash of the knife across the middle of the back, a cut down each side and a swift jerk.

Long after dark the plumers heard the steady quacking clatter of young herons crying to be fed. Far into the night hoarse croaks sounded over the still lake, greetings of those birds that had spent the day fishing in distant swamps. It argued good shooting again for the morrow.

The second day was a repetition of the first. Heron numbers thinned rapidly. Here on these two islands the plumers harvested a crop that yielded them twelve hundred dollars in a day and a half. Here they collected a load of plumes worth their weight in gold. Were the California days of '49 much better?

Malheur has seen many such massacres, but none so great as that. Little did we know of these facts as we sat watching the blue herons coming and going and expecting to find at least a few white herons some where about the locality.

The next day a heavy thunder shower blew up from the south. We had no way of escaping its fury, so we took the drenching as cheerfully as possible. We didn't care much, for although we were wet half the time, we didn't seem to catch cold. We were rapidly reaching that stage of musk-rat existence where a condition of water-soak was a part of our normal environment.

The following day we found the biggest colony of gulls and white pelicans I have ever seen. It was the sight of a life time. As we approached, out came a small delegation to meet us. When we got up to the colony, the whole city turned out in our honor. I have seen big bird colonies before, but never one like this ~~west of any place east~~. I was so excited I tripped over one of the oars and fell overboard with three plate-holders in my hands, ~~to express my feelings.~~

After hunting for seven days we returned to camp for more provisions and set out to visit another part of the Lake. This second time, we stayed out for nine days. In all this time, we had seen but two white herons, although at the time we thought these must be part of a group that nested some where about the Lake. Yet more likely it was a single stray bird that came our way twice. I am satisfied that of the thousands of white herons that formerly nested on Malheur, not a single bird is left.