

*Lecture*

HERONS.

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Fifteen miles below Portland, in the heart of the fir forest, we found a village of two hundred houses. It has an area of about three acres. Every home is a sky-scraper. Not a single house is less than a hundred and forty feet up, and some are a hundred and sixty feet high. The inhabitants are feathered fishers. They hunt the water-ways of the Columbia and Willamette for miles.

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It takes the biggest reserve of nerve and muscle to climb this billage, but one may sit on the wooded hillside far below and watch the life there in full swing. From two to five brush-heap houses the size of a wash-tub are carefully balanced and securely fastened in the top limbs of each tree. Gaunt, long-legged citizens stand about the airy door-ways and gossip in hoarse croaks. Residents are continually coming and going, some flapping in from the feeding ground with a craw full of fish and frogs, others sweeping down the avenues between the pointed firs with a departing guttural squawk.

But the heronries in the Oregon forests are too well protected from the raids of a bird photographer by reason of their great height from the ground.

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While in California year before last we found a large heronry at the lower end of San Francisco bay. We landed at a little station called Arden and struck out along a road that led through the woods. We found the heronry in the center of a heavily wooded belt and from a distance we could see the trees were well loaded with nests. We skirted the edge of the brush,

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looking for an entrance, but to our surprise each place we tried to enter was barred with a perfect mass of tangled bushes and trees. After two hours we went to the point opposite the largest tree and decided to push and cut our way through. The first few yards we crawled on hands and knees pushing our cameras or dragging them behind. Unable to crawl further, we had to clear a way and climb a ten foot brush heap. For a few yards, we ducked under and wiggled along the bed of a ditch in the mire to our knees. I never saw such a tangled mass of brush. Fallen limbs and trees of alder, swamp-maple and willow interlaced with blackberry brier, poison-oak and the rankest growth of nettles. All the while, we were assailed by an increasing mob of starving mosquitos that went raving mad at the taste of blood. We pushed on straining, sweating, crawling, and climbing for a hundred yards that seemed more like a mile.

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We forgot it all the minute we stood under the largest sycamore. It was seven feet thick at the base, and a difficult proposition to climb. But this was the center of business activity in the heron village. The monster was a hundred and twenty feet high and had a spread of limbs equal to it's height. In this single tree, we counted forty-one blue heron nests and twenty-eight night heron nests; sixty-nine nests in one tree. In another tree was seventeen of the larger nests and twenty eight of the smaller.

The great blue heron or "Crane" is one of the picturesque sights of every fish pond and along the bank of every river

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and lake in the country. I look for him along the shallow sand-  
bars and sloping banks as I look for the back-ground of green  
trees. He is always the solitary fisher. He is the bit of life  
that draws the whole to a focus. Watch him, and he stands as  
motionless as a stick. He is patient. A minnow or frog swims  
past and there is a lightening flash of that pointed bill as he  
pins him a foot below the surface.

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Nature has built the heron in an extremely practical  
way. She dressed him in colors of sky and water. She did not  
plant his eyes in the top of his head, as she did the woodcock,  
because he is not likely to be injured by enemies from above;  
but she put them right on the lower sloping side of his head, so  
he could look straight down at his feet without the slightest  
side-turn. She let his legs grow too long for perching conven-  
iently on a tree, just so he could wade in deep enough to fish.  
She gave him a dagger-shaped bill at the end of a neck that was  
both long enough to reach bottom, as well as to keep his eyes high  
above water, so he could see and aim correctly at a creature  
below the surface.

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When we climbed one of the larger sycamores with our  
camera we found most of the nests contained eggs but a few were  
filled with full grown birds. We had some difficulty in persuad-  
ing a pair of youngsters to step out of their nest for a little  
while so we could sit down and take pictures of the numerous sub-  
jects about on all sides.

It sounded as if we were in the midst of a gigantic

hen house. Some of the birds were clucking over their eggs that were soon to be hatched; others were cackling over newly laid eggs, and squaking at being disturbed; others were wrangling and squabbling, so that there was a continual clattering fuss above which one had to yell his loudest to be heard.

10 We made the first trip to the heronry on April 21, and found most of the nests contained eggs. There were about 700 nests in the whole colony, of which the larger number were black-crowned night herons. The great blues and the night herons occupied the same trees, nesting side by side. The larger nests were built almost entirely in the top of the sycamores, while the night herons set their platform nests at the very upturned tips of the sycamores' limbs and in the lower surrounding willows and alders.

11 A night heron's or as often called a "squawks" nest looks to me like a mere botch. Some of them are not hollowed in the least, but just rough platforms. In a wind, the eggs would roll off if the mother did not sit to hold them on. There is not much trouble after the eggs are hatched, for the youngsters seem to kick themselves loose from the shell with one foot, while they wrapp the long, angular toes of the other about the nearest twig.

12 The black-crowned night heron is a very different looking bird from the great blue. It has a shiny black patch on the top of the head, a gray body with a black back. The short but thick neck and short legs are just the opposite of the blue heron. (Shows old bird on very tip top of tree, standing  
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near nest.)

14 On our first trip to the heronry, when the nests contained eggs, we selected one or two of the best and most available to get a good series of pictures, showing the growth of the young. Most all the night herons nests contained four eggs. Each egg seemed to hatch in regular order about two days apart. When we photographed the same nest later, we found it held three frowzy-headed youngsters and one egg. On our third trip, the growth, both in size and ugliness was quite apparnet. Put on our nest trip, we found the nest deserted.

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16 The next time I sat in the tree top, the place sounded more like a big duck ranch. Above all the squawks of the parents there was a steady, quacking clatter of the hundreds of young herons, that never ceased. The sound grew more intense in spots, as here and there, a mother swept in from the feeding ground and fed her children.

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18 As I sat watching, an old blue heron sailed in and lit on a branch above her nest in the adjoining tree. The three youngsters twisted in ecstatic contorsions as the mother stepped awkwardly along the limb. Each reached up in full height to grasp her long bill, endeavoring to make her feed them. When she got ready, she disgorged a mess of partially digested fish down the throat of each nestling and left as leisurely as she came. In another case, where the young were older, I saw the mother bird disgorge into the nest. The fish in her craw seemed

to form into small portions and come up as the cud does for a cow, and each youngster pitched into the mess with vigor and energy that would have amazed a litter of young pigs.

19 When you climb anywhere near a nest after the youngsters have had a good meal, they will begin to "unswallow" as fast as they have gobbled it down. On account of this habit, especially common among the young night herons, we found it always safe to keep out of the way as much as possible, or at least, not approach a nest full of young birds from below.

20 In order to study the life of the herons we camped at the heronry all one night. At the south end of the heron jungle is a hay field, where we took up our quarters. We had no trouble in keeping awake most of the night to study heron habits. The blue herons, as well as the "squawks", or night herons seemed to keep busy most of the night. As some one has said, it sounded like several hundred Indians were trying to throttle each other. Then, the mosquitos and frogs were more active after dark. We crawled into a hay-cock and covered ourselves up, as much to get rid of the pestiferous, blood-thirsty insects as to keep warm. At daylight, we felt as much comfort in crawling out to get rid of burrs and stickers, as we had the night before in crawling in to get away from mosquitos.

21 \* The young birds of both species seem instinctively to know that falling from the trees to the ground below means death. Not because they are hurt in the least by the fall, but because the

22 old birds never descend to the ground beneath the nest-tree. The ground under the trees was strewn with the dead bodies of young birds. The young are fed only in the tree top and those below starve in the very sight of their parents.

23 A young night heron is well adapted to climbing from limb to limb by reason of his long, angling toes and the ability to hook his neck or bill over a limb and draw himself up as a parrot does. Not so with the young of the blue herons, they are as awkward about the limbs of the trees as their parents are stately in moving through the air. When over-balanced on a limb, they often fall to the ground.

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26 X At times I have seen young blue herons climb out on the limbs and stand straight up as if in rigid imitation of the surrounding branches. One that we photographed, looked like a raw recruit with his chin high in the air, afraid to look to the right or left. He stood there apparently thinking we did not see him and did not move a muscle all the time we were in the tree.

Often one will see young night herons hanging dead in the limbs of the trees. One case, where we photographed two hanging side by side aroused our curiosity. In walking about the limbs, the larger of the two birds had caught its foot in a crotch and hung itself head downward. That, in itself, was not unusual, but another bird hung by the neck only a few inches away. It seems that the smaller heron had overbalanced on the

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small limb and had hooked his chin over the branch to keep from falling , and he had hung himself dead rather than fall to the ground. His right foot showed that his last death struggle was a reaching and clutching for the limb. Had he thrown his head back a trifle, he would have dropped to the ground, we demonstrated this after taking the picture. I turned the bill up slightly and the body dropped to the bushes twenty feet below. How the bird could have held the rigid position of the neck throughout its death struggle, I do not understand, unless it seems to me a case where the force of instinct was strong, even to death.

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The last trip we made to the heronry, we found the limbs of the sycamores as well loaded with young herons, as a good apple tree is loaded with fruit. The moment we started to climb the tree with our cameras, was the signal for the breaking loose of a squawking bedlam. Young "squawks" jabbering all sorts of epithets from the nest edge and retreated on the limbs as we drew nearer. The young blue herons savagely disputed every foot of our climb. They aimed a fusilade of stabs at us from all sides, and we took great care not to get within reach of their weapons.

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It took a lot of trouble for us to get a series of heron pictures. We suffered and scratched for weeks with a miserable rash from the poison-oak. But we made five long trips to the heron village. The last trips through the jungle were not as difficult as the first, we had the beginning of a path, we doped with poison-oak preventatives, gloved our hands and veiled our

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faces. But it was a sight for the soul just to watch the great blue herons; the long, slow wing-beats as they flapped on from the feeding ground; then, the picture of quiet restfulness as they lounged about near their nests after the days work.