

## NIGHT LIFE IN A MARSH

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There are spots in every locality where, for one reason or another, we repeatedly return. Perhaps it is the natural beauty of the place, but more often it is because some rare flower grows there, or because it is the haunt of some favorite bird. In time a part of us dwells there too, and each new inhabitant becomes doubly interesting.

Such a place exists where two streams join to form Parkers Creek, near Hartford, N. J. One stream flows through extensive swampy meadows, filled with clumps of sedge and in the deeper parts with cattails. The other emerges from a small woods, spreading itself among a profusion of mallow and swamp rose. Below the junction of the two streams the creek is bordered on the left by open marsh and on the right by a thin line of trees and bushes, which give way to the tangle of roses.

My attention was first attracted to this spot early in March, 1934, when a number of snipe flew up before me as I skirted its edges to examine a tree from which a pair of woodchucks had flown. A week later I returned in the evening with the hope of hearing the winnowing of the snipe. A lone snipe silently traced his frenzied course across the evening sky, but from the depths of the marsh the bitterns pumped out their intermittent rhythm and the "ticket, ticket" of a Virginia Rail rose above the chorus of the croaking frogs.

My visits to this swamp, regardless of the season, have always been a pleasure. In November I have found as many as twenty vultures roosting in the trees along its edge. Pintails, Black Ducks, and Mallards congregate there in late winter. In the spring every tree is a perch for singing Redwings, while warblers search nervously for food among the bushes. Wary King Rails have exposed themselves when I have answered their strident cacking. Enormous flocks of swallows linger over its waters during migration.

A desire to examine the activity of the birds in this swamp at night encouraged Ed Manners and me to spend a night there. On the evening of June 3, 1945, we stopped at 10:00, where the road crosses the creek, and remained there until daybreak. The sky was heavily overcast and occasionally a light rain fell, but rarely did more than a few minutes pass that some bird could not be heard. The greatest number of individuals were migrating birds, passing over beneath the low hung clouds. One liquid call resembling somewhat the voice of the Least Sandpiper was heard several times during the night over periods of a half hour or more, suggesting the passage of large but straggling flocks. We learned later that this was the voice of the Olive-backed Thrush.

The first sound, aside from the occasional croaking of the frogs, was an uncanny, cat-like cry, which swelled out from the center of the marsh, enveloped

us, and for a moment caused us to lose our individuality and become a part of the life of the swamp. Three times we heard this cry in the night, and each time we were gripped by its magic.

At 11:30 a chat commenced calling. Throughout the night he continued with only momentary pauses. Near midnight an Oven-bird sang his short flight song and soon after a few notes of the Black-billed Cuckoo came from a bush on the roadside. Several times a Spotted Sandpiper flew about, peeping as if startled from sleep. Once we heard the rolling cry of an Upland Plover, first overhead, then in the far distance.

At 4:30, one hour before sunrise, when the faintest hint of dawn was showing, a Swamp Sparrow sang the first song of the morning. Between 4:30 and 5:00 he was followed by a Song Sparrow, yellow-throat, Redwing, Long-billed Marsh Wren and pheasant. From 5:00 to 5:10 the chorus was increased by a Towhee, Cardinal, Phoebe, Crested Flycatcher, Grasshopper Sparrow, Robin, Woodthrush, barnyard fowl, Night Heron, Meadowlark, Crow and Short-billed Marsh Wren. From then on the song became too varied to differentiate the succession of species.

Our first objective in the morning was to discover the source of the mysterious cry of the night. While wading through the marsh in the vicinity from which it arose, our attention was attracted by a repeated splashing which was followed by a sound resembling that produced by knocking two sticks together. Ed saw what appeared to be a large frog jumping through the water. Close by, in a rush clump, was a King Rail's nest, partially obscured by bent stems. It contained ten cream colored eggs, which were lightly marked with brown. We believe our question was answered.

In the upper end of the marsh we later found two nests of the Short-billed Marsh Wren. One, with six white eggs, was in a clump of grass. It was a loosely woven ball about six inches in diameter with a small, concealed opening in the side. A small piece of white down was hanging on the grass a few inches from the opening. The other, similarly constructed but apparently a dummy, was three feet away. Both nests were obscured more by their green color than by being hidden from view.

When we left at 10:00 A. M., we had recorded fifty species from the environs of the swamp, all but six of which were probably residents.