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PRAIRIE CHICKENS

# THE PALIMPSEST

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## Birds That Have Vanished

The "hoo—hoo—hoo—hoo" of the prairie chickens early on a spring morning was sweet music. It was a melodious sound that, once heard, would never be forgotten. This so-called "booming" was very deceptive; "when close it appears far away, and when a mile away may seem very near." It was a soft note "like the alto horn in the orchestra" which filled the still air of the mornings and evenings with harmony.

These birds, the true prairie chickens, were formerly abundant in the open country of the Mississippi Valley. They were common in Iowa thirty years ago, but now they have almost disappeared. Although they were resident birds, they migrated north and south, ranging as far east as Ohio, and from southeast Saskatchewan and southern Manitoba to eastern Colorado, northern Texas, Arkansas, and western Kentucky. In the winter they assembled in great flocks, but in the spring at mating time broke up again.

In the early days of the settlement of Iowa, the prairie "swarmed with prairie chickens". They were the most numerous of all the game birds. But from the beginning they were hunted and trapped so mercilessly that they have been practically exterminated. It was not uncommon seventy years ago to see a farmer come to town with a sled box nearly filled with undressed prairie chickens. They sold as low as two dollars a dozen at that time.

The disappearance of the prairie chickens is due to two reasons: first, the breaking up of their nesting places by cultivation; second, indiscriminate hunting with high powered repeating shotguns. These birds should have been counted among the Iowa farmer's best friends, as their chief diet in this State consisted of grasshoppers and other insects that destroyed the crops. To be sure they also fed upon grain but only while the ripe oats, wheat, or corn was in the field. Probably they consumed as many weed seeds as grain. Had the prairie chickens been protected as they should have been, they would be plentiful even now, and of material benefit to the farmer.

The prairie chicken, however, is not the only species that has diminished in numbers with the increased population of the State. When Thomas H. Macbride, writing *In Cabins and Sod-Houses*, spoke of parrots in the trees of southeastern Iowa, many readers supposed it was merely a figure of speech. But he was

actually stating a fact. The Carolina paroquets were once numerous in the Mississippi Valley. They ranged widely, reaching as far north as the southern border of the Great Lakes, west as far as eastern Colorado, and south to the Gulf of Mexico. Lieutenant Pike saw them in the Rockies in mid-winter of 1806.

The last record of these paroquets, once so plentiful, was reported from Florida near Lake Okeechobee, where in April, 1904, thirteen birds were seen. In Iowa the last recorded appearance was reported by Elliott Coues in his *Birds of the Northwest*, in the year 1874. Their beautiful plumage of green body-feathers, yellow heads, and red faces made them much sought after by plumage hunters and professional bird catchers, and their huddling together after being fired upon made them easy prey for so-called sportsmen. Their favorite food in winter was the cocklebur, and the destruction of those noxious weed seeds was a boon to the farmer. To-day their extermination is practically complete. Museums of natural history consider themselves lucky if they possess mounted specimens.

It is no wonder that bird lovers look with alarm at the rapid decrease of other species. In 1907, R. M. Anderson, in his *Birds of Iowa*, wrote, "It is highly probable that at the present time the whooping crane or white crane can be accounted no more than a rare migrant in Iowa. This magnificent and striking bird, perhaps the most imposing species native to Iowa, was

formerly a well-known and fairly common summer resident in the State, breeding in the large marshes which were at that time characteristic of northern Iowa".

This, the tallest of all North American birds, has been so relentlessly hunted that it is now considered unusually rare, perhaps the rarest of all our birds. In flight their long necks and stilt-like legs were stretched out in a line with the body, and the slanting sun rays glinted sharply on their white feathers. During late autumn, their slowly beating wings, moving them strongly southward, their circling spiral-like to a great height, croaking as they traveled like hounds on a cold trail, heralded the close approach of winter, and their reappearance in the spring was an assurance that cold weather was gone. The gradual extermination of the whooping crane has been one of the prime factors in the movement toward more stringent game laws.

Although the more serious sportsman realizes that protective game laws were enacted none too soon, few hunters know that one of the splendid bay ducks, in a class with the redhead and canvasback ducks, has been extinct nearly sixty years. This is the Labrador duck. The last bird of this species, so far as known, was taken at Grand Menan in 1871. Only forty-three specimens are recorded as existing in mounted collections.

The Labrador duck was almost as large and fully as

striking in appearance as the canvasback. The center of the crown was black; the rest of the head, throat, and upper neck were white. The wings were fuscous and white, and white predominated on the front and sides of the upper breast, in sharp contrast to the black belly and lower breast. Thus colored, they surely thrilled the early game hunters of the Atlantic seaboard, as they swooped, circled, and alighted in the bays and swamps from Nova Scotia to New Jersey.

Perhaps the saddest case of bird extermination is that of the passenger pigeon. "Upper parts rich bluish slate-color, back and sides of neck with metallic reflections; underparts deep, rich vinaceous", so reads a partial description of this "wild pigeon", as it was commonly called, which, less than seventy-five years ago, migrated over the eastern half of the United States in flocks of countless thousands. Alexander Wilson, writing about 1808, estimated that a flock of wild pigeons observed by him near Frankfort, Kentucky, contained at least two billion and a quarter individuals. Two recorded flights, one in 1858, over Washington, D. C., the other in 1873, on the Red River of the North, were described as being so large as to darken the sun. Iowa lay within the range of the wild pigeon, and many of the older residents of the State remember them as they alighted in the timber and orchards in search of food.

This beautiful bird, once so plentiful, has now been

unquestionably extinct since 1898. Thus within the space of twenty-five years, the most harmless and loveliest of birds, whose enormous flights were the wonder of the early settler, passed from an uncounted number into oblivion.

Protective bird laws came too late, however, to save a bird that means so much in the practical, historical, and aesthetical life of American people. Who can say what charm Thanksgiving day would hold for children if turkey were excluded from the picture? The day of Thanksgiving and turkey are always associated because the Pilgrims served the wild turkey at the first Thanksgiving.

To those who pioneered from the eastern coast to the timber-fringed streams of the broad Mississippi Valley, the wild turkey meant meat of high quality rather easily secured, though some cunning was necessary. The broad wings, large enough to carry the bird on sustained flights, were valued by the housewife as adjuncts to her sometimes meager equipment of utensils. Many a hearth in the pioneer homes was kept clean with a wild turkey wing. Distributed over a range that covered the entire eastern half of the United States, this noblest of American birds has rapidly decreased in number until now it can be found with difficulty, and then only in parts which are unfit for the habitation of man. In Iowa the wild turkey was a resident in Mills, Fremont, Des Moines, Lee, and

Van Buren counties, and even other districts reported them as abundant; yet from 1889, they began to be considered rare, and none has been observed for over thirty years.

Many other birds are surely passing out of existence. Where flocks were once seen, now only an occasional bird is observed. The quail or bob-white, the ruffed grouse, the canvasback and redhead ducks, the barn owl and swallow-tailed kites, the upland plover, the eskimo curlew, and many other birds that were commonly seen by the past generation have gradually diminished in numbers until at the present time the appearance of any of these birds on their old ranging grounds creates unusual interest.

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