



Old
Colony
Naturalist

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❁ A THOUGHT ❁

"With a snow-covered earth there is always possible all about us the most wonderful and delicate beauty imaginable; the snow-flakes coming from airy heights slowly transfigure every shape and outline upon which they fall, the very twigs of the trees seeking to simulate appearances which range from birds' nests to things "ne'er seen on land or sea." Truly snow and frost and sunlight and moonlight bring forth a beauty which man may reverently behold, but never can create. Let him look out upon it as often as he may in the blessed country

❁❁❁❁ if possible" ❁❁❁❁

A JANUARY WALK.

It began in an orchard, and ended up the river-path. A pair of nuthatches, white breasted, in company with a flock of chickadees, were hunting industriously over the trunk and branches of the fruit trees as I left the orchard, flying quickly from one tree to another, all the while uttering their peculiar well known cry, and also another sound that was new to me. The orchard contained many things of interest that may be seen on other days, as it is near home, but the river-path can only be visited in winter when the weather and walking are both favorable. Today it was almost free from snow, warm and sunny. The ground was carpeted most of the way with pine needles and oak leaves. Do you know the place? If not you should visit it for the first time on some spring day when the buds are beginning to open and every tree and bush just waking from its long winter's rest. Then go again in the summer when it is in its full beauty.

A path follows each side of the river. On

the east side the land rises quite abruptly, forming a high hill which extends the whole length. This is covered with a thick growth of oak, pine, beech, birch, and plenty of low bushes. The path is a winding one following the various turns and bends the river has made in finding its way to the bay. The west side is very different, but fully as interesting, only the woods are more dense and one does not get as close to the water. Today I was attracted by the east side, so shady and cool on a hot afternoon in summer, now flooded with sunshine. The colors stand out in bold relief, brown, red, green, light tan, the soft light ash of the beech, while everywhere the white bark of the birch presents a pleasant contrast. The alders and birches line the shores and are covered with dry blossoms and catkins. Many clumps of wild rose-bushes covered with bright red hips are out in the stream which at this point is very high and frozen over.

The *Smilax rotundifolia* is everywhere, some with stems still bright green, and leaves and bunches of blue-black berries scattered over it. Many of the trees that are near the water are

so festooned with it that they are almost hidden.

Clethra alnifolia abundant, and so handsome in July and August with its fragrant blossoms, shows only the brown seed vessels.

Near the water are many clumps of brown and green sedges, and varieties of moss.

As I walk on, I often pass patches of the trailing *Arbutus*, and when I remove some of the leaves with which they are protected, I find plenty of buds, but I am careful to cover them again before I leave them. Here is an oak with the upper parts broken off by some storm, and near the top is a good sized woodpecker's hole, but it is too high to examine unless you happen to be a boy and are good at shinning. A bush of New Jersey tea has some leaves and seed vessels still clinging to it.

The only sounds to be heard are the cracking of the ice, the sighing of the pines, and the rustle of dry beech and oak leaves. No birds seem to be here just at present, but I think I shall see some before I reach the end of the path. They like this place.

A little way up the hill is an old, decayed

stump, and when I pull it apart, a store-house is revealed, containing half eaten acorns and shellbarks. Perhaps they are the remnants of some squirrel's New Year's dinner-party. The only nests I have seen are large, built of coarse twigs, leaves and grass, and placed high in the tall pines or supported by the stout branches of the oak.

The beeches have their new buds which are sharp as needles and half an inch long, coming out everywhere from the axil of the old leaves which, curled and twisted, are struggling to be let free. A single bush of *Kalmia angustifolia* has green leaves still clinging to it, but the blossoms have become little seed balls.

There goes a partridge! The whirl of his wings is not to be mistaken. He flew from bushes by the water and very near to me, but I did not catch even a glimpse of him, for I was looking in the opposite direction. He hasn't gone far, and I may see him yet.

In another old stump that is riddled with holes I find plenty of down, hair, and soft decayed wood. The outside has been chiseled away in many places by woodpeckers, and the

wood seems to be full of borers. There is very little snow left in the path, and this shows only the foot-prints of man and dog. A few days ago a red fox came from these woods and ran the entire length of a gentleman's driveway, before he took to the woods again.

The young pitch pines show buds in clusters. They are from an inch to an inch and a quarter long, with pinkish pointed tips, the rest being covered with a white dust, while at the base are brown scales. Some of the old pines are almost free from cones, but occasionally I find one that is very full. Many cones on the ground are still tightly closed, others have snapped apart ready to scatter their seeds.

The notched leaves of the sweet fern are rolled up tightly, but when I crush them they send out a pleasant perfume. Crows are heard on the other side of the river, noisy as usual, and now a flock of chickadees has arrived. Some are calling steadily for Phœbe, others giving their soft little *tsip*, none are singing chickadee-dee. They are busy as ever, not resting even for a single moment while in their search for food.

There goes another partridge! And this time I have a good view of him. He has flown clear across the river into the woods on the other side. Why is it that so many birds seem always to prefer the *other* side of a stream or the *opposite* shore of a pond when one would like so much to study them at a close range? I am rubber-shod, and have been stepping very carefully, but the partridge has known the sound he heard was not made by the ice.

In many places the river is free from ice, and there the water is so clear and still every tree and bit of moss is reflected in it. The birds seem to have chosen some other hunting ground today, for I hear no more, and—my walk is over. I have come to open fields and the well travelled highway. A. A. F.

WINTER NOTES.

[Continued from November.]

But this resembles the portrait I have seen of a shrew. Wonder why it was so named. My hands close over it, and we are both sur-

prised. The little creature is lively enough now! Besides chirping like a panic stricken sparrow, it is all teeth. My query is answered. He whirls about so rapidly that he bites all my fingers at once. Sharp as needles the teeth are too; they shut like a vise, and when he sets them into the ball of my thumb, I take comfort in recalling the experiments of an acquaintance, whose curiosity led him to test the bites of bats, and other "small deer," and who assured me their bite was not poisonous. It is far from comfortable, but I must have a better look at my captive. Having taken a firm grip, he does not mean to be detached for anything short of liberty. In doors, he is with difficulty trapped between a plate and wire cover. Finding himself caged he, at first, seems dazed by the turn his affairs have taken; soon recovering his wits, in a measure, he chirps wildly, dashes to and fro, trying to burrow under the cover, stumbling over his own toes in his blind efforts to escape. Crumbs of food are slipped in to him; these he runs over several times; then he pauses abruptly, scratches his nose, and

thinks. He has an impression that—some-where—he has caught a whiff of something that smelled good. He scratches his nose again, and begins exploring the disagreeable, slippery surface, inch by inch, until he finds a bit of potato, at which he sniffs, and nibbles; but a small crumb satisfies; he is not to be cajoled into contentment; he flings up his nose as a young pig does at play, but there is no frolic in this little ball which momentarily becomes more frantic. He dashes round the plate, stops suddenly to throw up his head in that odd way, and leaps desperately at the wires. He is more likely to commit suicide, than to submit to be tamed, and I abandon hope of a closer acquaintance. Plate and contents are taken out of doors, when immediately he quiets down, takes a long breath, and his stolidity returns. Prison walls no longer distress him; he remembers the crumb, hunts for it and settles himself to enjoy it. It was but the warm air of the room which oppressed him. Perhaps if I tried making friends out of doors, all would go well. Setting the plate on a level spot, I remove the

cover, and he runs away? Not a bit of it! He drops his crumb, clambers leizurely over the edge into the snow, cuddles down, and begins daintily lapping the snow, as though that were the sole business in life, and he had no remembrance of being interrupted. He clears a spot the size of a silver dollar. I grow impatient, and pat his back, stroke his head, tickle his sides,—he does not care in the least. I stroke his fur the wrong way; he chirps, but will not move; roll him over, he regains the upright and goes on eating. I take hold of the stumpy tail; at this, he rolls over on his back, and kicks pettishly, but nothing will induce him to run. Fearing he would fall a victim to my neighbor's cat, I persuaded him, by force, to retire into a heap of stones. As an inducement to remain in hiding, I tucked an apple in after him. When I next looked from the window, my protege was tottering about the driveway like the most idiotic of toy mice, and I fear the cat had a paw in his final disappearance. S. E. C.

SEASONABLE SIGNS.

Perhaps the most uninteresting month in the Naturalist's calendar is January, the month when all Nature seems to rest. One might call it the first and last month of winter, the connecting link, as it were, between autumn and spring. December has hardly settled itself for its winter's nap; green meadows and lawns are still in evidence; bits of autumn show here and there in the way of foliage and fruit; not a few shrubs are still "wearing the green," and the berries of the alder and horse-brier are in excellent condition, while occasionally a belated flock of geese pass noiselessly along the sky's highway that leads to their winter home in the South. Then before we hardly realize that winter is here, February comes bringing hopes and signs of spring. Signs that are scarcely visible to the eye, but undoubtedly they exist and show themselves to the close observer. I have said that in January all Nature seems to rest, but science tells us that now she does her best work, quietly and rapidly. One writer says "in winter, we

are, as it were, behind the scenes in the green-room of some vast forest auditorium, and the closely locked buds are become the dressing rooms of thousands upon thousands of gaily decked flower-folk, who are preparing their multi-colored wardrobe of gorgeous petals with which to entrance and delight our mortal eyes when the golden key of the sun shall have unlocked their doors, . . . but if at present we are barred from the scene, the work of preparation is being rushed forward, and on every swelling twig there is evidence of a glorious drama of delight, which shall be uncurtained at the clarion voice of spring."

M. K. B.

 SOCIETY NOTES.

Be sure to hear Mr. Kellogg on Feb. 3rd. Don't stay at home on "work nights." Come and help.

The photograph received by our subscribers in the November Naturalist, is the road to Manomet, taken just beyond Hotel Pilgrim.

It always adds greatly to the pleasure of a

walk to have some particular quest in view. Now is the time to collect cocoons. They are to be found everywhere on bare twigs, if your eyes are sharp enough to see them.

Have you noticed the button-balls this month?

Our members are still keeping us ignorant of their choice of a National flower. The following is taken from the Boston *Transcript*. "The selection of the mountain laurel as our State flower is hardly appropriate. Massachusetts is not so noted for mountains that they should be conspicuously identified with our floral emblems."

It is a good time now to study some of the deserted nests and see what wonderful skill is shown by the little weavers. Unravel one of them, and many surprising and curious materials will be revealed as to lining and decoration.

A friend in Newton Highlands wrote us of a white sparrow that had been seen many days in succession, and the following week one of our members saw one near the pond at North Plymouth. Was it the same one?

THE ENGLISH SPARROW.

F. S. PIXLEY

You may talk about th' nightingale, th' thrush 'r medder lark,
'r any other singin' bird that came from Noah's ark;
But of all featherd things thiet fly, from turkey-buzzard
down,
Give me the little sparrer, with his modest coat o' brown.

I'll admit thet in the Springtime, when the groves with
music ring,
Natur' handicaps th' sparrer, he was never taught to sing;
But he sounds the Makers' praises in his weak 'nd lowly
way,
'nd tho' other birds come back at times, he never goes
away.

So when the Summer skies are bright it's easy 'nough to
sing.
But when it's cold 'n rains 'r snows its quite a diff'rent
thing.
In autumn, when th' nippen frosts drive other birds away
Th' sparrow is th' only one with nerve enough t' stay.

'nd even in midwinter, when th' trees 're brown 'nd bare,
'nd th' frosty flakes 're fallin' thro' th' bitter bitin' air,
Th' sparrer still is with us t' cheer us when we're glum,
For his presence is a prophecy of better days t' come.

What more can you 'nd I do than t' always do our best?
Are we any more deservin' than th' "little British pest?"
So, when you talk of "feathered kings" you'd better save a
crown
For the honest little sparrer, with his modest coat o' brown.

BOTANICAL DEPARTMENT.

We have not had as many meetings as usual in this department. Still we have had brought to us for examination, specimens of about two hundred plants, twenty-three mushrooms, and twenty-two trees. Four species of the mushrooms have been eaten by different members and pronounced good.

We have had some strange and rare specimens from gardens besides the rare treat of seeing paintings of three hundred and sixty of our native plants, by one of our own artists.

Each year we seem to extend our work a little into different lines. A year ago we made quite a gain in our knowledge of our ferns and mushrooms. Perhaps this last year, we have made the greatest gain in our study of trees.

After all that we see in the class, we feel that those of us who go afield have the greater pleasure, because we can neither bring to you the delight of finding a new flower or plant in its own home, nor the delicate beauty of some of our ferns growing in their woodland nooks, or as they form a perfect mat for some bould-

er on a rocky hillside. These things must be sought for to be appreciated, and not once, but many, many times.

Perhaps some of us will remember that a note of warning was sounded several years ago, in regard to the careless picking of some of our more rare plants. Since then, a "Society for the Protection of Native Plants" has been formed by plant lovers, which has the approval and endorsement of the New England Botanical Club, and the Massachusetts Horticultural Society. Some of our members belong to this society, and if any one would like more particulars about it, they would be glad to give them.

The part of our work that has received the least attention for the last two or three years is our herbarium. It contains about 250 species. During the past ten years, or since our society was formed, we have identified 514 or more living species, native to Plymouth.

We wish to thank all of those who have helped this department in any way, for it is by our united efforts that we can succeed.

M. W. W.

EDITORIALS.

One of the most interesting evenings our Society has passed was the one devoted to the birds' nests that are in our museum. We have excellent specimens of a number that are not easy to find even if you should see the birds coming directly from them. One of the most curious nests is that of the shah-shah, a bird of the west. This was contributed by one of our members who secured it one night just at dusk, on his way down the mountain.

It is seldom we have an opportunity to hear so delightful a lecture as the one given by Mr. F. Schuyler Matthews on "Wild Birds and their Music". He is an artist of exceptional ability. The birds he described he has painted from life, and his imitation of their wild music is beyond criticism. He enables you to become well acquainted with the bird and his song, and while listening, you feel as if the real bird was before you instead of his colored representation. Mr. Matthews should receive a warm welcome when he next visits Plymouth.

In the January number of *American Ornithology* are some illustrations of a handsome

Albino crow that lived for a short time in Whitinsville, Mass. The bird when young did not differ from the other birds that hatched at the same time, but as he grew older it was seen that his wings and tail contained white feathers. Later, after he had moulted, his plumage was still more beautiful. His body was iridescent black, while his wings and tail were mostly snow white. The writer says, for over two weeks, after it was known there was a white crow in town, every man and boy who owned or could borrow a gun, was seeking to slay him. Not because he had ever done any harm but because he was a freak and a marked bird. His stuffed skin is now shown to admiring friends.

We are wont to congratulate ourselves that we, of all God's creatures, are capable of a wide range of expression, that we can impart to others our thoughts, emotions and sentiments, but how often our vaunted means seem powerless and we stand impotent, dumb, unable to impart an impression. Nay, it is rarely indeed that we succeed in influencing others to correctly understand our own thought, and

it is not idly that someone has said, that "Speech conceals thought."

When written or spoken language succeeds in interpreting truly the impression of a human soul we count it no less than the work of genius, for we can recognize the hall-mark of truth although dumb ourselves.

WEATHER PROPHETS.

"To what extent birds and animals can foretell weather is uncertain. When swallows are seen hawking very high it is a good indication the insects upon which they feed venture up there only in the most auspicious weather. Yet bees will continue to leave the hive when a storm is near at hand. One of the most reliable weather signs they have in Texas is afforded by the ants. The ants bring their eggs up out of their underground retreats and expose them to the warmth of the sun to be hatched. When they are seen carrying them in again in great haste, though there be not a cloud in the sky, your walk or your drive must be postponed. A storm is near. When a storm is coming Virgil makes his swallows skim low about the lake."