

Irene Took the to Sam Rudden July 23 - 1943

4 negatives

BIRDS OF THE ALEUTIAN ISLANDS

by

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Out of the north Pacific Ocean and the Bering Sea, Alaska stretches an arm and seems with some ancient gesture to have flung a spattering of islands toward Kamchatka and the Asiatic mainland. Barren lands, the Aleutians born of Nature's whim, thrust their rocky headlands into the seas and rear their still warm and symmetrically pointed peaks, monuments of some past upheaval, into the sky. Bearing no trees and with dwarfed vegetation, they are buffeted with harsh winds and severed one from another by water passes whose jagged rocks and shifting bars are known to no chart maker. Because they are different and difficult, this chain of wild islands lures those who love adventure, those who thrill at the nearness of strange lands, strange birds and animals, and wild flower gardens spread out like carpets.

The main lure of the bird-lover along the Alaskan coast and the Bering Sea is the concentrations of sea and shore birds, because their numbers are like the numbers of the sea. Though insignificant in comparison of numbers, the pleasure of meeting with the smaller land birds in this barren - but not meager - top of the world is something to remember.

The sea trip across the Gulf of Alaska and threading one's way through treacherous Unimak Pass into the Bering Sea is an appetizer - and a tester of the stomach - for the delectable picture courses that follow in succession along the coastline of the Aleutian Islands. Dressed in slicker and boots and standing on the heaving deck in a pitch-black night, the waters tumbling and hissing, one sees off to the left strung like candles in the clouds, the lighted tips of volcanoes gleaming in the heavens. Looking out of the porthole in the morning, the sun sparkles on a blanket of fog and underneath it the myriads of shearwaters, petrels, and other water birds dipping and bobbing and splashing in the water. It feels like the morning of the first day.

Camped on Unimak Island, a big game refuge, after a day of tramping over the tundra, one sits at the typewriter under the mystic glow of the northern

lights. And all at once a small bird spirals into the air above the tangled shrubs and grass, lifting higher and higher until out of sight. Suddenly it plummets downward, spilling its tinkling notes into the night as it falls.. It is the Alaska longspur, one of the most abundant birds of the Aleutians and the islands to the North. Forsooth, since there are no trees, the bird must nest on the ground and sing in the sky.

In contrast to the longspur is the beautiful Aleutian leucosticte or rosy finch that plays almost the part of the English sparrow around the Aleut villages. He chatters from the roofs and lives about the back doors and the barns, but he takes himself off to a crack in a cliff to nest.

Another bird that sings on the wing is the Pribilof snow bunting. Bursting up from a field of flowers, like a blossom suddenly taking wings, the black-and-white bird scatters a series of rollicking notes. He trembles aloft above his home and perches as if on an unseen bough with spreading wings, pouring out his song. Wavering earthward like a snowflake, his song ends about thirty feet up, his wings close, and he shoots to the cover of the Arctic poppies.

It is comforting to meet the big dark colored song sparrows that are present throughout most of the Aleutian Chain and almost make one homesick for his own dooryard bird. Last and least is the little Alaska wren, tiny like our winter wren at home, in soze and song perhaps the most striking bird character of the north lands. He, too, must find a home in a crevice of a cliff. With the heart of a Viking, he braves a northern winter and is affectionately called "Limmershin" (chew of tobacco) by the natives.

Along the shorelines and little lakes hung in the hollows of the islands, little Pribilof sandpipers play, and many other waders nest on the tundra above the waves. On the tips of green-tufted ~~little~~ islands, and fishing at the mouths of little rivers is the ever-present bald eagle.

Toward evening, ^{a strong} wind may send a drift of fog from the South. We sit on the edge of a high cliff facing North to watch the return of the least auklets that live in great colonies among the boulders. These little sea-fowl, called by the Aleuts "choochkies", are plump of body, but not much larger than English

sparrows. We see them sitting on the rocks of the boulder-strewn beaches, bowing and chattering. Having their legs at the ends of their bodies, they prop themselves upright on their diminutive webbed feet and waddle around like little old men. During the day they feed off at sea, and we flatten on the top of the cliff and watch them come home at night. Out at sea a band of from fifty to two or three hundred will beat along into sight, driving low over the water against the wind. When near the island under the lee of a cliff, they rise just high enough to clear the top, and swish over our ears like the sound of a whip drawn quickly through the air.

For an hour one can lie in the grass with watch in hand and count flock after flock in rapid succession passing at the rate of six hundred to several thousand birds a minute. At times one could reach out and grab birds out of the air, so close they came over. Occasionally a flock, perhaps tired from long flight, will lift just over the rim, and a strong gust will hold them against an invisible wall. Down they sink again in the protection of the cliff and swing along to rise suddenly and storm the barrier at another point in their flight. We are not the only watchers, for at the edge of the cliff the keen eyes of a fox may be glimpsed half hidden in the grass.

There are three species of auklets, of which the choockie or least is the most abundant. The paroquet auklet, a little larger than the least auklet, is called "Baillie Brushkie" by the natives. The crested auklet, called "Canooskie," (little Captain), is well named, because he has a queer little crest of feathers that sticks out over his forehead and curves around toward his nose. All the auklets find homes in the crevices of the rocks and on the sheer cliffs where it is more difficult for the foxes to reach them, but in going to and from their homes the birds must ever be alert.

The birds that live on these northern islands are always on the firing line. They are snapped up by the animals, and shot and snared by the Aleuts. But they survive and cluster the cliffs like swarms of bees. Bird songs, like smiles and laughter, carry these avian beings from the flowery feasts of summer through the dry crusts of winter, so closely does the joy of summer tread upon the heels of winter's sorrow.