

Birds of Early Iowa

During the years immediately following the Civil War a pioneer family lived on a farm in Keokuk County about five miles from the site of the present town of Keota. The oldest son in the family, then a small boy just able to make his way around the farm, tells the following story of the birds so familiar to the pioneers but now almost unknown.

Our cabin stood upon an eminence on the east bank of Clear Creek which soon ceased to be "clear" owing to the breaking up and cultivation of more and more of its watershed. To the south of the residence and occupying lower ground was a meadow about twenty rods wide. Beyond this meadow to the southward stretched a fine large native forest unbroken for miles except by a few small farms that here and there had been hewn out of the wilderness. To the west and northwest there was also timber and brush lands, and to the east and northeast lay the clearing which constituted my father's farm. Since there was no public road within half a mile of the house, the creaking of oxcarts and the rattle of farm wagons did not disturb the serenity of our surroundings. The woods, the meadows, and the farm lands were a paradise for the wild birds.

Directly south of our house and beyond the meadow, in the midst of moderately large timber, stood a

huge oak tree, the patriarch of the forest. It reared its lofty head some forty feet above the surrounding trees and stretched its branches out over the forest like the arms of a giant extended in benediction. The trunk of this great tree was nearly six feet in diameter and when it fell a victim to the woodman's ax in later years a count of its annual rings showed that it must have been a sapling as large around as a man's coat sleeve at the time Columbus discovered America.

Upon this tree during migration time the passenger pigeons used to alight and roost by the thousands. So numerous were they that the upper branches occasionally gave way under their weight and for a few minutes confusion reigned, the beating of the birds' wings sounding not unlike the roll of distant thunder. Then the noise gradually died away as the pigeons found another resting place, smoothed their ruffled plumage, and settled down for the night.

The number of these birds was almost incredible. For days at a time one could not look up at the sky without seeing some of them in flight and occasionally during the migration season there were so many that they obscured the sun and cast a shadow upon the earth like passing clouds.

Some five hundred feet northeast of this great oak and near the edge of the meadow stood an ancient and wide-spreading elm. This tree and its nightly occupants furnished my boyish curiosity and imagi-

nation many a thrill, for it was usually the roosting place of a flock of wild turkeys. I could sit upon our doorstep in the twilight and see one dusky form after another make its way up from limb to limb in the old elm until I could count from eighteen to twenty-five dark spots in the tree. My father was a worshipper of nature and never bothered these stately and beautiful birds.

In the early morning the turkeys would fly off the old elm and leisurely hunt grasshoppers over the meadow and through the orchard, disappearing after awhile in the cornfield, apparently not afraid of any one on the premises. When I was just learning to count my mother called me to the east window one morning and asked me to count the wild turkeys quietly foraging through the orchard. With considerable difficulty I made out that there were twenty-two.

One spring my father was preparing to have some brush land broken for cultivation. The man who had undertaken to do this work came one morning in June with a great plow which had a wooden beam ten feet or more in length, a plow bottom in the rear that turned a furrow nearly two feet wide, and a pair of trucks in front. But what was of especial interest to me was the fact that he had five fine horses. That kind of work was generally done with the help of oxen. Four years old, bare headed and bare footed, I took my chances with briars, thorn-bushes, and rattle snakes, and followed this most

interesting outfit to the brush land which was to be transformed into a cultivated field.

While they were making the first round with considerable noise and shouting at the horses, a great bird suddenly flew out of the bushes and into the timber beyond. "That's a wild turkey", said my father, as he went into the bushes from which the bird had appeared. In a few moments he came back with his straw hat full of turkey eggs and hurried off to the house where he found an old hen accommodating enough to finish the job of incubation. The birds raised out of this flock, together with some new blood added a few years later when father found another nest, made the foundation for a thriving bronze turkey industry.

An old hickory tree east of the orchard was a favorite resting place for the pinnated grouse or prairie chickens which were about as numerous then as the several species of blackbirds are to-day. An uncle who lived with us one year acquired a taste for prairie chicken. He had an old rifle with an octagonal barrel that seemed to me as long as a fence rail. It must have weighed at least fifteen pounds. Sometimes when a supply of prairie chickens was desired, the east window was raised a few inches and the muzzle of this old gun was poked out. Every time the gun spit fire we could see a chicken tumble to the ground. When he had brought down enough chickens for a "mess all round" he went out and brought them in.

It is unnecessary to more than mention here the thousands of ducks and geese of many species that passed over every spring and fall: at least a few of most of these species are still alive and familiar to many people. Our game laws have helped in their preservation, and an awakening to the danger of the extermination of these creatures is fortunately apparent to-day.

One class of birds seen during migration time in those days especially inspired my youthful mind with awe and admiration. These were the great white or whooping cranes and the sand-hill cranes. They used to come along in flocks of from three to twenty or more, at an immense elevation, sweeping the sky in great majestic circles and ever and anon came that peculiar "whoop" that sounded like a combination of flute, bugle, and foghorn. I have not been favored by the sight of a crane or heard that raucous "whoop" for many a long year.

Another bird that was rather common in those days was the beautiful and graceful swallow-tailed kite. Individuals of this species could be seen floating about in the air almost any summer day, frequently carrying mice, ground squirrels, frogs, or snakes in their talons, as if they enjoyed the sensation of being carried about by the air while regarding the tidbit in their talons as a child might contemplate an apple or an orange. The last one of these beautiful creatures it was my good fortune to see come over Sigourney in the summer of 1910.

His shadow flitted across my path one day as I was walking in the street. I looked up and was delighted to see that even one of these graceful birds was still alive for I had not seen one for twenty years before. I watched his evolutions and gyrations over the city quite a while, then he disappeared to the eastward. The next day a man came to town carrying its dead body. He said he did not know what kind of bird it was but saw it soaring about over his premises and thinking it was after his chickens rushed for his "blunderbuss" and put a sudden stop to its supposed evil intentions.

In addition to these feathered inhabitants of the land there were others, less numerous or more retiring, but well known to the pioneers. From the woods near by came the drumming of the ruffed grouse and in the dusk the whippoorwill, close at hand but unseen, sent out its weird chant. This is sometimes heard to-day but for the most part the wild birds have disappeared. The domestic hen clucking contentedly in the barn yard has taken the place of the prairie chicken and we look up to see the air-planes whirring by instead of the clouds of pigeons, the flocks of cranes, or the solitary kite circling in the sky.

E. D. NAUMAN