

## A Short, Short Story

About an ambitious photographer, his camera, his subject,  
his best fly line and a cedar stump.

By JAMES R. MACKINTOSH, Toronto

I became ambitious after serving as assistant to a nature photographer. I was aware of some of the procedure necessary to taking a picture of a wild bird, and the photographer clarified such terms as "depth of Focus," "depth of Field," I was enlightened on the mysteries of the light meter. I would get me a camera. I acquired an ancient model known to the initiated as an R. B. Graphlex (a popular model with the Press about 60 years ago but now a little out of date) with viewing mirror and a Focal Plane Shutter which was operated by a powerful spring. A flash attachment for such a camera would cost that kind of money you read about in the newspapers. So I did not get one. Instead of the flash I would use sunlight, and my remote control consisted of one tapered fly line (my best \$15.75 A. L. & W.) tied to the trigger and stretched a safe distance from the spot where, I fondly hoped, the bird would pose.

I should mention here that I used a magazine, or film holders and cut film so that, having exposed one film I could easily remove it in my dark room and develop and fix it and so improve, or follow the same procedure in my next exposure, in the unlikely event of getting a good negative the first time. A Red-breasted Nuthatch decided to patronize my feeding station that winter and he was photographed by all sorts of cameras from Leicas to the ten cent box camera you sometimes get in a 25 cent grab bag. But he was photographed by an R. B. Graphlex. I will tell you why. The Revolving Back Graphlex, as I mentioned above has a Focal Plane Shutter, which is an arrangement like a roller blind with slots of different widths cut transversely at intervals, narrow slots for fast work and wider for slower work. Wild birds must be photographed at high speed with a small lens opening to get a clear and deep picture. I also mentioned that the shutter was operated by a strong spring. It is a strong spring and it must be wound up to No. 6 tension

in this operation, with the F opening at 11 which boils down to about one hundredth of a second. Now to our tale . . . .

My good friend, and one time master of our expeditions, Victor Crich, arrived one day to take a shot of my nuthatch, and from somewhere in the chaotic interior of his car he produced one large cedar stump which was placed in a likely spot near my living room window. A small morsel of suet was attached to the stump, the camera, a Speed Graphic set up, remote control assembled and leading to my easy chair in the living room where Vic sat and waited, remote control in hand. He did not wait long, within ten minutes he had his picture. The T.F.N.C. has the best grapevine service in the world and before a week everybody and his auntie were aiming at that bird, and getting pictures . . . of sorts. And why not I? . . . with my ancient model I had taken pictures of such things as crows, pheasants, butterflies, etc. and even if I did have to point out which was which, one improves with practice. I would photograph that nuthatch.

Proceeding as above mentioned, I waited two hours in frigid weather and was rewarded by the bird and a blink of sunshine at the same time so I pulled my tapered fly line, feverishly removed the magazine, proceeded to process my film, alas, my film was clear as glass. I found I still had a few things to know about R. B. Graphlex, I had forgotten to raise the mirror, and remove the safety slide. I would try again, bird and light being perfect I got another shot. Ah! this time I had something. As my negative became clearer I saw that I had a perfect picture of Vic's cedar stump, but no nuthatch. There are some preliminary noises in the shutter mechanism of the R. B. before the shutter lets go and descends with a crash, and the nuthatch is a small bird and quick. Cut film in those days was not worth its weight in rubies as it is now, I kept trying and I got 39 perfect pictures of that, ah, stump.

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evidently used as scratching posts. If you "accidentally" fell off your pony and had sense enough not to let go the reins you could use such a stone as a mounting post if you could climb on to it to begin with.

Flowers were not overly plentiful but I can remember a few varieties that did grow in abundance. Summer-fallowing was done by horse power and it was often late in the season before it was completed. Maybe this was not good but frequently before the plough destroyed them the fields were blue with beard-tongue (blue-bells to us). We brought them in by the armful, this bounty of nature which to my father were weeds, and filled every vase and tin in the house.

In some places the ditches and fields beside the road were yellow with waisthigh sunflowers. And the bare roads themselves sometimes were carpeted with scarlet mallow with its beautiful red flowers and soft grey foliage. There were some shallow sloughs which after the water had gone turned yellow with a velvety gold-and-brown flower that blossomed on bare stems. Picked they made poor bouquets without added foliage. In small sloughs the silky red top grass waving back and forth in a fresh wind was breathtakingly beautiful.

The individual flowers that grew around our farm were personal friends. There was the spot with southern exposure where the first crocus bloomed in spring, and almost at the same time could be seen the bright yellow flower and artistic foliage of the hairy-fruited parsley. And just as bright and just as admired the leafy musineon. In the shade and moist atmosphere of the pumphouse there was a beautiful clump of goldenrod, and in the rich soil of the old barn blue vetch grew lush like bunches of grapes.

In the overgrazed pasture there was cactus (bane of bare feet), pussytoes, sage, and clumps of moss phlox, stiff bristly plants with dainty white flowers. Once I rode three miles to get a specimen of sneeze-weed to make item No. 12 in an entry for the Eston Fair — if my wisdom had been greater I probably would not have had to go so far for a twelfth known specimen! Trailing

home behind the cattle, low in the stubble I found a small vetch with grey leaves, red buds that opened into pale pink flowers. Beside the stonepile there was a fleabane that grew in a circle like a small fairy ring (maybe there was a stone in the middle) — it had pink petals and had to be enjoyed in solitude for picked the fragile petals quickly withered.

Best of all memories though were those of our infrequent picnics beside the Saskatchewan River about twelve miles from our farm by devious route and many a ranch barbed-wire gate. The smell of roses, the tier on tier of coulees blue in the distance, and as we neared the river the dangerous descents over primitive trails, then the smell of willow and finally the swift and treacherous river itself flowing in its wide bed by stony shore and sandbanks. Many's the time we wished we could corral some of that water rushing uselessly to the Bay to water our parched crops. The giant clumps of cactus with their bright waxy flowers, the profusion of trees and shrubs, new flowers, flowing water from a spring, and wet sand beneath the feet — these were indeed rare sensations for the prairie child.

When I first moved to the Grenfell district I missed the rich colour of the earth in the Snipe Lake district, the distant blue hills of the Saskatchewan River, the unlimited sunsets and the wide unfenced untreed spaces, but time and I have changed, and now I doubt if I would give up my bluffs and jewel-like sloughs for the open prairie again even if it remained to go back to. Be that as it may the memories are good.

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**Moral:** If you really want a picture of a Red Breasted Nuthatch don't try to get it with an R. B. Graphlex and an expensive fishing line. You will suffer from frustration and you will weep when next you try to throw a fly with a frayed line.

Note — "T.F.N.C." means "Toronto Field Naturalists' Club". Nearly all members have cameras.

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