

LAST OF THE CURLEWS

By FRED BODSWORTH, Dodd, Mead & Comp., New York. March 1955.

Review by L. T. CARMICHAEL

In these days when we are thinking so much about the welfare of the Whooping Crane, rejoicing in the fact that there may be a slight possibility of their comeback, and proud of the efforts of naturalists across a whole continent to prevent their complete extermination, it would be well for every one of us to read the "Last of the Curlews", and in a glorious flight of imagination, follow this lonely bird as it wings its way about its migratory circuit from the land of the aurora borealis to that of the southern cross.

It is a story, not only of the flight, but of the disappointments, courage, fortitude, strength, love instincts and final tragedy which befell a lone survivor of the once numerous species on its trip from the Arctic to the tip of South America and back again by a different route to its nesting grounds. It is a humanized and charming story, graphically illustrating how its inability to learn to fear, coupled with greedy and short-sighted hunting methods have combined to obliterate a species. It opens our eyes to the dire necessity for conservation and to a responsibility which is ours to see that no species, now living, be lost from the face of the earth, for:

"The beauty and genius of a work of art may be reconceived, though its first material expression be destroyed; a vanished harmony may yet again inspire the composer; but when the last individual or a race living beings breathes no more, another heaven and earth must pass before such a one can be again."

This story will be enjoyed, not only by ornithologists, but by everyone. It is not only a moving tale but a classic of English literature. One cannot help but be captivated by the charm of the story coupled with its superb English.

In June the lone Curlew arrives on the half frozen tundra plains of the Arctic, and immediately marks off its private territory and nesting ground, jealously guarding this from all other migrants, until its expected

mate joins it there. But the weeks pass and the mate does not appear. It flies alone. It, an Eskimo Curlew, rejects the company of even the Hudsonian Curlews. At last, alone and despondent, it gives up in despair, the mating instinct being supplemented once more by the uncontrollable desire to migrate south. It joins and leads a flock of Golden Plovers, the only birds capable of its own speed and endurance.

In a flight of imagination let us follow these birds as they wing their way across the uncharted airways to the south. About the first of August they rest for a while on the salt marshes of James Bay, then eastward to the Labrador Peninsula, where the fleshy berries of the crowberry add a purple tinge to the hills and plateaus. Here they gorge and fatter for several weeks in preparation of their 2500 miles of non-stop flight. Fighting cold winds and treacherous snow storms, on they go out over the stormy Atlantic, past the tip of Cape Breton Island, over the Sargasso Sea, past the Lesser Antilles, landing, thin and exhausted forty-eight hours later on the savannahs of the Orinoco. Another 2500 miles and they rest and feed on the Argentine pampas, 8000 miles from their arctic nesting grounds. Working still southward, they finally arrive during the scorching December sun on the plains of Patagonia — a nights flight from the Antarctic Ocean. There the plovers left the curlew, and once more it flew alone.

January came, and with it the feel of the Arctic's first faint call. The curlew started home. One day, at long last, a female of its species dropped down from the sky and stood beside it. Love making was instantaneous, and elated with their new-found happiness they continued the journey together. In February they were a thousand miles north, then west they turned — over the Andes, above the peaks of perpetual snow, then a long downward glide to the Pacific ocean. Working north over a parched region of sandy de-

sert plateaus between the Andes and the sea, they crossed the open ocean to Guatemala. Over Central America they met and passed the hosts of migrant birds who were flying northward to overtake the North American spring. Perhaps the most interesting part of the story to naturalists is their leisurely move northward as spring moved northward from the Gulf of Mexico to Saskatchewan.

As they crossed our own prairie, the ecstasy of their love making made them oblivious to humans and to fear, they fed closely behind the farm machinery in the field. A

trigger-happy farmer spotted them. A shot gun blasted out its pellets of death, and the female was no more. The curlew headed north in silence alone — once again he defended his territory — for it must be kept in readiness for the female his instinct told him soon would come.

In June, this year, Mr. Bodsworth's novel was purchased by Reader's Digest for inclusion in the Autumn volume of Reader's Digest Condensed Books. This is the first time that a book by a Canadian author has been accepted for use in a Condensed Book Volume.

A BOOK REVIEW

By FRANK H. BRAZIER

"Sea-Birds" by James Fisher and R. M. Lockley (Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston, 1954).

Aside from strictly reference books, there are a few volumes which ought to grace the shelves of every naturalist's library, whether he be casual, dilettante or professional. Most of these books, not being professional texts, are to be found in public libraries. Some of these would be Rachel Carlson's "*The Sea around Us*", Dr. N. J. Berrill's "*Sex and the Nature of Things*", Edgar Anderson's "*Plants, Man and Life*", Francois Bouliere's "*The Natural History of Mammals*", Konrad Lorenz's "*King Solomon's Ring*", Charles Darwin's "*Origin of Species*", H. G. Wells' "*The Science of Life*" and M. W. de Laubenfels "*Pageant of Life Science*". No doubt there are others but the foregoing come readily to mind. To this illustrious company I have no hesitation in recommending that "Sea-Birds" be added. If this book was simply a book about the sea-birds of the North Atlantic we could afford it casual interest, but it is much more than that, although the authors modestly state: "We have paused in field-work simply to offer this book as a stimulant. We intend it as no more." Stimulant indeed it is, but to more than ornithologists.

It shows how many sciences contribute to the one science — geology, ecology, biology, oceanology, meteorology, etc., all assist ornithology,

so the ornithologist must understand the other non-ornithological factors. The description of the structure of the North Atlantic, and its currents and climate, in relation to the bird life there could be used as a pattern by a Saskatchewan ornithologist in relating the Province's geology and climate to its bird life. In addition, the tables, diagrams and unique map-nets illustrate how the subject information can be best presented.

The chapter on Evolution of birds is particularly detailed and interesting, especially when discussing areas of origin of the various bird families. The fact that the North Atlantic has not been the area of origin of any important group of sea-birds will be accepted by geologists as pertinent comment on the Wegener Theory of Continental Drift. As the California Gull (*Larus californicus*) and the Herring Gull (*Larus argentatus*) both occur in Saskatchewan it is interesting to note that they are actually subspecies which, with others, form circumpolar chains.

In the chapter entitled "Sea-Bird Numbers and Man", the melancholy tale of the extinction of the Great Auk (*Alca impennis*) makes grim reading, as does the account of the inroads made by the millinery trade on the terms.

The first half of the book examines certain phases of sea-bird study such as migrations and movements, navigation, social and sexual behaviour,