

THE NATURALIST ON HORSEBACK

E. OTTO HOHN, Department of Physiology, University of Alberta, Edmonton

If you are both an enthusiastic wildlife observer and a horseman you will sooner or later want to enjoy both activities simultaneously — can it be done? The short and practical answer is — not very well — but that is putting it in a nutshell. There are a number of considerations and qualifications.

If you are prepared to look at birds and the larger mammals with the naked eye, you can do that almost as well from the saddle as on foot. But the use of binoculars is tricky, because no horse, in my admittedly limited experience, ever stands still for as long as you may wish it to. You can stop it from moving on, easily enough, but you can't reduce it to total immobility; and this, an absolute requisite for a satisfactory look with binoculars, imposes a fundamental limit on the combination of riding with bird or mammal watching in the ordinary sense. However, riding and spotting without binoculars can be satisfactory to the extent that in a familiar bit of country you can identify most birds and large mammals by their naked-eye appearance. Some of your bird identifications, based on glimpses and hearing songs or calls, may however be probabilities based on knowing what to expect in each habitat, rather than certainties.

As an adjunct to naked-eye bird watching, riding has evident advantages over walking. You can let the horse do the rough and tiring work of wading through mud and rough vegetation as well as climbing up hill and down dale, and if it is useful in marshes as well. In 1907 I spent some months about a large marsh in the pampas of Argentina. The local horses, bred on the marshes, would wade without hesitation in the mudflats and lagoons, which had amazingly firm bottoms, to any depth short of that which would have forced them to swim. Here birding on horseback was preferable to the alternatives of wading or the labor of pushing a boat through the dense stands of tall reeds and rushes. To see grebes, cormorants, and limpkins, and to peer into the nests or those of everglade kites from the saddle was a rare experience. I was not convinced that birds would allow me to approach them closer on horseback than on foot. This may seem to contradict the late 19th and early 20th century British naturalist Abel Chapman's successful use of the stalking horse in the Coto Donar in southern Spain, for goose shooting at the turn of the century. But I believe he walked behind a horse and did not ride it, and it is quite conceivable that some birds are so used to grazing horses that they will accept a close



Breaking horses

E. Otto Hohn



...ed-up for an overnight collecting trip

E. Otto Hohn

...roach by these before flushing
...they will by a man mounted or
...t.

...ollecting is perhaps nowadays not
...of bird watching for many; but as
...ysiologist needing samples of en-
...ine glands of certain birds, I have
...occasion to do it using horses. I
...t know whether cavalry armed
...carbines always dismounted to
...ot, but I've always been warned
...to shoot from horseback but to
...instead of a few yards away from
...horse. One of the horses at my
...osal in Argentina was excellent
...his sort of work — I was collecting
...ted snipe. I would ride him over
...flooded pastures until we flushed
...of the birds, dismount and walk
...o a snipe where I'd marked its
...ent after its usually short flight.
...ers were generally close by. The
...e set to grazing as soon as I
...oped the reins and he stayed
...re he was until I was ready to
...e on. Not so with a mare I was
...loaned for work in this marsh —
...slowly took off for home after I
...ounted and was busy. Fortunately
...n intervening fence stopped her
...n really getting away on me.

Though I shot dismounted, the horse was a great asset in this collecting for it saved me a lot of walking over grassland under a few inches of water to get to the general area where the snipe were, and within that area to get from one group of birds to another.

So much for naked-eye bird watching and collecting with the help of a horse.

It is when one tries to use binoculars in the saddle that problems really arise. I imagine most people will feel like myself — that when a bird is sighted there is generally not enough time to extricate the binoculars from their case and that they should therefore be carried at the ready. If you do this on horseback you will find that the neck straps are of such a length that the binoculars hang too low and are cruelly bumped about by the saddle bow during a trot or canter. You have to shorten the straps so that you can only just swing the binoculars clear of your chin when you bring them up to your eyes. Even then you will want to steady them when the horse is in any

of its faster gaits by clamping them under one arm, holding them in one hand or pushing them down the front of a tightly-buttoned jacket or wind-breaker.

With these precautions the binoculars will stay pretty close to where you want them whatever (short of jumping, which I've not tried with binoculars) you make the horse do. The great flaw, however, as I've already remarked, is that no horse with which I have had experience can be relied upon to stand absolutely still for more than a very few seconds so that satisfactory views through binoculars, though possible, are rare. Of course, you can get such a view by dismounting, but one is always reluctant to do this from sheer laziness and because a strange horse cannot always be relied upon to stay in place when the bridle is allowed to hang, as western-trained horses are supposed to; nor will it necessarily follow readi-

ly wherever you may try to lead it in order to get a good view of your bi-

Most of these difficulties are minimal with a horse with which one has become familiar and perhaps, but I've not yet experienced this, they could be nearly abolished by training it very carefully and patiently.

A last point: if like myself you are apt to let your thoughts wander whenever your body is temporarily out of some steady state, don't ever let your mind become completely absorbed in your inner world when you are in the saddle. Any horse with some spirit is liable to make a surprise move at any time. For example, one of my Argentine mounts, after carrying me calmly through paths that ran among serrated masses of five-foot high thistles, where we were happily cantering over rough pasture suddenly shied at a single clump of thistles out in the open.



Killdeer settling on eggs

R. E. Geary