

Field Notes of the Dusky Mallard.

By Bonnycastle Dale.



THE locality selected for the study of this shy, elusive duck lies in the reservation of the Mississauga Indians, on Rice Lake, Canada, who in their soft gutturals, call it the "She-sheb." By the white hunters of the lake it is known as the Black Duck, in the New England States I have heard it spoken of as the Dusky Duck; farther south it bears the name of the Black Mallard, and in Florida it is sometimes called the Black English Duck, but be it known by this or another name it is the same wary, clever bird, always on the look out for enemies—and, truly, their name is legion.

Early in the Spring of 1905 we journeyed over the honeycombed surface of the heavy ice that covered Rice Lake to the island of the Beaver, where we found our little shanty as clean as when we had left it the November before. The intense cold had driven every

the open water as true as the arrow from the bow. What wonderful instinct is implanted in the feathered game! Here was a tiny stream created in a great icefield within the hour, and there were the ducks speeding toward it. Soon they came over the island so closely that I could see the orange-red legs, the dark green "speculum" on the wings, the handsome brownish-black plumage, the white lining of the wings, the clear yellow-green of the bill, and the black button on the end, and finally the brilliant black eye searching even that icefield for a possible enemy. Along they sped, circled above the open crack three times, and alighted with wings hooked toward the light wind that blew from the North. Our study had begun, the Dusky Mallards were with us again.

For days we were stormbound on the Beaver; the great struggle between the wind, the sun, and the river's current with the great icefield awed and interested us. At last the wind got the underhand, and the wonderful scenes of the ice-shove were enacted for us two



Camp Scene

stoat and weasel, mole, squirrel, and rat off the island to the mainland. From the northern point of the island not one single glimmering streak of open water was to be seen, all the far-reaching scene was one field of greenish, sun-seared ice, while even the Otonabee River, due north of us, which feeds the lake, was still icebound. We were early, it was only the 30th of April, but we wished to see the great migrating host arrive, headed usually by our friends the black ducks.

The first light that fell on this old hunting lake the next morning showed a blue, gleaming crack at the river's mouth—the first open water, and as soon as it was clear enough we searched it with the telescope. It was a mere ribbon of water a foot or two wide, and perhaps thirty feet long, but we knew full well that the heralds of the great northern flight had reached here several days before, had doubled on their tracks, and reported no open water.

My ever-hungry assistant, Fritz, scanned the southern sky line with the big glass, and suddenly exclaimed, "What are those two black dots!" I seized the telescope, and located the two wavering grey marks that were rising over the distant woods to the south; just two pencilled marks on the cloud-ed sky, the kind of marks that make the hunter's heart beat faster—incoming ducks!

Soon I could make them out clearly. Two black dots winnowing ahead for

lonely spectators.

The ducks were here in immense flocks, filling every open blue spot—pairs and small flocks of black ducks (as we shall hereafter call the Dusky Mallard) dotted the scene, decoying to one another or to the many small black roots and logs, the flotsam of the Spring flood.

Once, when the fury of the North-wester tore adrift a huge icepack and sent it ever gathering speed, down the lake, we watched a flock of black ducks that sat asleep on this novel craft, and looked for all the world like a fringe. Unlike their usual caution every bird was asleep, head laid over on the back, bill tucked beneath the wing. Along swept the icefield, its speed now over a mile an hour, and rapidly increasing. Directly in its path lay Black Island, and on it tore with its load of sleeping passengers. There was a grinding crash, a roar of climbing, splintering, ringing ice, and a mighty flapping jump of the startled flock as they sprang into the air with many loud quacks.

We examined a passing icefield, pushed the canoe's bow on to it, and stole a ride. Now we saw why the ducks choose these river-facing ice edges. The rapid current had piled it with wild celery, muskrat apples (wild onions), spatterdock, and all the floating foods of the drowned lands and wild rice beds.

We noted that most of the black ducks had arrived in pairs; these had mated south of the Canadian line, while

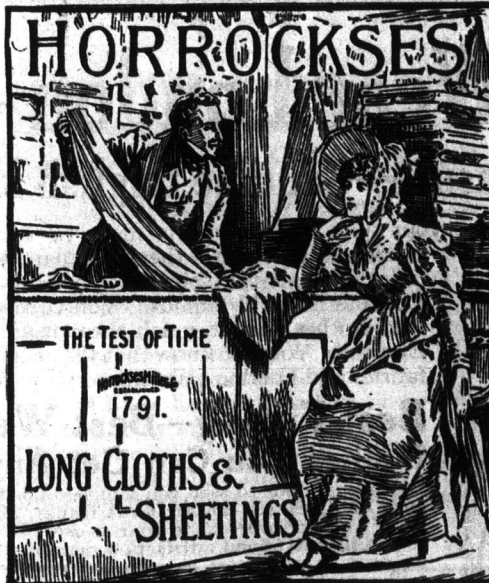
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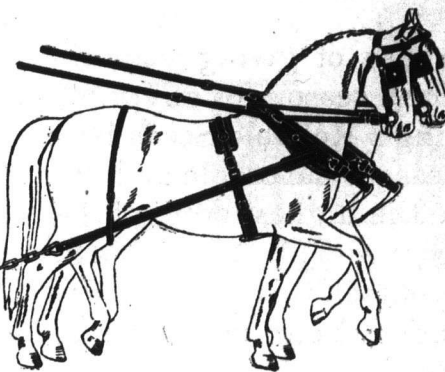


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