

Winter

By H. H. Pittman

Winter! The very word has a chilly sound and makes one think appreciatively of fur coats and of evenings by a glowing stove. In the country, it is, in a way, welcomed, for it brings a period of relaxation to the farmer—a rest after the work which has had to be rushed on account of the short season. In the towns, however, the snow and biting winds are dreaded, for, after all, comfort tends to create "softness," and a drop in temperature that leaves the farmer unmoved has a painful effect upon the townsman.

On the great plains, far away from the cities, the changes of the seasons stir a contemplative mind unaccountably. They are so great, so immune, that man's

able because they are smaller and live in holes, although they seem to lead rather a wandering life during the cold months. This month the last of the migrants—the ever busy wood-pecker—flies from bluff to bluff on his way to a more congenial climate.

The journey of the wood-pecker is typical of nearly all migration. The immense journeys of the birds are not direct flights from cold to warmth, as the older observers believed, but a series of gradual flights from one feeding ground to another, south in the fall and north in the spring, along regular routes that have possibly been followed ever since the world has been in its present condition. Our fore-fathers marvelled at the long distances covered, but in reality this is simple, although we have yet to explain the underlying guiding instinct and many other problems.

December is really cold, but it is far from being a "dead" month. I have seen, both in Manitoba and Saskatchewan, one of the smallest mammals known, the pigmy shrew, running on the snow-crust in December, when the thermometer was many degrees below zero, and my cheeks and nose were frozen, and my hands numbed and useless. Other small creatures are about also, and the tracks of voles and field mice are plentiful—a fact of which the great snowy owls seem to be aware.

The shrews, voles and mice, the prairie hares or jack-rabbits, the bush-rabbits, the weasels and the wolves are the principal animals to be seen this month, but there is other life about of an unexpected kind, for sometimes badger tracks can be seen in the snow—proof positive that our knowledge of hibernation is limited.

With the coming of January one feels that the back of the winter is broken, although the weather is generally colder. The wolves draw nearer the houses and can be heard howling in every direction, particularly if any dead horses or cattle have been drawn out to the sloughs. The horned larks and snow-birds are bolder and feed around the farm buildings, crouching low to protect their legs and feet with their body feathers. The sharp-tailed grouse leave the stubble and straw piles and also condescend to visit the farm-yards, quarrelling and running about with erected crests in a peculiarly restless manner. There is something very likable about these birds. They are so independent, scornful, one feels, to descend to subterfuge by changing their plumage in order to harmonize with the surroundings. They make no attempt to conceal themselves, often settling right upon the roofs of the houses.

In February the cold is still generally severe. An interesting feature this month is the action of the wind upon the snow. In cold weather the snow falls in single crystals, and when, towards the end of the winter, a slight crust has been formed by the increasing warmth of the sun's rays, the wind carves out fantastic and beautiful designs. When pressed upon, too, snow will "pack," and the tracks of the sleighs, human footprints and the trails of animals stand out in relief.

On fine nights the wonderful Northern lights appear. Sometimes merely a vague indefinite streak, and at others a gently-quivering lemon-yellow light resembling the lower edge of a constantly moving



Baird's prairie deer-mice

mightiest efforts seem paltry in comparison. Humboldt, I believe, once wrote to the effect that the marvels of Nature had a tendency to sadden, but surely only a morbid disposition would be affected in this way. For most of us, perhaps, "awed" would be a better way to express our feelings, for who has not experienced a feeling of awe or reverence for the master hand behind some wonderful creation—whether of man or Nature?

The countryman is generally drawn to Nature, although often unconsciously, and studies the movement of the wild life—the animals, the birds, the plants—with the interest the city person bestows upon his daily paper, and who shall say the result is not as beneficial—mentally?

November is the first winter month. The ground becomes too stiff to plow and the air is pleasantly crisp. Snow is general, and the merry ringing of the sleigh-bells relieves the silence of the plains. Frequently the first snows are melted and disappear during a mild spell, making the animals that have changed their coats conspicuous. During a drive after one of these warm spells, scores of jack-rabbits can be seen, and bush-rabbits found in every patch of scrub. The weasels, which are the first animals to turn white, are not so notice-

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Snowy owl

curtain of flame. Occasionally there is a single line of flame with the oscillating curtain above it. The folds in the curtain—ever changing—are marvellous to watch, yet impossible to do justice to with either pen or brush.

Towards the end of the month mild sunny days occur, and the cheery song of the little horned-larks (delivered from the ground) is heard, particularly welcome after the silence which for so long has enveloped the snow-covered

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