

The Highways

of the Air



THE WILD GEESE SOUTHWARD FLYING.

By Hubert M. Skinner.

O living cloud that rushest by,
Thou threadst along the arch of blue
Thy viewless path across the sky.

Unerring is thy course, and true.
As if 'twere marked and plain to view,
O living cloud that rushest by,

If it were not for the migrations of our furred or feathered game, we should not have such sport to-day. The great per cent. of our wild fowl and many other birds, for instance, would be massed in certain definite and well known regions where their slaughter would be only a matter of detail. It is very well for the gentlemen who believe that nature is going to take care of things somehow, that nature does take care of them in her own way, and so prevents the intentions of the men who would kill the last game bird for fifty cents, or the last game animal for the sake of half an hour's sport.

In a loose way it is often supposed that only our wild fowl migrate. As a matter of fact, however, almost all of the birds of the north are migrants, as well as many of the south. Quail migrate irregularly, and grouse migrate mysteriously; but the two seasons of heat and cold in our upper latitudes cause a general shifting of our birds twice a year.

Robins, blackbirds, bluebirds, jays, thrushes — practically all the song birds as well as the more sought for occupants of our woods and marshes — move north in the spring and south in the fall.

Generally speaking, we suppose that the seasons of warmth and cold make the only reasons for these migrations, but, as a matter of fact, a great many species could spend the entire year in the northern latitudes if they cared to do so. In parts of the north some of these do winter, while in others they migrate. Of course, if food fails the migration occurs at any time of the year. The wild duck does not find its food easily when the lakes and marshes are frozen, although the hardy mallard will hang about the last open water sometimes until midwinter. These ducks and others frequently pass the

Thou leav'st the swan and caribou,
And the wild rice and "drupe des Sioux."
Thy viewless path across the sky

Leads to the palm and cockatoo,
And all their gaudy, noisy crew,
O living cloud that rushest by,

With thy free life our souls imbue!
Thou canst not hear, yet would I sue.
Thy viewless path across the sky

Mark with a passing plume or two!
Drop me a feather 'midst the dew!
O living cloud that rushest by

whole winter as far north as South Dakota, only going below those latitudes under stress of heavy weather. Many others of the same species, none the less, go as far south as the Gulf, and winter in Mexico, Central America or even South America. In these latter countries they are less persecuted in the winter than in the United States, where, in-

So small a loss thou wilt not rue;
'Twill be a token, entre nous,
Thy viewless path across the sky

Thou wilt reverse, as travellers do,
Great Bear, Manitoba, and Sault,
O living cloud that rushest by,

Will call to thee, "Bienvenue!"
Then be thy missing numbers few!
Thy viewless path across the sky

Alive as now; and sounding through
The calm, still air, thy "yang" renew!
O living cloud that rushest by,

once grew there. We cannot remember the time when the horse had several toes instead of one for each leg. Neither, for that matter, can we remember the time when the Gulf of Mexico stretched north practically to the foot of Hudson Bay. Yet such was once the case. When the division, which was made by a mid-continental upheaval, came there were some species which had their origin in the north and others which had their origin in the south. Their original short

Like quondam winged shafts that flew
From bows of gods, return, and strew
Thy viewless path across the sky

With harrow shapes prolonged — and
who
Shall fail to greet their dusky hue,
O living cloud that rushest by,

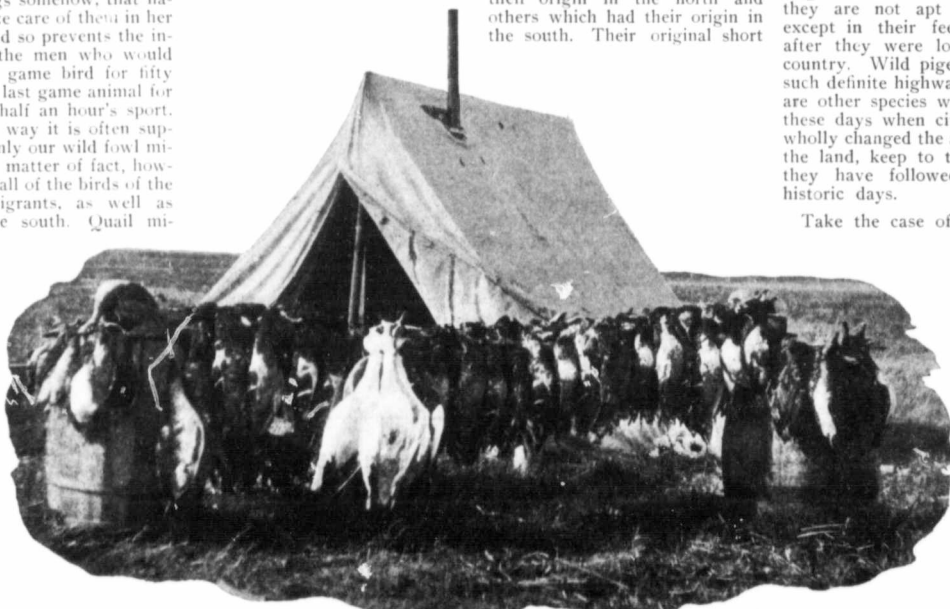
With thanks to God that Spring is due?
Like to the dreams my childhood knew
Thy viewless path across the sky,
O living cloud that rushest by!

birds pass almost any part of the country twice a year.

The singular thing about these migrations is that they apparently cling to certain lines, as though the birds had certain highways of their own up in the air. Any plover shooter will tell you that so long as there were any plover they always used to appear in the spring time along certain high ridges, on either side of which they are not apt to be seen, except in their feeding flights, after they were located in the country. Wild pigeons also had such definite highways, and there are other species which, even in these days when civilization has wholly changed the appearance of the land, keep to the lines that they have followed from prehistoric days.

Take the case of the golden plover which once moved in millions across the continent. It breeds in Labrador and the sub-Arctic America. Curious and interesting enough is the habit of this bird, which, twice a year, travels more than a third the circumference of the globe, passing

country where it might well better itself, but impelled northward and southward by some instinct stronger than breeding and feeding, stronger, indeed, than dislike for warmth and cold. The southern line of flight of a good part of the golden plover, or "frost bird," as it is known in the east, runs east of the Atlantic coast. Literally it passed over the high places of the keys, sunken or showing, which lie east of the lower coast. Observers show us that there used to be land here; and they further point out that had it not been for this north and south Atlantic flight of migratory birds, Columbus might never have discovered America or any of the islands east of it. Passing westward by water he in-



The Slaughter House of the Prairies. The Toll of the "Highway of The Air"

deed, they have no rest at all in any season of the year.

How Birds Helped Columbus.

The food question or the climate question alone does not determine migration. These migrations are customs, but back of these customs are what you may call a habit, and that habit dates far back beyond the memory of man. We make toothpicks of the splint bone on a deer's foreleg, but few of us reflect that a foot

food migrations became strengthened and lengthened into the great transcontinental flights which represent, according to some scientists, an ancient instinct for going back home. This habit has been kept up long after the original necessity for it has passed away, but in view of modern conditions it is a good thing that it has remained. Also, the sportsman can thank his stars for the same reason, counting as he does upon seeing the

