

**The American Woodcock.**

By R. R. McLEOD.

This is a bird worth considering. His body is not only capable of furnishing delicious food for our stomachs, but interesting and instructive nourishment for our brains. A fairly common bird belonging to the great Snipe community, and distributed over a wide range of North America, including the Maritime Provinces of Canada. Nearly as large as a pigeon, plump and stout of build, legs short, tail hidden by upper and lower coverts, bill about three inches in length, wings short and strong. Colors for all the upper parts a blending of black, brown, grey and russet; under parts pale warm brown. A dark stripe from eye to bill. Here we have a specialist among birds, not a generalized creature like a crow, or jay. He walks in a deliberate awkward fashion, as if he was fearful of falling over his bill that is only adapted for one kind of service, and that is to prod and probe in soft, boggy, or muddy ground to its full length, and therein find grubs, and beetles, and lower life of one sort and another. He goes to work with this implement in full confidence that something may be had for food by this, a most random search out of sight and smell. It seems like shooting up chimney expecting to get a wild goose that way any day. The bill is covered all over with a skin-like envelope that terminates at the tip in a thickened knob of great sensitiveness.

We know that all birds are descendants of reptiles. We have the fossil evidence for this belief; the family tree has its roots far back in the old reptilian world. Millions of years ago there were no woodcock, although there were feathered lizards, and lizard-like birds. Out of that old stock diverged the various families and species now to be seen in the world. The marks of the sharp struggle for existence is on every one of them. Our woodcock affords an exceptional example of this kind. In the very long ago his bill was much shorter, his tail was longer, his eyes were not so large and singularly placed, his brain was not half upset, his ears were not below his eyes, his color was of one kind, black, or brown, or drab. Hunger is the prime factor that keeps everything moving that has life in it. This ancestral woodcock by degrees took to the soft muddy places where insects and worms and larval life of one kind and another could be found. In the long run they became investigators not only of the surface, but also explored the depths for hidden

creatures. In that mode of life the best food fell to the birds with the longest and most sensitive bills, and there is always some variation from which nature may make a selection. If there had been no savage hawks and prowling foxes and wild-cats and weasels, the old primitive color would have remained. A woodcock with his bill up to his eyes in mud had no great opportunity to keep a sharp lookout for enemies. He worked almost always somewhat under cover of bushes and grass and rushes that measurably hid him, but any one of them that most resembled the ground and dead leaves of his haunts was surest to escape. The offspring of such individuals would inherit the peculiarities of the parents to a large degree, and the result in the long course of time is a bird that so closely mimics the surroundings that it is a difficult matter to detect him, although we are looking at the very spot where he is not ten feet distant. The eyes are large and prominent and set almost on the top head, insomuch that the ears are below and further forward than the eyes, contrary to the rule in birds. This is a commanding position for them, admirably adapted to his manner of life that demands most of his attention to investigate black mud and muck with his bill pushed up to the feathers as he works for his daily bread. The only objection to the size and position is the fact that they are a trifle too noticeable to vigilant enemies. We may read in Hudibras that

"Fools are known by looking wise  
As men find woodcock by their eyes."

To have the eyes of less dimensions and not so prominent would doubtless result in greater fatalities than the present arrangement that has been the outcome of nice balancing of probabilities in the interest of life itself.

A strongly marked habit of the woodcock is to remain stock still in his haunt till almost trodden upon by man or beast. This peculiarity has arisen from the close mimicry of his plumage to his surroundings on the ground where there are always more or less dead leaves and twigs and grasses. The more difficult it became to see him the greater his security and the less demand for him to take to his wings. In fact the individuals that have held their ground to the last minute were but rarely seized by enemies which failed to notice them, and went on with their feeding with but slight interruption and prospered and multiplied over the nervous fearful members of the species that were too apprehensive to be healthy and strong.