

Selections from A-BIRDING ON A BRONCO.

By Florence A. Merriam, 1896

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"Climb the mountain back of the house and you can see the Pacific," the ranchman told me with a gleam in his eye; and later, when I had done that, from the top of a peak at the foot of the valley he pointed out the distant blue mountains of Mexico. Then he gave me his daughter's saddle horse to use as long as I was his guest, that I might explore the valley and study its birds to the best advantage. Before coming to California, I had known only the birds of New York and Massachusetts, and so was filled with eager enthusiasm at thought of spending the migration and nesting season in a new bird world.

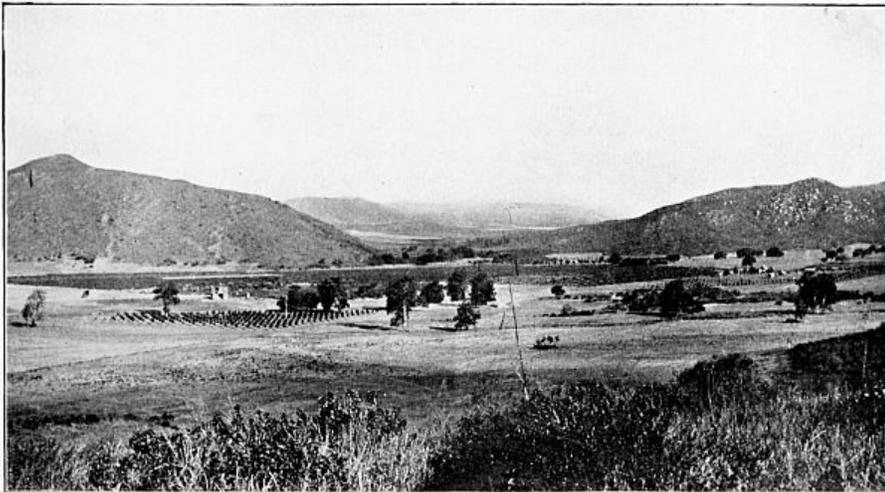
I had no gun, but was armed with opera-glass and note-book, and had Ridgway's Manual to turn to in all my perplexities. Every morning, right after breakfast, my horse was brought to the door and I set out to make the rounds of the valley. I rode till dinner time, getting acquainted with the migrants as they came from the south, and calling at the more distant nests on the way. After dinner I would take my camp-stool and stroll, through the oaks at the head of the valley, for a quiet study of the nearer nests. Then once more my horse would be brought up for me to take a run before sunset; and at night I would identify my new birds and write up the notes of the day. What more could observer crave? The world was mine. I never spent a happier spring. The freedom and novelty of ranch life and the exhilaration of days spent in the saddle gave added zest to the delights of a new fauna. In my small valley circuit of a mile and a half, I made the

acquaintance of about seventy-five birds, and without resort to the gun was able to name fifty-six of them.

My saddle horse, a white bronco who went by the musical name of Canello, had been broken by a Mexican whose cruelty had tamed the wild blood in his veins and left him with a fear of all swarthy skins. Now he could be ridden bareback by the little girls, with only a rope noose around his nose, and was warranted to stand still before a flock of birds so long as there was grass to eat. He was to be relied on as a horse of ripe, experience and mature judgment in matters of local danger. No power of bit or spur could induce him to set foot upon a piece of 'boggy land,' and to give me confidence one of the ranchman's sons said, "Wherever I've killed a rattlesnake from him he'll shy for years;" and went on to cite localities where a sudden, violent lurch had nearly sent him over Canello's head! What greater recommendation could I wish?...

Canello and I soon became the best of friends. I found in him a valuable second—for, as I had anticipated, the birds were used to grazing horses, and were much less suspicious of an equestrian than a foot passenger—and he found in me a movable stake, constantly leading him to new grazing ground; for when there was a nest to watch I simply hung the bridle over the pommel and let him eat, so getting free hands for opera-glass and note-book. To be sure, there were slight causes of difference between us. He liked to watch birds in the high alfalfa under the sycamores, but when it came to standing still where the hot sun beat down through the brush and there was nothing to eat, his interest in ornithology flagged perceptibly. Then he sometimes carried the rôle of grazing horse too far, marching off to a fresh clump of grass out of sight of my nest at the most interesting

moment; or when I was intently gazing through my glass at a rare bird, he would sometimes give a sudden kick at a horsefly, bobbing the glass out of range just as I was making out the character of the wing-bars.



OUR VALLEY

From the ranch-house, encircled by live-oaks, the valley widened out, and was covered with orchards and vineyards, inclosed by the low brush-grown ridges of the Coast Mountains. It was a veritable paradise for the indolent field student. With so much insect-producing verdure, birds were everywhere at all times. There were no long hours to sit waiting on a camp-stool, and only here and there a treetop to 'sky' the wandering birds. The only difficulty was to choose your intimates.

Canello and I had our regular beat, down past the blooming quince and apricot orchard, along the brush-covered side of the valley where the migrants flocked, around the circle through a great vineyard in the

middle of the valley, past a pond where the feathered settlers gathered to bathe, and so back home to the oaks again.

I liked to start out in the freshness of the morning, when the fog was breaking up into buff clouds over the mountains and drawing off in veils over the peaks. The brush we passed through was full of glistening spiders' webs, and in the open the grass was overlaid with disks of cobweb, flashing rainbow colors in the sun.

As we loped gayly along down the curving road, a startled quail would call out, "Who-are-you'-ah? who-are-you'-ah?" and another would cry "quit" in sharp warning tones; while a pair would scud across the road like little hens, ahead of the horse; or perhaps a covey would start up and whirr over the hillside. The sound of Canello's flying hoofs would often rouse a long-eared jack-rabbit, who with long leaps would go bounding over the flowers, to disappear in the brush.

The narrow road wound through the dense bushy undergrowth known as 'chaparral,' and as Canello galloped round the sharp curves I had to bend low under the sweeping branches, keeping alert for birds and animals, as well as Mexicans and Indians that we might meet.

This corner of the valley was the mouth of Twin Oaks Canyon, and was a forest of brush, alive with birds, and visited only by the children whose small schoolhouse stood beside the giant twin oak from which the valley post-office was named. Flocks of migrating warblers were always to be found here; flycatchers shot out at passing insects; chewinks scratched among the dead leaves and flew up to sing on the branches; insistent vireos cried *tu-whip' tu-whip' tu-whip' tu-wee'-ah*, coming out in sight for a moment only to go hunting back into the impenetrable chaparral; lazuli buntings sang their musical round; blue

jays—blue squawkers, as they are here called—went screaming harshly through the thicket; and the clear ringing voice of the wren-tit ran down the scale, now in the brush, now echoing from the boulder-strewn hills above. But the king of the chaparral was the great brown thrasher. His loud rollicking song and careless independent ways, so suggestive of his cousin, the mockingbird, made him always a marked figure.

There was one dense corner of the thicket where a thrasher lived, and I used to urge Canello through the tangle almost every morning for the pleasure of sharing his good spirits. He was not hard to find, big brown bird that he was, standing on the top of a bush as he shouted out boisterously, *kick'-it-now, kick'-it-now, shut'-up shut'-up, dor'-a-thy dor'-a-thy*; or, calling a halt in his mad rhapsody, slowly drawled out, *whoa'-now, whoa'-now*. After listening to such a tirade as this, it was pleasant to come to an opening in the brush and find a band of gentle yellow-birds leaning over the blossoms of the white forget-me-nots.

There were a great many hummingbirds in the chaparral, and at a certain point on the road I was several times attacked by one of the pugnacious little warriors. I suppose we were treading too near his nest, though I was not keen-eyed enough to find it. From high in the air, he would come with a whirr, swooping down so close over our heads that Canello started uneasily and wanted to get out of the way. Down over our heads, and then high up in the air, he would swing back and forth in an arc. One day he must have shot at us half a dozen times, and another day, over a spot in the brush near us,—probably, where the nest was,—he did the same thing a dozen times in quick succession.

In the midst of the brush corner were a number of pretty round oaks, in one of which the warblers gathered. My favorite tree was in blossom and alive with buzzing insects, which may have accounted for the presence of the warblers. While I sat in the saddle watching the dainty birds decked out in black and gold, Canello rested his nose in the cleft of the tree, quite unmindful of the busy warblers that flitted about the branches, darting up for insects or chasing down by his nose after falling millers...

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...On our morning round, Canello and I attended strictly to business,—he to grazing, I to observing; but on our afternoon rides I, at least, felt that we might pay a little more heed to the beauties of the valley and the joys of horsebacking. Sometimes we would be overtaken by the night fog. One moment the mustard would be all aglow with sunshine; at the next, a sullen bank of gray fog would have risen over the mountain, obscuring the sun which had warmed us and lighted the mustard; and in a few moments it would be so cold and damp that I would urge Canello into a lope to warm our blood as we hurried home.

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