A Field After Feathered Songsters

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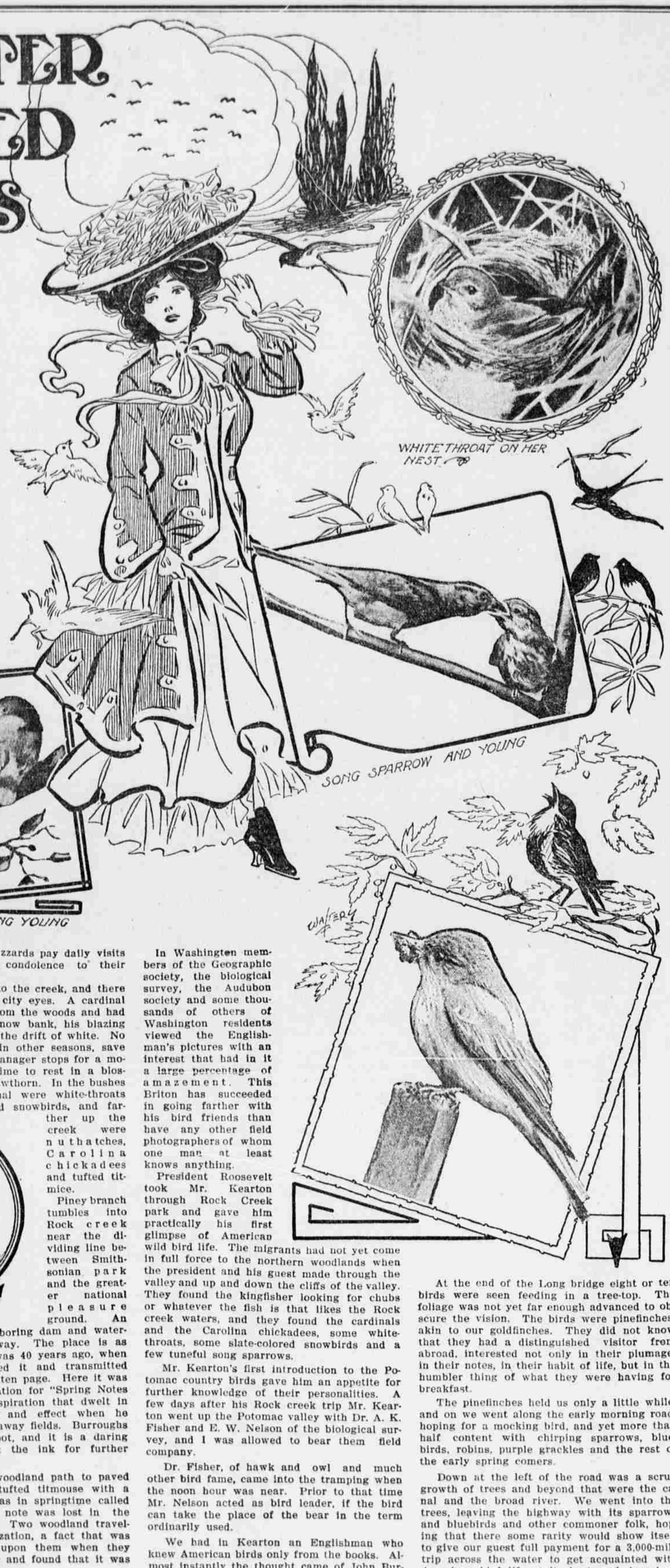

WHITE-THROAT ON HER NEST

SONG SPARROW AND YOUNG

CHICKADEE FEEDING YOUNG

IT WAS Dr. Theodore S. Palmer, of the government biological survey, the man who stands between the birds of the country and extermination, who invited a sojourning stranger in Washington to leave the city behind him far a few hours to catch a glimpse of the wild, feathered friends which brave the Washington winter. The thought of an intended interview in the north wing of the capitol kept the invited one from an instant acceptance, but the delay ended when the doctor said: "Come! Is not one songbird worth many senators?"

The displeasure of the Sons and Daughters of the Revolution must be braved for the next few lines. The host of this day's tramp asked his guest if he preferred to go to the south, there to follow a favorite Virginia hunting trail of George Washington, or go to the north, to follow the bird-searching tracks of Elliot Coues and John Burroughs. The answer was quick enough, "Let's strike the trail of Coues and Burroughs," for while the sojourner knew that the father of his country was first in nearly everything, he never heard that he was first in ornithology.

The tramp lay through the valley of Rock creek. The stream flows through a cleft in the wooded hills and forms one of the chief natural attractions of the zoological park and of the national park which lies beyond. Standing at the edge of a street in a thickly settled part of the city, one looks down deep in a rocky chasm through which tumbles the stream, washing in its course the roots of noble trees. It is as wild as a bit of the Adirondacks' heart and has all the beauty which attaches to the wilderness.

The two hunters of birds—hunters, though neither carried a weapon more deadly than a field glass—went down the winding, snow-covered path close to the edge of the bank of the singing stream. Rock creek sings aloud, but it can't drown the noise of the cawing crows. Corvus claims the capital and the district for his own. Until a few years ago there was a crow roost numbering fully 15,000 birds at Arlington, just over the river. The crows are roosting elsewhere now, but there are just as many of them as ever in the woods and fields along the Potomac. Corvus will not leave the capital. He feels that it is essentially his city, for is not his surname Americanus? The air was full of crows, and higher up, ever soaring, were the great buzzards—the birds to which above all others distance lends enchantment.

A GRAVE CONSULTATION

SNOWBIRD

The path leads upward from the creek into a bit of wild, rough woodland tangled with smilax, laurel and honeysuckle, all giving a glad greenness to the waste of winter. It was here, where the rocks, the roots and the entangling underbrush make heavy the way, that General Funston took a walk that has as yet been unsung. General Funston came to Washington for a day. He called on President Roosevelt. The president said, "General, will you take a walk with me?" The general borrowed the president's favorite word and said, "Delighted." A carriage drove up to the White House door.

"I thought we were to take a walk, Mr. President," said General Funston.

"The walk will come later, general," answered Mr. Roosevelt.

They drove to the spot on Rock creek where begins the "rough path of riotous nature." They left the carriage and began to walk. The president set the pace. He went over rocks and windfalls, through thicket and through brush, at the gait he took when he led the secret service followers a race through the broad streets of Washington, and the pace was rapid and rough for miles.

If General Funston had been a sailor instead of a soldier, he would have described his condition on coming to Washington for that visit as "flying light." He had brought only one pair of trousers with him. After the walk with the president was ended the carriage was again pressed into service and General Funston was dropped near his hotel.

The next day he was asked if he had enjoyed his walk with the president.

"Yes, I enjoyed it," he said, "after a fashion; but the next time I go walking with Theodore Roosevelt I'll ride all the way. I had to go into my hotel by the back door and get to my room by means of a freight elevator. I sent a bell boy out to buy me another pair of trousers and there wasn't enough left of the pair I had on to give the ready-made clothing man the size."

The zoological garden of the Smithsonian institution is situated in Rock Creek park. There is nearly everything there that a "zoo" should contain and little need is there of description. One curious bird event, however, marked the visit of the winter morning to the headquarters of the animals. In an outdoor cage were six turkey buzzards, asleep and as contented, apparently, as though they were fed upon their favorite "long-since-dead" dog. Instead of fresh meat. Circling just above the buzzards' cage and eyeing them with apparent pity were several of their free brethren. The keepers at the park say that the wild buzzards pay daily visits of curiosity and condolence to their caged kinsmen.

Down again to the creek, and there was a sight for city eyes. A cardinal had come out from the woods and had alighted on a snow bank, his blazing body backed by the drift of white. No sight like that in other seasons, save when a scarlet tanager stops for a moment in springtime to rest in a blossom-burdened hawthorn. In the bushes near the cardinal were white-throats and slate-colored snowbirds, and farther up the creek were nuthatches, Carolina chickadees and tufted titmice.

Piney branch tumbles into Rock creek near the dividing line between Smithsonian park and the greater national pleasure ground. An old mill with its neighboring dam and waterfall stands not far away. The place is as beautiful to-day as it was 40 years ago, when John Burroughs haunted it and transmitted its beauties to the written page. Here it was that he had his inspiration for "Spring Notes at the Capital," an inspiration that dwelt in him and showed force and effect when he wrote of other and faraway fields. Burroughs has written of this spot, and it is a daring pen which would seek the ink for further words.

The change from woodland path to paved street is abrupt. A tufted titmouse with a voice as full-throated as in springtime called from an oak, but the note was lost in the rattle of a street car. Two woodland travelers had reached civilization, a fact that was still more impressed upon them when they boarded the street car and found that it was unheated.

Richard Kearton, an English ornithologist and photographer, although lamed badly as a result of an accident when cliff climbing, is engaged to-day in the work of making pictures of birds that make their nests in places inaccessible to any save the most daring men. Mr. Kearton came to Washington before President Roosevelt went out of office and he was entertained at the White House and was led through the woods, the ravines and fields near the capital city by the president of the United States in order that he might get knowledge of American bird life. Since his return to England the English people have paid marked attention to their fellow countryman. They had recognized him as a scientist worthy of consideration prior to the time of his visit to this country, but the attention that the strenuous president of the United States paid to the English bird lover brought to him additional attention and the marked consideration of some people who had been given to ignoring him on the ground that he was a photographer rather than scientist. Mr. Kearton is both a photographer and a scientist and his contribution of his knowledge of English bird life is of immense value to bird students.

In Washington members of the Geographic society, the biological survey, the Audubon society and some thousands of others of Washington residents viewed the Englishman's pictures with an interest that had in it a large percentage of amazement. This Briton has succeeded in going farther with his bird friends than have any other field photographers of whom one man at least knows anything.

President Roosevelt took Mr. Kearton through Rock Creek park and gave him practically his first glimpse of American wild bird life. The migrants had not yet come in full force to the northern woodlands when the president and his guest made through the valley and up and down the cliffs of the valley. They found the kingfisher looking for chubs or whatever the fish is that likes the Rock creek waters, and they found the cardinals and the Carolina chickadees, some white-throats, some slate-colored snowbirds and a few tuneful song sparrows.

Mr. Kearton's first introduction to the Potomac country birds gave him an appetite for further knowledge of their personalities. A few days after his Rock creek trip Mr. Kearton went up the Potomac valley with Dr. A. K. Fisher and E. W. Nelson of the biological survey, and I was allowed to bear them field company.

Dr. Fisher, of hawk and owl and much other bird fame, came into the tramping when the noon hour was near. Prior to that time Mr. Nelson acted as bird leader, if the bird can take the place of the bear in the term ordinarily used.

We had in Kearton an Englishman who knew American birds only from the books. Almost instantly the thought came of John Burroughs tramping all over southern England trying to find a nightingale, and to find him when he was in a tuneful mood. Richard Kearton was willing to tramp all over the Columbia district to see a mocking bird. He wanted also to hear him sing, but that at best was a matter of chance, for the singing season was yet young.

The mocker, to the European, unquestionably is our best-known bird. He fills in the interest place on the other side that is filled in on this side by the nightingale, or perhaps equally with the nightingale, the skylark, "whose tryst is in the clouds."

We crossed Cabin John bridge over the beautiful gorge, wavy with the greening treetops of early spring. Out of the depth of the valley came the song sparrow's music, almost if not quite the purest bird music that the American fields can call their own.

The Englishman went into a melting mood at the song sparrow's note. He kept it with him in cadence all day long, whistling it occasionally to make sure he was retaining it, and stopping every time that one of the birds sang from the roadside, to listen and to make sure that memory was holding the melody intact.

At the end of the Long bridge eight or ten birds were seen feeding in a tree-top. The foliage was not yet far enough advanced to obscure the vision. The birds were pinefinches, akin to our goldfinches. They did not know that they had a distinguished visitor from abroad, interested not only in their plumage, in their notes, in their habit of life, but in the humbler thing of what they were having for breakfast.

The pinefinches held us only a little while, and on we went along the early morning road, hoping for a mocking bird, and yet more than half content with chirping sparrows, bluebirds, robins, purple grackles and the rest of the early spring comers.

Down at the left of the road was a scrub growth of trees and beyond that were the canal and the broad river. We went into the trees, leaving the highway with its sparrows and bluebirds and other commoner folk, hoping that there some rarity would show itself to give our guest full payment for a 3,000-mile trip across the water to get acquainted with American bird life at its best, and American bird life is always at its best, and this we loyally told the British subject.

In the thicket we did not find the mocking bird, but we found something that in beauty at least more than compensated for the absence of the sober-clad southern songster. A male cardinal, fire red, crested and proud and tuneful, was there.

We caught a glimpse of the disappearing tail feathers of a bird that flashed into an evergreen tree, heavy-boughed and thick-leaved. I went over to the tree and knocked gently on the trunk. The bird came out and perched on a dead branch not 10 feet above our heads. It was a mocking bird. The fact was whispered to Mr. Kearton—who had found what he wanted.

The mocker paid absolutely no attention to us, save to turn his head once and to look down, probably curiously wondering what three hulking fellows found in him to arouse in them such an abundance of impertinent curiosity. He simply would not sing, but we stayed there, hoping against hope, until finally tiring of our company long before we tired of his, he left his perch and made for the Virginia shore.

AT FIRST SIGHT.

He—Rosalie, I can't tell you how I worship your almond eyes, your velvet cheeks, like peaches, and your cherry lips!

Rosalie—I suppose you are the new gardener.

Cupid's Cynicism.

"Is it so, that you used to call regularly on that girl?"

"Yes; she always sang a song to me that I loved."

"Why didn't you marry her?"

"I found I could buy the song for 50 cents."—The Circle.

Would Depend.

She—You've seen Charley's wife. Would you call her pretty?

He—I might if I were talking to Charley.

Once in a while you encounter one of those cheerful individuals who never borrow trouble, in spite of the fact that they borrow everything else.

One man's hobby may be another man's nightmare.