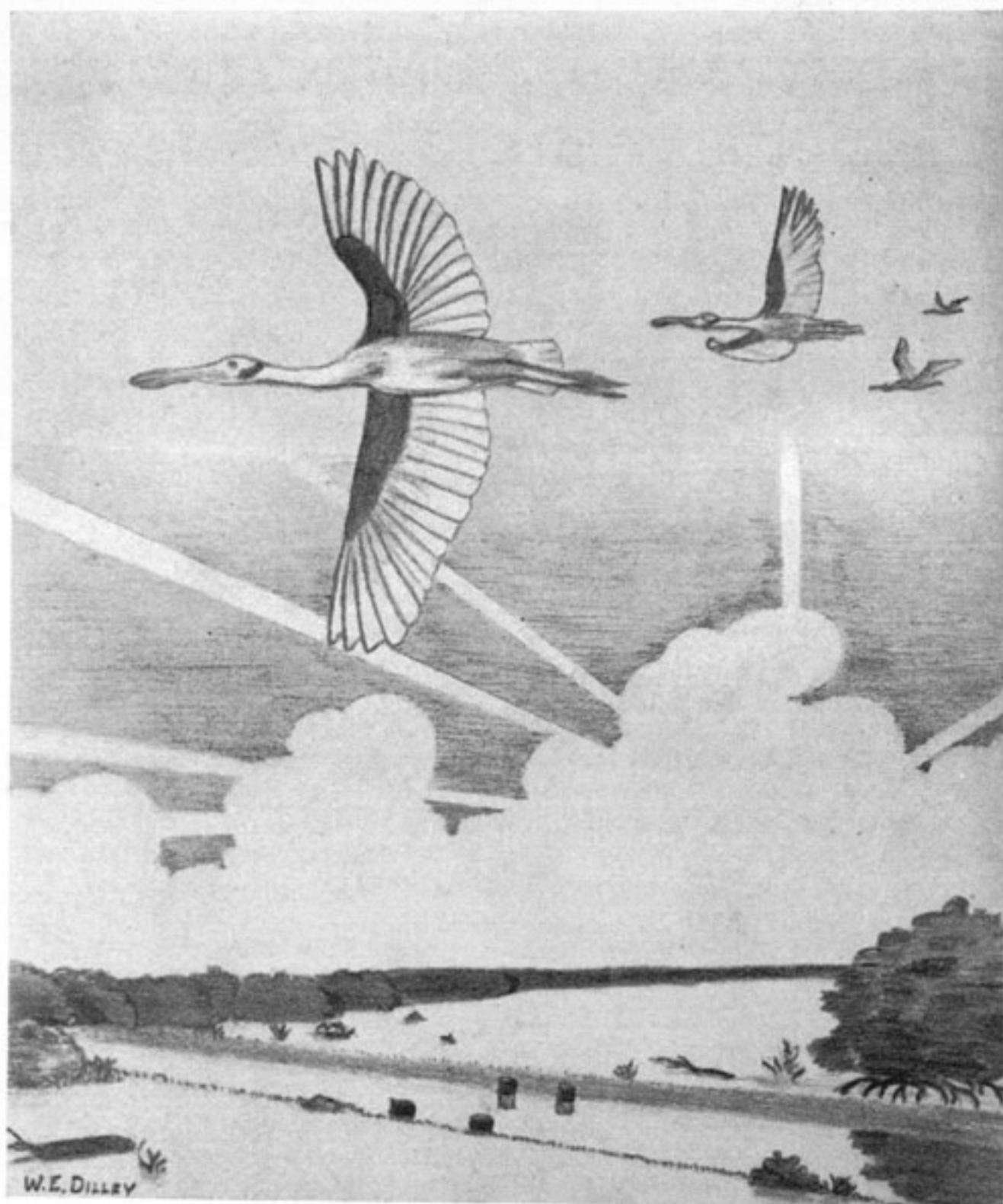




"the last rays of the setting sun falling on their bodies"

A Memorable Trip to Cape Sable

by LOUIS A. STIMSON

TO AN AMATEUR ORNITHOLOGIST, like myself, the Cape Sable area has always held out a very definite lure. There was always the chance that a trip there would produce a new bird for my "life" list, or for that of my companion for the day, and in either event the pleasure was almost the same. One memorable trip was made with the late Inge Tragardh on Saturday and Sunday, the 18th and 19th of April, 1935.

The hope of finding Arthur H. Howell's Cape Sable seaside sparrow (*Ammospiza mirabilis*) was the mainspring of that particular trip. The fact that we did not find it seemed an increasing disappointment in view of the disastrous hurricane which later that year apparently destroyed all the sparrows of that area. At the time no one knew that the species did occur in the marshes lying to landward of the mangrove fringe along the southwest coast from the ridge and slough area to some miles west of Ochopee, although Howell mentioned Nicholson's find of a singing male somewhere near Pinecrest. The disappointment of our day, however, was more than offset by the end result of the trip.

Considering Howell's statement that the bird was known only from the coastal prairie near Cape Sable, Inge and I mistakenly assumed that we must go to the actual Cape and hunt for a prairie or marsh in back of the Cape. We knew that to reach the Cape we must have a boat. Renting a boat and trailer from a boat dock in Coconut Grove, we left my home at noon on Saturday with the trailer attached to my old Dodge, itself a veteran of many trips to the Flamingo area.

Those who read this in 1953, and who have motored down into the Everglades National Park over the well-maintained rock road now reaching to Flamingo, will have little conception of what such a trip in 1935 was like. True enough, the road from Paradise Key to the hump-backed bridge at the Snake Bight Canal did have a rock base. It also had many a

hole and rough spot to slow down any car negotiating that 25 miles. From Snake Bight Canal to Flamingo the road was only a track of ruts over that infamous Cape Sable marl, and passable only in dry weather. From Flamingo on west the road across the prairies was a choice of tracks through batis, salicornia, and the salt marsh grasses. Prior to that 1935 Labor Day hurricane, which changed many conditions, the trip across the prairie was usually safer than it is today. The bridges, however, at Slagle's Ditch and at Durdin's Ditch (now sometimes called House's Ditch) were quite primitive. At Slagle's Ditch the bridge consisted of four sabal palm trunks, two on each side forming a concave runway for the car's wheels. At Durdin's Ditch the bridge was a trifle more elaborate, being made of two 12x12 inch (or smaller) timbers, at car wheel distance apart with open water showing between. On an earlier trip at the sight of the first bridge my wife cried out in alarm, "Why, you are not going to try to go across that, are you?" But even she finally became used to them. Our trailer wheels tracked the car wheels, and we had no trouble.

Reaching the East Cape Canal we put the boat in the water, loaded in our duffle, and rowed to East Cape. When discussing the trip, Inge had said he thought we could sleep on the open beach, as he had done in other places. I said not down there, and had borrowed a pup-tent from my son's Boy Scout troop. Now while I put up the tent, Inge went over to the tree line to secure firewood. He came back saying the mosquitoes were terrific, and they followed him back. After cooking our supper, we were forced to eat it sitting in the smoke of a grass smothered fire. The mosquitoes even penetrated through the smoke and were most annoying. After supper Inge suggested going out in the boat to get away from them, but they followed us right out. We returned and crawled into the tent. It had a mosquito bar on the inside and the space between the netting and the canvas soon was filled with buzzing mosquitoes. The tent was six feet long. Inge was over six feet tall, and I lacked only about an inch. I knew that sometime in the night one of us would push a foot through or under the netting and let in that hungry horde. The buzzing and the fear kept me awake until it actually happened. Then I pulled my blanket over my head and slept peacefully the rest of the night. Inge spent the remainder of the night slapping the pests.



"He had lost his life near here in the faithful attempt to execute his duty and preserve the stately plume bird . . ."

In the morning, which dawned beautifully clear, we found that we had camped close to what appeared to be a vine covered mound. It was not until a subsequent trip the next year, after the hurricane had swept the Cape clear that we found our mound was actually the monument erected by the Florida Audubon Society in memory to the National Audubon Society warden Guy Bradley. He had lost his life near here in the faithful attempt to execute his duty and preserve the stately plumæ bird, the American egret. That story is well known to all followers of the Audubon movement.

At the moment a vine covered mound held little interest. We were looking for the seaside sparrow. We tramped through the hardwood hammock, but found no prairie, only small areas of salt marsh with a mangrove fringe beyond. We kept on, still hoping, almost to Middle Cape which at



"We returned down along the water's edge, fully enjoying the beauties of that curving waterline and the beautiful shell beach."

that time boasted a quite pretentious group of houses, a main house with several out buildings. We returned down along the water's edge fully enjoying the beauties of that curving water line and the beautiful shell beach. The previous afternoon without knowing it, we had driven past the prairie habitat of the Cape Sable seaside sparrow, and had spent a morning of hard work on the Cape all in vain. We decided to give up for the day our quest for the sparrow and look for something else, at the time thought to be even more rare than the sparrow.

The previous afternoon we had stopped at Flamingo for a few minutes and had talked to Loren Roberts. He told us that only recently some roseate spoonbills, which he called "Pinks," had been seen at 'Gator Lake. So up to 'Gator Lake we decided to go. Returning to our car we packed away most of the camping duffle to lighten the boat. Then we continued up the East Cape Canal to the Homestead Canal and up that to 'Gator Lake. Along the way the mud flats on either side of the East Cape Canal were alive with shore-birds. Referring to my record book I see that I

listed 62 species of birds for the two-day trip. We probably overlooked many that we might have found with a little more searching, for the trip was built around the hopes of seeing, first, one rare bird, and second, an even rarer one. The stately great white heron had been listed on every previous trip, but we missed it on this. Many of the heron family were seen as usual. Three graceful swallow-tailed kites added some pleasure to the day, and ten noisy, but trim, black-necked stilts easily stole our attention from the more sombre plovers and sandpipers. Special notes listed as occurring commonly on the Cape (specifically East Cape): six ground doves, one barn swallow, two mockingbirds, ten western palm warblers, and cardinal. Perhaps at the time I thought it strange to find them there, as surely we saw other species also on the Cape. In fact probably all the sixty-two species were observed on Sunday, along the shore at East Cape and back to the Canal, and along the Canal on the way to and from 'Gator Lake. Alligator Lake was known to be a historical spot in Florida ornithology. It ranked with Cuthbert Lake and other great rookeries, such as East River and Shark River. Past storms had wrecked it and the birds had gone elsewhere. In 1935, on April 19th, we did not find a bird of any species there. So with disappointment in our hearts we faced the long six-mile row back down the canal against the tide. When we reached the car, we were too tired even to attempt to haul the boat up out of the water by hand. We made the trusty old Dodge do the work.

With the boat on the trailer and the trailer attached to the car, we built a small fire and cooked a frugal supper. We little anticipated that the best part of the trip was yet ahead of us. For we were destined that evening to see what neither of us had ever seen in our lives. A bird whose beauty is such that no words of mine can do it justice. A bird with a wondrous bill, and of such a delicate pink color that it has been described as being like an evanescent pearl which changes shade with each change of light incident upon it. To see the roseate spoonbill for the first time under any conditions could be a thrill to any ornithologist, but to see it under the setting of that evening made the pleasure keener still.

We were standing on the bank of the East Cape Canal eating our supper with our eyes on the setting sun. Standing there in that immense wilderness it seemed that all nature had suddenly become hushed as if in expectation

of some unusual event. Suddenly from out of the very sun itself came a flock of twenty black specs. We watched them gradually take the form of birds. "Just another flock of ibis," said Inge. But no, there was something just a little different in that manner of flight. "Look at their bills,--PINKS,!" I cried as they passed overhead. Then the last rays of the setting sun falling on their bodies exposed to view that delicate pink of softest rose hue from whence comes their name. Soon the sky from which they had come was bathed in the same gorgeous hue, as the beautiful sunset faded to darkness. Surely such an experience could never be forgotten.

In 1942 Robert P. Allen published his research report, *The Roseate Spoonbill*. Oddly enough he was in the field not far away from April 10th to 15th, 1935, and reported seeing sixty-four spoonbills in Alligator Cove, thirty miles to the eastward. Perhaps our birds were on their way to a night roost in that place. Perhaps they would have had time to reach there before darkness settled for the night. Although that report stated that spoonbills were increasing in Texas, it was a little pessimistic as to the future for the bird in Florida. The only hope seemed to lay in establishing sanctuaries with "an adequate force of wardens." That situation has now been reached in the Everglades National Park. Due to the establishment of the Park, together with people's greater respect for the authority of the federal government, the roseate spoonbill is increasing in Florida. Now it is possible for anyone, who so desires, to experience the thrill of seeing this beautiful bird for the first time, or of seeing large numbers at certain places at certain times. But surely no thrill could equal under present conditions that which came to Inge and me on the evening of April 19th, 1935.