

Florida Trails

by Winthrop Packard

Chapter 10: Down the Indian River

The bobolinks, bound for South America and perpetual summer, go by a route which most birds, strange to say, shun. They pass down through Florida and over the Caribbean Sea, touching at Cuba, Jamaica and Yucatan. Why this is not the popular route with all birds it is difficult to say. It offers the most land surface for food and the shortest sea flights on the way, being in its comfort and elegance a sort of Pullman train route which the Florida East Coast pleasure seekers imitate. Yet there seem to be only about ten of the migrating birds which follow it. The yellow-billed cuckoo is one of these, and last night I heard him spring his musical rain-call in the guava bushes while the wind in the palm trees overhead beat a zyllophonic accompaniment. It is now mid-January, and I am a little in doubt whether this cuckoo has paused on his southward way and winter is yet to come, or whether he is one of the first of the spring migrants to turn his flight northward, so gently does one summer fade into the next as one gets well down the Florida peninsula on "the bobolink route." The bank swallows are of the ten that take up this route, and the air is often full of their whirling flocks.

Here at White City we are about two-thirds the way down the Florida peninsula, about east of the northern end of Lake Okeechobee, which sits at the northern end of the Everglades. The southeast trade winds, blowing across the Gulf Stream and over the Bahamas, bringing fresh sea odors to Florida, here pass a long line of the islands which bar off the Indian River from the ocean. Then they cross the river, and top another wave of the sea of billowy sand. The Indian River is the first hollow between these long north and south extending billows. Over the ridge to westward you come to a shallow lagoon in which all kinds of marsh life



flourish, from alligators to the lovely yellow blooms of *Utricularia inflata* and the heart-shaped leaves of *Limnanthemum lacunosum*, both these last Northern friends whom it is cheery to find so far south.

Here, rather more than two hundred miles south of St. Augustine, north and south meet and merge most curiously and at this time of year one has reminders of winter or of summer according to the direction of the wind. Ten days ago this came out of the north and froze oranges on the trees well down into the middle of the State. Here the cold was not severe enough to do that, but the cocoanut palms over on the Indian River bore frosted cocoanuts one morning and all tender vegetables such as beans, eggplants and tomatoes were killed outright. The result gives the eye some key to those trees and shrubs which are truly tropical and have wandered north over their really proper boundary line, and those which hold northern pith and do not mind some cold weather. The oranges have not minded the temperature of twenty-six degrees which came to them. The yellow fruit hangs like golden blobs of sunshine all about. The green leaves are untouched, even those of the little thumbling kumquats which are the least of oranges.

Lemons as well, though they are far tenderer than the oranges, hold up their pointed ovals in the midst of green leaves. But the guavas were badly nipped and their foliage everywhere is brown, a color something like the soft tans in their sycamore-like trunks. Though the guava leaf is like that of a chestnut, its trunk makes one think it a young sycamore. By rights its fruit should be a button or a bur, according to Northern landmarks. As a matter of fact it begins an orange blossom, most spicily sweet scented, grows a green apple to a lemon-looking maturity, and its seeded pulp is peach-like, and spiced with a faint off-color flavor which seems but to add to its delectability. In Northern minds there is well rooted a belief that the orange tree holds ripe fruit, green fruit and new blooms at the same time. This is hardly borne out by the facts. The orange is a cropper, just as the apple is, and just now the trees hold no color save that of the ripe fruit, no odor but that of its spicy, oily rind. The guavas, however, have everything in motion from bloom to ripe fruit.

Cocoanut palms and royal palms are both to be found in south Florida, though neither is indigenous, both having been planted by accident or design. The palmetto is on the other hand native to the State. In the northern third of the State, however, it never seems to me to



feel at home. Palmettos there are set out along fine walks and in yards and formal gardens where for the most part they stand primly and seem a bit self-conscious. Rarely there in my woodland walks, either in swamp or upland, did I find the cabbage palmetto, which is the only tall growing kind, wild. As you come south you begin to find along in the Palatka neighborhood sudden accesses of tropical picturesqueness in the swampy lands. The jungle grows stateliness and becomes peopled with possibilities of all romance, a condition less common to the lonely, flat woods and the impenetrable tangle of jasmine and greenbrier and gray moss of the swamps in the northern counties of the State.

All this I think due to the presence all about you of the tall palmettos. There is an interminable regularity about the pines. From Palatka south, the palmettos stray in groups all about the landscape, never standing prim and solemn as they do about Jacksonville and St. Augustine. Here they seem to prance in toward town like plumed Seminole chieftains of the early days. They lean together in groups and make the landscape cozy and beautiful, while yet it loses nothing of dignity. There is something of the feather duster model about the palmetto, but it suggests only dignity and beauty for all that. Along the banks of streams they lean plumed heads far over the water and make the muddiest "branch" a place of enchantment thereby. There is a graciousness about the simple act that makes you take off your hat and say "thank you" in all reverence. Of all the trees of the South the palmetto has most personality and you learn to love it far beyond the others.

I think it is the presence all about of the picturesque and sociable palmettos that softens the aspect of the flat lands as you go back from the Indian River in this latitude, and makes the barrens lovable and kindly. Yet other things I am sure contribute. The cold snap, which may have been the end of the tiny winter that comes even to this far Southern clime seems to have sent many Northern birds awing once more. All about flock the robins in countless numbers, their winter plumage seeming just a little duller than it will be when they hasten North in April. I have not heard one of them sing, but the air is full of unmistakable robin cries and they run over grassy spots with the same self-confident grace. A favorite food with them seems to be the gallberries which exactly resemble low-bush black huckleberries and grow in vast profusion all over the ground through the flat woods. These are most bitter and nauseous to my taste, in fact I know of only one thing worse and that is the buckthorn berry which is plentiful all the early winter at home and of which also the wintering robins seem very fond. Blue birds are plentiful.

The crow blackbirds that are wintering here seem to be, if anything, just a little more



familiar and fearless than those which nest yearly in the Boston Public Gardens. They may very well be the same birds, though. At Fort Pierce I saw them walking gravely about the yards and in the public streets, picking up food with the pigeons and hardly getting out of the way of the slow-moving wagons. At White City they fly up from the road at my feet and barely wait for me to go by before they are back again. With them I find redwing blackbirds, the mates in full epaulette, almost as fearless as their larger brethren. There is another flock of black birds, whose presence I hailed with delight, making the woods vocal over on the shores of the St. Lucie River. That is a dozen or so of unmistakable black crows, *Corvus americana*; not the big-billed, big-footed Florida representative of the race whom I have seen occasionally sneaking silently off among the pine tops; not the cracked-voiced fish crows with their childish hilarity; but good old Northern crows, making the woods ring with their full-throated haw, haw, haws. These sounded good to me. I think the cold snap must have sent them down a little below their usual parallel, for they are the first I have seen in over two months spent in the Florida woodlands.

The garden in which the house is embowered is full of myrtle warblers in full winter plumage. These flit from one rose bush full of bloom to another, then in among oleander and hibiscus blossoms and the scarlet clusters of the begonia. Here again is a touch of Northern winter that has come to the land of flowers. Often of a winter's day in Massachusetts have I seen myrtle warblers lingering among the bayberry bushes, feeding on the waxy berries.

There is far more brown in the landscape than is wont to meet the eye and this tells the tale, not only of a temperature that has been below freezing, but just what plants are on the northern edge of their limit, just as the yellow-rump warblers are on the southern edge of theirs. The brown guava leaves whisper the story; the banana plants, killed to the stalk, shout it aloud. So do the fields of pineapples. This is a country of pineapple plantations. They cover that ridge next the Indian River, clothing it in prickly green lances from the river banks to the savanna behind it, for miles on miles, running north and south. In places these are under sheds, acres in extent. In others the wide lagoon of water on the west protected them and they are but little harmed. In others the full blight of the cold has worked in them and their green lances have turned a sickly, straw yellow. On such fields the crop for this year is ruined, and many acres of newly set young plants are killed to the root. Thus does winter set his mark occasionally even on this semi-tropic land.

But if it has been winter, I am quite convinced that it is now spring. I have surprised a suspicious tone of young green along the river edge, such a color as in Massachusetts I



would know meant mid-April. It is the tender green of young willow leaves just opening out of gray buds, all yellowed with the pollen from drooping catkins. The swamp willows that had lost their leaves are beginning to put them out again. So on oak trees I find the straggly catkins hanging in tassels where the limbs are gray with new leaf buds that are pushing off last year's leaves. And still the blue jays are searching among these catkins for



acorns of last year, not altogether unsuccessfully, so close does spring tread on the heels of the old year and its fruits. All about in the fields I hear a spring-like twittering among the myriad birds, a preliminary tuning of instruments. I hear the friendly "cochituate" of a goldfinch as he scallops his way along the sky. The Florida blue jays, even noisier than our Northern ones and vastly more familiar, clang and scream all about and red birds whistle musically. Through

all this I hear another note, or rather a succession of notes, that make me smile. I have been stalking this puzzling, strange song, if one can call it that, for a day or two, as opportunity offered, and only this morning made sure. After all, it was only the crow blackbird trying to sing a spring song. As a song it is hardly a success. It begins with a shrill, hardly musical, call note, long repeated. Then the bird essays something like the trill of a canary, though not very much like it in result. Then he gives a little deprecatory chirp as if he were as much surprised as I am at the result of all this, almost tumbles off his perch, recovers, and flies over to another tree to begin the performance all over again. The whole is as grotesquely awkward and humorously meeching as the motions of the crow blackbird usually are.

Not only in bird voices, in willow and oak catkins, are these signs of spring. The ground underfoot is beginning to teem with them. Under pines it is starred with tiny, white blossoms while the ditch bottoms and the moister places everywhere are purple and white. Most spring-like of all is the violet among the wild grasses in the flat woods. From its tiny, white flowers with their purplish veining I took it at first glance to be *Viola blanda*, our sweet, white violet of early May in all meadowy places. A closer examination, however, showed it to have beardless petals and instead of the round, heart-shaped leaves of our Northern variety lanceolate ones, tapering into long petioles. Therefore it is *Viola lanceolata*. But except for these minor differences it is the same flower, as delicately beautiful and enticing as when it grows fifteen hundred miles nearer the pole. Yet if one thinks a New England spring is at hand he has but to look up. On bare limbs in all swampy places, hang the solemn beards of



Tillandsia, the Spanish moss, while on others grow grotesque pineapple-like plants that are indeed of the pineapple family though they bear no pineapples. Instead they shoot upward a scarlet, gladiolus-like spike from which appear long tubes of blue petals, holding out yellow anthers. The whole looks as if some vivid, tropic bird had lighted on this pineapple-top and was poising there a moment before farther flight. Underneath springs the rank growth of Florida's largest fern, the *Achrosticum aureum*. Its fronds rise as high as my head and spread like a trunkless palm in a circle sometimes ten feet in diameter.

Out of all this confusion of Northern and Southern spring signs, rises always one clear note, that of the southeast trade wind in the palm trees. Rarely is it absent from the ear. It brings fresh, sea-born smells of perpetual spring to the nostrils, sometimes weary of the too rich perfume of spicy pines and odorous gardens, and its rustle sings you to sleep all night long with the song of the Southern sea. So as the palmetto grows dearest to the eye of all these Southern trees, it becomes also dearest to the ear. It is the harp on which this loneliest, yet most alluring of all Southern tunes is soothingly played.

