

Florida Trails

by Winthrop Packard

Chapter 15: Intruding on Ward's Herons



Ward's heron is the Florida variety of the great blue heron, like him only more so. There is slight difference in the marking, the *Ardea wardi* having olive instead of black legs, whiter lower parts, and a somewhat darker neck. But Ward's heron is almost a foot taller than the other, and when you see the two fly side by side you might well think the great blue heron the little blue heron, so much does this peninsular prototype dwarf his compatriot of wider range. There are Ward's herons in the big lagoon here east of White City mornings that I am confident stand six feet in height. Out there on marshy islands they have a superb dignity of pose, statues of frozen alertness.

Taking wing they blanket the landscape with wide pinions and their legs stretch rudder-wise to a great length behind them, while their necks are doubled back on themselves till the head is hunched in between the shoulders and the protruding neck curve looks like a pouch. By this use of the neck you will know them in the distance from the sandhill cranes because the crane flies with neck fully stretched. But the sandhill crane is a foot shorter, anyway. Ward's heron rarely gets out of Florida, being found most frequently in the lower two-thirds of the State, or from Alachua County down.

It was by way of the sandhill cranes that I came to the heron rookery. They have a way of setting up a most prodigious cackling, a sonorous croaking call that outdoes all the barnyard fowls in St. Lucie County. It is quite like the barnyard, too, a cutdarkuting as of husky Plymouth Rock hens that have laid eggs and are proud of it. It carries far. The first



time I heard it I hastened cautiously a mile or two through the flat-woods, expecting every minute to come onto the birds. But after I had made my mile or two the birds took flight, writing black Greek letters along the horizon. Most often in the dawn I heard them over toward the big lagoon and traced the sound there to its most conspicuous landmark. This is a tiny island, holding a score or two of cabbage palmettos flanked with odorous myrtles, these in turn standing in a jungle of ferns, osmundas in the main, a picturesquely beautiful spot, standing in the middle of this big, shallow lagoon that stretches thirty miles, north and south, flanking the pineapple-clad ridge from Fort Pierce down.

To this shore in the gray of dawn the sound led me and then vanished with all evidence, the croaking cranes having slipped away on silent wings. I stopped a moment to admire the sunrise. It was a clear, winter morning, cool for Florida, and dawn had tumbled suddenly out of a cloudless sky, upon a flat land. It was too cold for the usual morning mists and there was nothing to restrain the light. It was daybreak all in a moment. Yet, after all, there was a good space of time between the dawn and the sunrise, a time in which all the sky in the east grew golden and then crimson. The island was two islands, one under the other with half the palms pointing directly toward the nadir. Lagoons within the lagoon reflected the pellucid blue of the high sky and the crimson gold of the eastern horizon, seven-foot saw grass dividing them with its dense tangle. Out of this saw grass came the clucking of coot as the flocks began to bestir themselves. Then there was a great chorus of musical chuckles and a great cloud of witnesses to the joy of living arose. The coot spend the night in the water in the little pools among the saw grass, but the grass tops are, full of blackbirds all night long.

With the chorus out they came, a thousand red-wings flying jubilantly overhead to their feeding grounds. Behind me in the palmetto scrub there was further rustle of wings and todo of waking birds. I turned to see what was there and a wave of warmth struck my back and swept by me. I knew by that that the sun had popped up over the pineapple ridge to eastward and the day had fairly begun, but I waited, still watching the palmetto scrub that here grew in dense shrubbery, three feet high. Out of it came a cock robin, swinging so near me that he shied with a little nervous shriek of dismay. At the word the palmetto began to spout robins, singly and in flocks, filling the air with their fluttering and their good morning cries till the eruption had lasted for several minutes and I do not know how many hundred birds had taken wing. In this region the robins, still lingering on the fifteenth of February as if they knew of the snow and zero weather North, keep together in flocks, often of hundreds if not thousands of birds. Moreover, they roost together, always on or near the ground amongst the



scrub palmettos, though why there instead of the pines or the tall palmettos I do not know. So with the blackbirds, redwing and rusty, crow blackbird and Florida grackle, all seem to roost low together in the great beds of saw grass out in the lonely lagoon.

Turning back to the east, I found the lagoon a flood of crimson glory with my palm-topped island swimming in it, all rimmed with fire, for the sun was just behind the dense trees whose feathery fronds seemed just crisping with its flame. And then I looked again, carefully, and took the bird glass from my pocket and focused that on the tree tops as best I might against the crimson glow, for there above the fronded palms stretched a half-dozen or so of long necks with big, keen-pointed beaks set on small heads that topped the necks at right angles. Standing in the palm tops, or perhaps sitting there, were a dozen great Ward's herons. I watched them for some time in their comings and goings, and soon made up my mind that there were many nests there.

I had stumbled upon a Ward's heron rookery and was greatly pleased. Yet so far the stumble was a long-distance one. The island was an eighth of a mile away, and though there are boats on the lagoon, the saw grass grows so dense and divides portions of it off from other portions so definitely and finally, that none were available. You cannot penetrate the saw grass with a boat. I tried wading in it out toward my island, for the lagoon is nowhere deep except in the alligator holes, but only a pretty desperate man would make his way far in the saw grass. The herons flew croaking to and fro to their nests, but I had to be content to watch them with the bird glass.

Some days later I had built a tiny canoe of cotton drilling, stretched over palmetto-stalk ribs, and painted. The adventures of this wee coracle, going to the lagoon, on the lagoon, and coming from the lagoon were humorously grotesque and exciting, but they have no part in this story. It is sufficient to say that it floated like a bird too much like a bird sometimes—and that after due study and persistence, I reached the island in it a morning about a week after the discovery of it. I was right. The palmetto tops were full of the nests of Ward's heron.

The island itself was a gem of palm-topped green in the clear water of the lagoon. Along its edges sedges and bulrushes grew from the water, and as the ground rose one came upon a grove of the lovely olive-colored myrtle, the spicebush of the South. Among these myrtles growing almost breast high were the *Osmunda* ferns, *regalis* mostly, so thick that they made progress slow. Beneath the palmettos was a noisy debris of fallen leaves, that rattled and crunched under foot, reminding one of walking through Northern woods in winter when there is a crust on the snow. It was not until I struck this pseudo snow crust that the herons



took alarm. Then there was a crashing in the tree tops as great wings flapped against the broad, stiff leaves of the palms and the birds took flight with harsh croaks, circling about till I was reminded of the harpies in the AENEID. Some flapped off to the mainland, others lighted in the marsh shallows near by and froze there. It is surprising how immediately a big heron, thus motionless, becomes but an inanimate part of the landscape and escapes notice. Never before had I seen the big birds so near, every mark and feather of their noble forms being brought to close range by the glass. A most striking feature was the long, drooping, graceful plume which grew from the back of the head, a mark of the breeding season.

I found young birds in various stages of growth, from those almost grown which took wing when too closely approached, to little chaps that peeped beseechingly when the old birds came sailing back, evidently expecting to be fed. There were other nests in which I could see no young birds which seemed to be in good condition and which I thought contained eggs. But how was I to prove this? I might “shin” one of the smooth, straight trunks if it were like that of a Northern tree. But shinning a palmetto is another matter. The endogenous fiber crumbles on the outside, as to the weather-worn pith, but leaves the trunk beset with tiny splinters that fill whatever rubs too intimately against them. I might climb one of these palmetto trunks in that way if I had to; in fact, a morning or two later—but of that anon. I decided that one tall palm dominated a series of nests and if I could perch among its fronds I would be able to make intimate study of what goes on in heron land. I circumnavigated the island and crossed it from side to side, finding there nothing to alarm but much to interest.



Some days later I came back, equipped to go to the top of my selected palm. It was a different sort of a morning. All the day before the wind had blown from the south and the sun had shone fervently in on a land that lay sweltering in warmth under a midsummer-like temperature. The weather which had been like that of the finest October became like that of the finest July. A myriad insects, before silent, found a voice as evening came on and the night, so full of genial warmth, thrilled with their gentle calls. Frog voices came from the little ponds in the savanna on the way down to the big lagoon, and that chill which comes with a windless dawn even was not great enough to silence them. Only the daybreak put out the lights of the big fireflies whose yellow-green, fairy lamps had glowed and paled all night long among the grasses and bushes of the roadside. Something of the fervor of the tropics



had come upon the land.

I ought to have realized what other life this genial warmth was likely to bring out, especially on the little island, the one dry refuge in miles of wild lagoon, but a month of cold weather had lulled me into forgetfulness of what every man who tramps the wilds of southern Florida must not forget. So I landed right eagerly and marched up under the palmettos with an armful of short, stout slats, a pocket full of nails, a hammer and a small saw. I would nail the slats, ladderwise, one above another up the trunk of my chosen palmetto, saw an entrance to the very center of the branching fronds at its top, and there I should sit, the very head of the palmetto cabbage, in a bower of green, watching my neighbors in a score or so of nests a little below me. I submit that it was a proper scheme, and the only reason why it was not carried out to immediate success was that I had not reckoned on the tenants of the lower flat.

Upstairs everything was all right. The herons flapped away with croaking dismay as I came beneath their trees. I could see the long necks of some of the half-mature birds stretched upward from the nests of slender crossed reeds and sticks, and I glanced from them to the ground beneath the selected palmetto as I strode over brittle rubbish of their dead leaves and brush and royal ferns. And then I stopped with one foot in the air and a little whoop of dismay and utter terror of what was about to happen, for there beneath my selected palm, almost beneath my raised foot, was the body of a great snake. His head and tail were both hidden by the fallen palmetto leaves, but I knew he could not be less than seven feet long by his thickness, which was several inches. I doubt if I could have much more than spanned him with my two hands at any part of his visible length, about five feet, as he stretched from palm to palm.

However, I did not try any such test. I was content to gaze at him with bulging eyes and watch him, in breathless silence, for fear he might make the first move. Nor was this study reassuring. It began with hopes that he might be merely one of the harmless big south Florida snakes. Some of these are found eight feet long and proportionately big round, and are looked upon with friendly favor by people who know them best, because they not only eat rats and other vermin but are fabled to kill and eat the poisonous snakes. The study ended in the conviction that here was none of these. I knew that I was looking upon a grandfather of rattlers, a diamond-back seven feet long, four inches thick, and stuffed with venom from his little wicked yellow eyes to his stubby tail. Almost any hunter of this region will show you seven-foot skins. Some have dens hung with them. Here was the real thing.



In blithely entering this apartment house, bound for the upper story, I had reckoned without the hosts of the lower flat. On my previous visit this present incumbent, and I knew not how many more, had been stowed, torpid, beneath the leaves for warmth. This was their weather, and they were sleeping without many bedclothes.

I reached for my shooting-coat pocket and brought out a 38-caliber revolver. I had carried this for months for just such a desperate emergency, and the sight of its gleaming barrel gave me confidence. But not when I noted the tremulous figure eights which the front sight made in the air as I tried to get a bead on mine enemy. This would not do. A miss or a wound would mean an argument for which the island was far too small, from my point of view, to say nothing of the possible reinforcements for the other fellow. I backed gingerly away with both eyes over both shoulders as well as on the snake which moved almost imperceptibly. I tiptoed round him, trying to find some vantage ground, trying to get a little less shake into the muzzle of that revolver, but it was no use. The thought of stirring him up in the midst of that tangle of dead palm leaves, royal ferns and bushes was not a pleasant one; and I tiptoed back along my trail to my canoe, which looked mighty cozy and comfortable when I got to it. This cautious retreat was wise, too. The rattler did not follow me, but on my way I passed two big cotton-mouthed moccasins, thick, clumsy, four feet long and stubby-tailed, and almost as venomous as the rattlesnake whose island they helped tenant. I must have stepped within a foot of these on my way in.

The island in the big lagoon is a lovely spot. Its tenants of the upper story are beautiful and most fascinating. But the folk of the lower flat! Br-r r, wur-r r, ugh!

