



# *A Florida Sketch-Book*

by Bradford Torrey



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## **Chapter 2: Beside the Marsh**

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I am sitting upon the upland bank of a narrow winding creek. Before me is a sea of grass, brown and green of many shades. To the north the marsh is bounded by live-oak woods,—a line with numberless indentations,—beyond which runs the Matanzas River, as I know by the passing and repassing of sails behind the trees. Eastward are sand-hills, dazzling white in the sun, with a ragged green fringe along their tops. Then comes a stretch of the open sea, and then, more to the south, St. Anastasia Island, with its tall black-and-white lighthouse and the cluster of lower buildings at its base. Small sailboats, and now and then a tiny steamer, pass up and down the river to and from St. Augustine.

A delicious south wind is blowing (it is the 15th of February), and I sit in the shade of a cedar-tree and enjoy the air and the scene. A contrast, this, to the frozen world I was living in, less than a week ago.

As I approached the creek, a single spotted sandpiper was teetering along the edge of the water, and the next moment a big blue heron rose just beyond him and went flapping away to the middle of the marsh. Now, an hour afterward, he is still standing there, towering above the tall grass. Once when I turned that way I saw, as I thought, a stake, and then something moved upon it,—a bird of some kind. And what an enormous beak! I raised my field-glass. It was the heron. His body was the post, and his head was the bird. Meanwhile, the sandpiper has stolen away, I know not when or where. He must have omitted the “tweet, tweet”, with which ordinarily he signalizes his flight. He is the first of his kind that I have seen during my brief stay in these parts.

Now a multitude of crows pass over; fish crows, I think they must be, from their small size and their strange, ridiculous voices. And now a second great blue heron comes in sight, and keeps on over the marsh and over the live-oak wood, on his way to the San Sebastian marshes, or some point still more remote. A fine show he makes, with his wide expanse of



wing, and his feet drawn up and standing out behind him. Next a marsh hawk in brown plumage comes skimming over the grass. This way and that he swerves in ever graceful lines. For one to whom ease and grace come by nature, even the chase of meadow mice is an act of beauty, while another goes awkwardly though in pursuit of a goddess.

Several times I have noticed a kingfisher hovering above the grass (so it looks, but no doubt he is over an arm of the creek), striking the air with quick strokes, and keeping his head pointed downward, after the manner of a tern. Then he disappeared while I was looking at something else. Now I remark him sitting motionless upon the top of a post in the midst of the marsh.

A third blue heron appears, and he too flies over without stopping. Number One still keeps his place; through the glass I can see him dressing his feathers with his clumsy beak. The lively strain of a white-eyed vireo, pertest of songsters, comes to me from somewhere on my right, and the soft chipping of myrtle warblers is all but incessant. I look up from my paper to see a turkey buzzard sailing majestically northward. I watch him till he fades in the distance. Not once does he flap his wings, but sails and sails, going with the wind, yet turning again and again to rise against it,—helping himself thus to its adverse, uplifting pressure in the place of wing-strokes, perhaps,—and passing onward all the while in beautiful circles. He, too, scavenger though he is, has a genius for being graceful. One might almost be willing to be a buzzard, to fly like that!

The kingfisher and the heron are still at their posts. An exquisite yellow butterfly, of a sort strange to my Yankee eyes, flits past, followed by a red admiral. The marsh hawk is on the wing again, and while looking at him I descry a second hawk, too far away to be made out. Now the air behind me is dark with crows,—a hundred or two, at least, circling over the low cedars. Some motive they have for all their clamor, but it passes my owlish wisdom to guess what it can be. A fourth blue heron appears, and drops into the grass out of sight.

Between my feet is a single blossom of the yellow oxalis, the only flower to be seen; and very pretty it is, each petal with an orange spot at the base.

Another buzzard, another marsh hawk, another yellow butterfly, and then a smaller one, darker, almost orange. It passes too quickly over the creek and away. The marsh hawk comes nearer, and I see the strong yellow tinge of his plumage, especially underneath. He



will grow handsomer as he grows older. A pity the same could not be true of men. Behind me are sharp cries of titlarks. From the direction of the river come frequent reports of guns. Somebody is doing his best to be happy! All at once I prick up my ears. From the grass just across the creek rises the brief, hurried song of a long-billed marsh wren. So he is in Florida, is he? Already I have heard confused noises which I feel sure are the work of rails of some kind. No doubt there is abundant life concealed in those acres on acres of close grass.

The heron and the kingfisher are still quiet. Their morning hunt was successful, and for to-day Fate cannot harm them. A buzzard, with nervous, rustling beats, goes directly above the low cedar under which I am resting.

At last, after a siesta of two hours, the heron has changed his place. I looked up just in season to see him sweeping over the grass, into which he dropped the next instant. The tide is falling. The distant sand-hills are winking in the heat, but the breeze is deliciously cool, the very perfection of temperature, if a man is to sit still in the shade. It is eleven o'clock. I have a mile to go in the hot sun, and turn away. But first I sweep the line once more with my glass. Yonder to the south are two more blue herons standing in the grass. Perhaps there are more still. I sweep the line. Yes, far, far away I can see four heads in a row. Heads and necks rise above the grass. But so far away! Are they birds, or only posts made alive by my imagination? I look again. I believe I was deceived. They are nothing but stakes. See how in a row they stand. I smile at myself. Just then one of them moves, and another is pulled down suddenly into the grass. I smile again. "Ten great blue herons," I say to myself.

All this has detained me, and meantime the kingfisher has taken wing and gone noisily up the creek. The marsh hawk appears once more. A killdeer's sharp, rasping note—a familiar sound in St. Augustine—comes from I know not where. A procession of more than twenty black vultures passes over my head. I can see their feet drawn up under them. My own I must use in plodding homeward.