

Wood, Field and Stream

By GEORGE GREENFIELD.

A fellow can see the logic of getting up in the middle of the night in order to reach the Beaverkill before the warm Summer sun drives the trout to deep pools. And one does not question the necessity of an early start for the 100-mile spin to Greenport when the Peconic Bay weakfish run is on in the Spring. Those things are to be expected.

But when you are invited to take part in a bird count, no further away from home than Van Cortlandt Park—fifteen minutes by automobile—and the orders are "Don't be late, we start at 5:30 on the dot," well, it's a bit mystifying.

So, arriving at the edge of the Van Cortlandt swamps at exactly 5:29 A. M. last Sunday to join six booted and heavily bundled young men who were to conduct a Christmas bird census in the Bronx wilds, we confessed our puzzlement to the group leaders, Allan Cruickshank and Robert P. Allen.

"What in the name of John James Audubon do you expect to see in pitch dark?" we demanded of Cruickshank.

The answer was an enigmatic smile.

Four Students in Group.

Cruickshank and Allen, leading the way, scrambled down a steep bank, followed by three C. C. N. Y. students, Robert Kramer, Danny Lehrman and Irving Cantor, and a Washington High School boy, William Norse, all members of the Sialis Bird Club.

The crunch of boots in the frozen snow broke the dead stillness of the night as we picked our way through the swamp. A silver crescent moon, hanging low in the sky, cast an eerie glow over the western ridge. There was a strong sense of physical exhilaration in facing the biting wind, plowing through brush and briars and sliding across ice-locked ponds.

Suddenly Cruickshank halted. He pointed to a high oak tree, some twenty yards away. On a limb about thirty feet from the ground, snuggled in the lee of the thick trunk, a bird was silhouetted against the sky.

"That," whispered Cruickshank, "is the reason for getting out in the dark. It's a screech owl—I think. But we'll find out."

Pursing his lips, this young man,

who speaks the language of the birds, whistled the plaintive, haunting notes of the screech owl—a misnomer, by the way, for its cry is the antithesis of a screech. It is, rather, a gentle, melodious call, with a soft ascending and descending trill.

The huddled figure on the limb stirred after the third call. A moment later the answer came—the same plaintive cry, strangely in harmony with the brooding quiet of this hour before dawn. Having made certain of his identification of the bird by ear, Cruickshank clapped his gloved hands briskly. Startled, the owl winged its way to a tree at the opposite end of the swamp.

"You see," explained our mentor, "the screech owl, being nocturnal, flies and feeds while others sleep. Once daylight comes, it finds a hollow tree or some other hiding place where the human eye could never find it. In order to identify it for our census, we have to seek it at night, then imitate its cry and make it answer. Now listen."

Hoots Excite Screech Owl.

Cruickshank emitted a series of deep-throated, raucous hoots—the call of the barred owl, a bird about four times the size of the screech owl and one of the latter's most hated enemies. In response, from the far end of the swamp, came the excited notes of the screech owl, obviously frightened by the "proximity" of its foe.

It was an exciting glimpse into the life and ways of an interesting specimen of wildlife—a bit of outdoor theatricalism that already stamped the day a success for this mild ornithologist. But there were more thrills in store.

The sun had been up an hour when Allen noticed a line of foot-

prints in the snow. "Hey!" he exclaimed in surprise. "Great blue heron around here."

Now, the great blue heron is a Winter rarity in the Bronx, although there is a colony on the Sound near Rye. In the twelve years of the census, there had never been an identification of this species at Van Cortlandt or any of the other parks.

The trail was followed about 300 yards to the north swamp, while excitement among the birdmen mounted. Sure enough, as we trampled on a clump of apple balsam, the pale blue bird arose from the thicket and soared slowly and majestically to the south, an unexpected and thrilling sight.

More Surprises Ahead.

Still more surprises ahead. Breast- ing our way through a field of cattails, brown stalks rising to a height of seven feet, we were startled by a tremendous whirr-r-r of wings. Almost from underfoot a fat cock pheasant streaked aloft and roared away, its brilliant plumage shining in the sun. The swamp, we found, was alive with pheasants. In two hours the party flushed about twenty wild ringnecks.

Watching the flight at dawn of great flocks of starlings, streaming northward to the Westchester hills from their famous roosting place in the cornices of New York's Riverside Church, to which they return each night; studying the antics of the tiny nuthatch, the only bird that moves down the side of a tree head-first; discovery of a lone sora rail and a bobwhite quail—these were just a few of the day's highlights.

It provided an amazing picture of the variety of wild life to be found in Winter within a stone's throw of the city's busy highways.