

AUDUBON MAGAZINE

A BI-MONTHLY MAGAZINE DEVOTED
TO THE PROTECTION AND PRESER-
VATION OF OUR NATIVE WILDLIFE

Our Motto: A BIRD IN THE BUSH IS WORTH TWO IN THE HAND

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Published at 461 Eighth Avenue, New York, N. Y., by the National Audubon Society
Postmaster: If undeliverable, please notify Audubon Magazine on form 3578 at 1006 Fifth Ave., New York, N. Y.

VOL. XLIV

JULY-AUGUST, 1942

No. 4

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AUDUBON MAGAZINE is published bi-monthly by the National Audubon Society. Subscription price, \$2.00 a year in the United States, \$2.25 foreign. Single copies, 35 cents. All issues of Section II are sent to members and subscribers who have requested them. Single copies containing 'The Season,' 15 cents; 'The Season' and 'Breeding-Bird Census,' 20 cents;

'Christmas Bird Count' Section, 25 cents. Notice of change of address should be received by the 10th of the month prior to issue with which it is to be effective. AUDUBON MAGAZINE regrets that it cannot continue subscriptions beyond date of expiration. Checks and money orders should be made payable to AUDUBON MAGAZINE.

Reentered as second-class matter April 29, 1942 at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the Act of March 3, 1879

Editorial and advertising offices, 1006 Fifth Avenue, New York, N. Y.

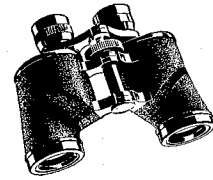
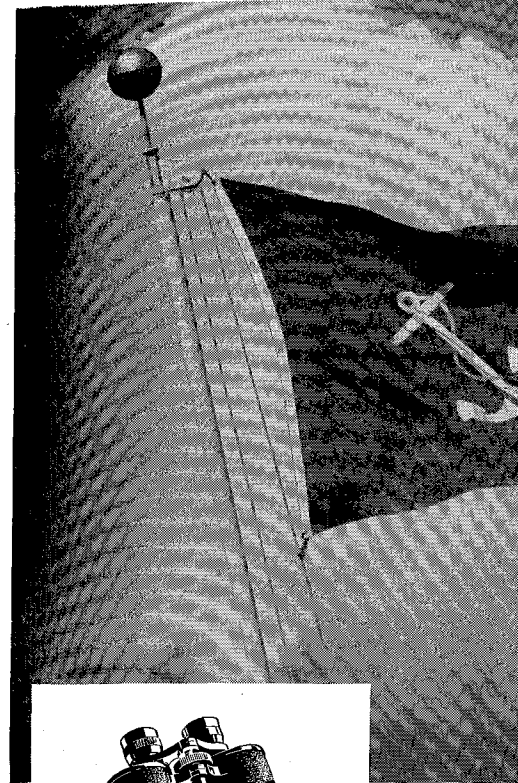
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THE WITMER STONE WILDLIFE SANCTUARY

By Richard H. Pough

AT THE southern tip of New Jersey, where the "Garden State" tapers off in the Atlantic Ocean, you will find a port of embarkation outrivalling the greatest harbors of the world. Whereas busy New York City counts human migrants by hundreds of thousands, the woods and dunes of Cape May Point greet and bid farewell to millions of avian travelers. There are no bands to welcome them as they stream into the funnel that is Cape May, nor confetti to speed them on their way as they take off for distant Delaware; yet their histrionic display in migration at Cape May relegates a luxury liner sailing to Class Z rating.

This spot has been famous among ornithologists for a century and a half. With one side exposed to the Atlantic Ocean, and the other facing Delaware Bay, with salt and fresh water ponds, sandy beaches, pine woods, catbriar tangles, beach plum and bayberry thickets, sand dunes and picturesque woodlands of Spanish oak and cedar providing a wide diversity of habitat within a relatively tiny area, Cape May acts as a magnet for the migrating birds of eastern North America. Here gather birds of the sea and shore, birds of the meadows and farmlands, birds of the swamps and marshes, birds of the mountains and plains, and accidental visitors from the seven seas and the flyways of the world.

You will find Cape May exciting at any season of the year, but the autumnal flights, beginning with the warblers in early August and ending with the Woodcock flight in late November, are the Point's greatest attraction. The key to these extraordinary flights lies in Cape May's geographical location. Along the Atlantic coast migrating land birds must fly southwest in the fall to avoid being carried out to sea. These land birds seem to fear water and many hesitate to cross even small bays until they have a favorable wind. As a result many birds, once they reach southern New Jersey, find further progress to the south blocked by the wide expanse of Delaware Bay and so are funneled down to Cape May Point. Here, once favorable winds spring up, they find a shorter crossing than at any point for forty miles up the bay shore.

Most land birds migrate chiefly at night. In the fall their departure for the south is stimulated by sharp drops in temperature. Usually these drops occur when a mass of polar air flows down over the continent from the

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northwest. Birds, flying south through such a body of air, tend to be carried eastward far out over the ocean unless their flight on a westward course is strong enough to counter both the westerly trend of the shore line and their own easterly drift. In the early morning you can see night migrating land birds of all kinds flying in from the ocean. Others can be seen coming down from great heights to the

Point from all directions, because, as daylight overtakes them, Cape May is the only land they can see for miles around.

Paradoxically, spring might be termed the only "off" season in the Cape's bird-life cycle. True, you see the many local breeding species returning to their old haunts, but the air is innocent of autumn's rush of wings; trees and shrubs, in spite of new spring finery, seem only half alive in the absence of last fall's twittering excitement. For its unique geographical location is as uncondusive to spectacular spring flights as it is attractive to southward migrants.

With the coming of summer this slackened tempo shifts into second gear, preparatory to an all-out migration display. The earliest fall flights are those of the warblers. Thirty-one species have been recorded in the mixed flocks that start streaming through as early as the last week of July. Nearby, George Ord collected in 1809 the beautiful little warbler on which Alexander Wilson bestowed the name of the Cape.

The first northwest wind in August brings Tree Swallows, which concentrate by the tens of thousands on the low bushes in the sanctuary area before they leave on their southward journey. The very different Barn Swallow migration gets under way at about the same time, but it occurs without any marked concentration as a continuous morning flight along the narrow strip adjacent to the beach.

By mid-August the great Kingbird flight is underway. These daytime migrants pile up at the Point by the thousands during periods of northwest winds, and you see them beating their way back northward into the wind along the bay shore, as though looking for a place where it might narrow sufficiently for them to venture with

safety across the water to the western shore. Among the common Eastern Kingbirds there are always a few Western or Arkansas Kingbirds, readily distinguishable by their lemon-yellow breasts. Late August and early September bring the Reedbird (Bobolink) flights, but unless there is an unusually strong northwest wind they fly directly out from the Point toward Cape Henlopen in Delaware. Only in the heaviest winds do they hesitate to cross and resort to beating back up the bay shore in the manner of Kingbirds.

The first northwester in September starts the famous hawk flights. These are composed of two types of hawks—the regular coastal migrants and the off-course mountain ridge migrants. During late August Ospreys can be seen drifting south along the coast, but the characteristic coastal migrants are the falcons. Sparrow Hawks are seen in numbers from September through the first week of October, and the Pigeon Hawk flight commences about mid-September and continues until mid-October. A few Peregrines may be seen in September, but the great flight of these rare birds comes in October. Hawks that are normally mountain ridge migrants—*Buteos*, and especially the *Accipiters*—are seen all through the migration period from late August to November, whenever the flow of cold air from the northwest is rapid enough to drift them east down the coast. Usually over 90 per cent are young birds of the year and this has given rise to the theory that it is chiefly the inexperienced birds that fail to make allowance for wind drift and are carried to the coast.

The last week in September and the first in October bring one of Cape May's most spectacular flights—that of the Flickers. Until recent years, these birds were regarded as game and were shot in great numbers. Flicker poles,

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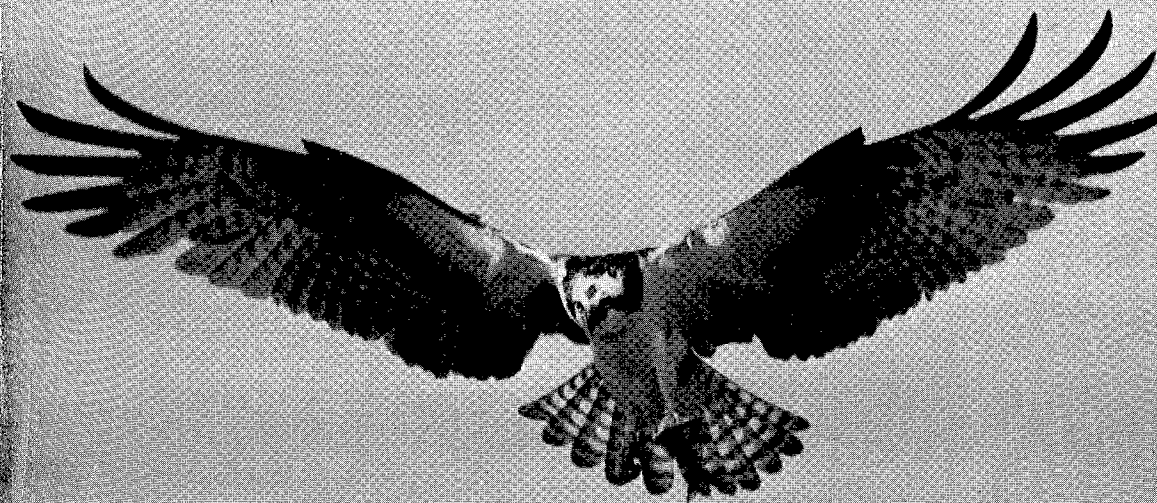
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Eliot Porter

The Osprey or Fish Hawk dots the Cape May landscape with its huge nests and fills the Cape May air with its characteristic whistle.

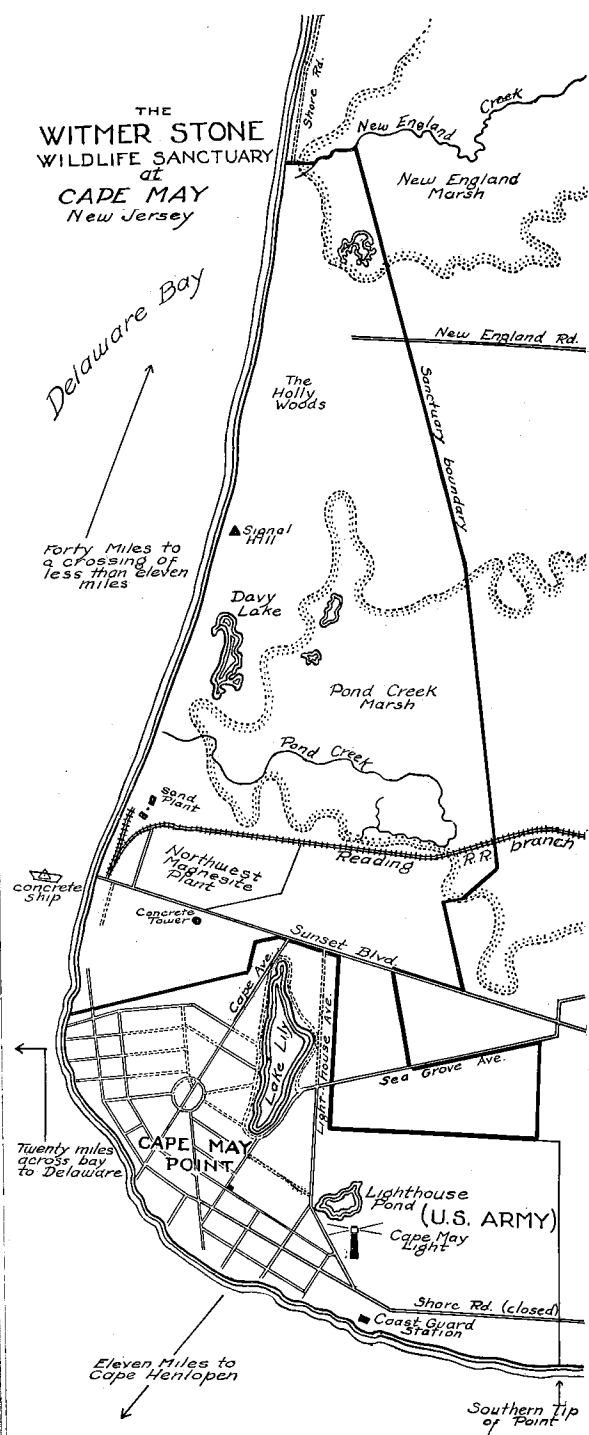
sloping rails nailed to the tops of dead trees, from which half a dozen perched birds could be swept with one shot, were in common use. More timid than most birds about crossing water, or even an open marsh, they sometimes beat north into the northwest wind along the bay shore, just back of the beach among the dunes, at a rate that carries thousands past a given point in the first couple of hours after daybreak.

The flights come to a climax, as far as numbers are concerned, with the massed Robin galaxy in late October and early November. There are mornings when, shortly after daybreak, the air is full of Robins, from the tree tops to a height where they are indistinguishable even with binoculars. The migration comes to a close sometime in November, with the great Woodcock flight. While this is on

(and as a rule it lasts only a day or two) the woods teem with these odd-looking birds, and in the days before the Witmer Stone Wildlife Sanctuary was established, they suffered high mortality from hunting.

Your interest in this region need not wane with the passing of Cape May's fall migration miracle, however. Winter bird populations in the area are high. Many stragglers from the migrating hosts stay on all winter, and lists made for AUDUBON MAGAZINE's regular Christmas Count have revealed from 100 to 110 species then in the district.

With such a tempting display of birds assembled on Cape's May's doorstep, it is not surprising that the records, going back as far as the eighteenth century, indicate mass killing of birds for sport and for food and the collection of their eggs by the thou-



sands. Prior to the passage of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act and of the law prohibiting the shooting of song birds, it was not uncommon for thousands of birds to be killed in a single day during the height of the migration season. Even more recently heavy legal toll has regularly been taken in this lush and traditional hunting ground. The slaughter of migrating hawks, in particular, was notorious.

The National Audubon Society came to the rescue when, in 1935, it leased a portion of this strategic area, posted it and engaged a warden to protect all wildlife within its limits. The Witmer Stone Wildlife Sanctuary thus came into being, named in honor of the distinguished ornithologist and naturalist, who made a lifetime study of the birds of the region, and bequeathed his famous book *Bird Studies at Old Cape May* to avian-loving posterity. Dr. Stone shared with William Dutcher, the Society's founder and first president, chairmanship of the American Ornithologists Union Committee on Bird Protection during its early years, and out of the work of that Committee was born the National Audubon Society.

Proof of the extraordinary work accomplished by the Witmer Stone Wildlife Sanctuary has been the increasing interest in wildlife conservation on the part of local people who live on and near the Point. Within seven years of the establishment of the Sanctuary, the Society has won not only the full sympathy and approval of neighbors, but their active cooperation as well. The value of such sanctuaries at concentration points has been demonstrated to such a degree that the Cape May community has been eager to see additional areas come within the protecting warden service. To this end, agreements were concluded in 1942 whereby, with the

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generous cooperation of local land-owners, the boundaries of the Sanctuary have been extended to include approximately 700 acres on the west side of Cape May Point, with some two miles of shoreline on Delaware Bay. It includes all of the wooded area in which the killing of birds has heretofore been especially concentrated. Immediately to the south of the new sanctuary limits, and extending to the very point of land, lie properties owned by the United States Government and the Borough of Cape May Point. The former is posted against trespass, and war-time restrictions are rigidly enforced. The latter has a borough ordinance prohibiting hunting. To all intents and purposes, then, the Witmer Stone Wildlife Sanctuary may be said to include approximately 1,000 acres, and to extend from New England Creek on the north to the tip of the Point on the south.

The cost of warden service and other maintenance is met by the National Audubon Society with the much appreciated aid of friends. Each year the New Jersey Audubon Society has contributed for this purpose the income from its Miller Memorial Bird Sanctuary Fund. In memory of her

brother William Louis Abbott, a close friend of Dr. Stone and both a naturalist in his own right and an enthusiast on Cape May, Miss Gertrude Abbott has generously contributed a fund of \$2,000, the income from which is applied toward meeting the costs of this Sanctuary. However, in financing the major part of the costs, the Society depends upon and earnestly requests annual gifts by interested members and friends.

A Witmer Stone Wildlife Sanctuary Advisory Committee has been formed to aid the Society in determining best administrative policies. The membership of this Committee consists of Messrs. Ralph T. Stevens, Otway H. Brown, J. Arthur Hess and Dr. J. R. Moon of Cape May, together with Mr. James E. MacCloskey, Jr., of the Northwest Magnesite Company.

Although great care will be exercised to assure protection of birds and other wildlife in the Sanctuary, and trespass with gun, dog or trap will not be permitted, persons wishing to observe Nature's display within its boundaries are cordially invited and are advised to visit the Sanctuary during the fall migration season from early August to October.

YOUR BREEDING-BIRD CENSUS DUE AUGUST 15

Audubon Magazine's Sixth Breeding-Bird Census will be published, as usual, in Section II of the September-October issue, and all contributions intended for publication should reach the Editor (1006 Fifth Avenue, New York, N. Y.) not later than August 15. All new censuses should follow the form and regulations as outlined in the March-April 1938 issue of the magazine. Reprints of this are still available upon request.
