Sac Prairie Summer

By AUGUST DERLETH

26 June: A red-tailed hawk started up from a fence-post at the roadside as I came walking along this morning. The bird waited I thought an uncommonly long time to take flight; indeed, I was almost upon it when it swung up, turning, its tail showing a sheen of red-brown in the sun, its markings plain and beautifully patterned. It vaulted rapidly into the tall blue overhead.

28 June: A pewee bathed in the rainfall today at the grape vines west of the house. I happened to see him quite by chance—but it is always by chance that one sees the most revealing aspects of his neighbors’ lives—and thought at first that the bird was at feeding in its frequent upward darts; but no, it was not so; it flew up into the falling rain, came back and shook itself, and went aloft again, not foraging at all. The bird invited the rainfall thus for approximately a dozen times before he was done.

1 July: Heard at the east end of the Spring Slough trestle at 7:45 this evening: acris crepitans, caroling robins, the conqueree of redwings, song sparrows, tree frogs, swamp sparrows, wood thrushes, pewees, green frogs, chewinks, catbirds, all in numbers—from three to seven each; together with two solitary, a little green heron and a mourning dove.

14 July: In the course of wandering among red raspberry bushes on the east slope of the Big Hill today, I flushed a hen pheasant and four young pheasants slightly larger in size than quail, and quite able to fly low over the ground. They flew, most of them, into the ravine to the north, though two of them preferred to dodge about in the underbrush and kept themselves well hidden there despite the disturbance they caused whenever I neared one of them. I mounted to the hilltop presently and heard the hen clucking her brood together again.

15 July: While at my desk this evening, I heard a whippoorwill’s song, coming clearly on the damp air out of the south, doubtless from the near edge of Bergen’s Island. I stopped work and stood at the screen to listen, taking delight in this song, as always. The bird sang for perhaps five minutes, and then once again the night was given to katydids and crickets.

30 July: Awakened this morning by a violent fluttering in the fireplace chimney. Investigating, I found there a mature mourning dove which had somehow got down inside—quite possibly during last night’s storm—and could not escape upward through the long chimney. I managed to reach her past the draft block and drew her into the room. She was not at all harmed, though now filled with trepidation. I took her outside and released her.

1 August: There was much todo of grackles about the house this morning. A large flock of the birds—the summer’s first noticed here—held to the trees close to the house, black in the lindens and arbor vitae, making their not unpleasant music throughout the morning.

7 August: Perhaps one of the most typical sounds of any early morning in Sac Prairie from April 9th onward—the traditional first day of the birds—is the crying of purple martins from the heights at which they
circle and soar above the village. And what patterns they make on the heavens, seen among the arching branches! And how few, how very few of the villagers are ever aware of sound or sight of them!

11 August: While swimming in the Wisconsin this afternoon, I paused in midstream near the third pier from the east shore to watch young swallows—doubtless the last family of the year—being fed in their nests under the bridge. The birds were all barn swallows, and adult birds lined the girders under all the spans, occasionally flying out to feed and keeping up a constant rippling of sound, by no means unpleasant, suggesting conversation rather than song.

16 August: The grackles were once again in possession of the trees around the house this morning, vying with pewee and mourning dove song; so pleasant a sound especially in early morning that it is difficult to imagine people taking exception to it, withal its reminder that autumn would soon be upon us, and after that the season of complaint once more. I stood at the window listening to their incessant chatter—all talking at once, like a party of bridge players at Emmy Littel’s or Annie Schorer’s—and evidently all being understood, each in his own way.

18 August: From 6:45 to seven o’clock this evening, while I walked from the head of the railroad bridge to the Mid-Meadow trestle, I heard the songs and/or calls of a cardinal, goldfinches, crickets, katydids, marsh wrens, chimney swifts, cedar waxwings, solitary sandpipers, a least sandpiper, pewees, kingbirds, song sparrows, chewinks, a flicker, killdeer, a kingfisher, catbirds, a green frog, yellow warblers, swamp sparrows, mourning doves, a phoebe, a Baltimore oriole, a black mallard, nighthawks, brown cuckoos, and indigo buntings. In contrast to their scarcity earlier in the season, no less than a score of nighthawks foraged tonight over the Upper Meadow’s lower extremity and the adjoining hills there. One or two birds were crying, spiralling up and skycoasting, though I observed in these cases there was customarily another bird on wing which was the object of the coaster’s attention; the birds coasted at each other, not simply toward the hill, as in the nesting season.

29 August: Among birds calling this morning in the marshes, the chickadee was unusually prominent with the phe-be-be song so commonly associated with winter and early spring among many ornithologists. The song had a kind of strangeness rising among the songs of pewees, warblers, wood thrushes, and others more usually associated with summer, though it should not have been, for it can be heard in any month. Quite possibly it is less heard in the summer months because of the plethora of other calls and songs which diminish it and cause it to be lost.

3 September: In the village this evening I noticed how robins—a dozen of them—hopped cheerily about under the spray of water on Spellman’s lawn, enjoying the water in the absence of rain. They flew in and out of the spray with manifest delight.

10 September: Purple Martins clung to the telegraph wires over the west channel railroad bridge this evening, plainly on the edge of their leavetaking. They were present in some numbers, almost a hundred of them; their very numbers made the signature of summer’s end.