Country Calendar: Autumn

By AUGUST DERLETH

i. Killdeer at Night

The killdeer’s, which is one of the first voices to be heard in the late winter days, is also one of the last to be silenced by autumn and the coming of winter. It is not alone because his voice is the more noticed when other birds have departed or grown silent, but because, beginning in late summer, and continuing well into autumn—in clement weather into December—the killdeer makes his nostalgic crying ring out by night, a sudden wild succession of killdee’s erupting in the darkness over the fields and pastures—not along the familiar strand of the Wisconsin, which he haunts by summer days, but in upland places.

The killdeer’s is the one voice I am certain of hearing on mild autumn nights. Cricket and katydid may be still, owls may have grown into sullen silence, but every little while the killdeers fly up and course low over the fields, crying, as if suddenly disturbed at foraging or rest, with a sound akin to that made when the bird is flushed from its nest. They are partial to moonlit nights—harvest moon, hunter’s moon, moon of falling leaves—on those nights when the sweet fragrance of fallen leaves or the pungence of leaf-fire smoke fills the air, adding their crying to the beauty of such nights.

I hear him scarcely at all in the spring in such places; then he is partial to the river bottoms, to the lowlands of creeks, swamps, sloughs, ponds, where he is heard from dawn into the early hours of the night. Sometimes of early summer his voice rises at midnight with the sudden starting forth of meadowlark song, or the threnody of a song sparrow, or a catbird’s mew and mockery. By autumn he has taken possession of the fields by night, flying along the cattle trails, among the cornrows, past rows of shocks, among a gaggle of geese come down to spend the night feasting on corn, over the knolls and terraces of the land west of Sac Prairie, but seldom in that season at the river, save by day.

How much a part of the autumn night in the fields his voice has grown! I took him for granted until I was away from his domain for weeks, months—and how welcome his voice was when I returned! We are all prone to take even the greatest beauty of earth for granted out of a surfeit of it; we know it daily in season, it is a kind of wealth which is too seldom realized for its very tangibility, since it seems there for the asking, though overnight a catastrophe could wipe it out of being—a thought that troubles us not.

I used to go into the woods, the hills and marshes, at every available opportunity—and I suppose, in a sense, I still do—compelled not alone by the desire to do so, but by the conviction that I should ever regret a single possible hour not spent close to the earth. I never had occasion for such regret, in truth, because I always learned more and more effectively how to apportion my time to allow for many hours in the hills and the marshes. But increasingly, now, I am the more acutely aware of
the smallest aspects of natural beauty—and of these the killdeer's crying of autumn nights over the fields is but one.

ii. The Mutations of Song

Whenever I walk along the railroad embankment into the marshes south and east of Sac Prairie of autumn evenings, just before and after sundown, I am made aware of the infinite variations in the mutations of spring bird songs. There are a few which show no great variation, if any—redwing's conqueree, bluebird chortling, the lyricism of meadowlarks—but there are others which offer such a singular variety of songs that I am sometimes hard put to it to identify the songster immediately. Song sparrows, vesper sparrows, robins—these especially make of their autumnal songs a pale and much altered version, usually far shorter than earlier melodies, of their spring songs.

Though the great fountain of song that held the April and May night air is no more, there is yet a surprising amount of activity. On one late October night recently, between the hours of five and six o'clock, with sundown occurring shortly after five, I heard the songs and cries of crows, song sparrows, swamp sparrows, field sparrows, vesper sparrows, meadowlarks, killdeer, robins, bluebirds, a single pileated woodpecker, blue jays, chickadees, white-throated sparrows, redwings, grackles, screech owls, barred owls, horned owls, a kingfisher, chewinks, ducks, and juncos, over and above the voices of hylidae—peepers and cricket frogs—and an occasional green frog or two, to say nothing of crickets and a few last katydids.

They diminished in volume, numbers, and kind with the onset of darkness, until at the last only killdeers and song sparrows were left to sing, and cardinals and robins to make complaint of night and perhaps too my own intrusion upon their domain. On occasion, the song sparrows gave forth recognizable strains of May song, but in the main theirs was, like the robin's, a kind of caricature of the spring melody—a broken song, half-voiced, half-withheld, falling away to impatient sounds and silence. One could never mistake an autumn evening for one in spring, if all else were shut away but the voices of the birds, for there is never in even the mildest, most summerlike autumn, the full-throated song of a spring night.

Indeed, the songs of many birds in autumn fall upon the ear like a melody half remembered, something beyond total recall, as if the songsters themselves had forgotten what it was they sang so glibly but a few months ago—though the listener had not. Yet the mutations are never beyond the boundaries of the original song; they arise from within its frame, which is to say that though some birds never repeat their spring songs in autumn, they never sing a note not sung in spring, only a variant arrangement of the spring notes.

At last, in the deeper dark of night, there is no voice left; the darkness is still, but pregnant, as if at the next turning all the choir of the spring night were to burst forth anew. And, indeed, is it not true?—save that the next turning is a little farther away than a night in autumn.

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