

HENRY ABBOTT

CAMPS AND
TRAILS

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My rifle was standing against a birch tree within easy reach of my right hand, while I, sitting on a log, was eating my lunch. A hunter's lunch is carried in a small cotton bag and a string tied around the mouth of the bag also secures it to one's belt. On one side of this bag, faded to a pale blue from many washings, appears printed matter containing a trade mark, a name of manufacturer or dealer and indications that the bag once contained sugar. The contents of the bag on this occasion just fitted my appetite.

While I was busily munching a sandwich I became aware of a curious bird sitting on the lower limb of a tree at my left and about ten yards away. I do not mean that he was an unusual bird; he wore a plain slaty-gray coat and was a little larger than a full grown robin. He was quite a commonplace bird and one often seen in our northern forests. His name is Canada jay. I do not know why, but he is also sometimes called whiskey jack. He was curiously and intently watching me with his right eye. Presently he turned his head and studied my operations with his left eye. Most birds and many animals who live in the woods have a distinct advantage over man in the fact that their eyes are so placed that they are able to look in opposite directions at the same time. They can thus look for their prey with one eye, while

watching out for an enemy with the other.

This fellow was apparently not entirely satisfied with what his right eye saw, so for purposes of confirmation he turned on me the left eye. I had not noticed his arrival. He had silently come after I sat down on the log. He now spread his wings and without a single flap silently skated across the air to another tree on my right but a little nearer, where he could "view the subject from another standpoint." It now occurred to me, that, possibly the jay bird might also be needing some lunch so I tossed a small piece of bread out on the other end of the log when he slid down and ate it. Then I invited him to come nearer; and presently, when I gave him a piece of meat he was eating it out of my hand. While I was closely watching my guest, there suddenly and as silently appeared a second bird walking down the log, and then in a moment a third arrived to join the lunch party. The strangest thing about the incident was the silence and suddenness with which, like ghosts, the birds appeared before me, and when the last crumb had been devoured, they as silently slipped away.

The place where the jays and I met was in a dense forest about fifteen miles from any human habitation and it is probable that they had met the human animal so seldom that the native curiosity of the forest dweller had not yet given place to fear.

Bige and I were hunting. We were living at "The Dan'l Boone Camp" on the northwestern slope of Crescent Mountain. We left camp that morning about seven o'clock and together traveled down the valley, following one of our own trails about three miles

until we crossed Pigeon Brook, where we separated. When Bige and I hunt, we always get far enough apart so there will be no possibility of shooting each other. Also, we hunt separately to avoid conversation. Gossip on a "still hunt" is about the worst practice in which one can indulge.

On this occasion, it was agreed that Bige should climb the eastern end of Wild Cat Mountain and proceed along the top of the ridge which extends several miles toward the west, while I hunted through the valley and over the foot hills, meeting him on the western end of the ridge for lunch at twelve o'clock. It was now nearly one o'clock and as I had been unable to find Bige, I ate lunch with the jay birds as above described.

Since leaving Bige that morning I had seen no big game, but had shot a goshawk. Every guide and hunter of my acquaintance in the North Woods, is the sworn enemy of this bird of prey. No man is thought to have performed his duty if he allows one of these hawks to escape. The goshawk destroys many song birds, but his particular object in life is to kill partridges. The partridge is one of our most desirable game birds. He has many enemies among the four footed residents of the forest. The owl also, will kill a partridge at night, while he is roosting in a tree; but the goshawk (sometimes called partridge hawk) pursues a policy of frightfulness amounting almost to extermination of the partridge. He will sit all day, and day after day in a tree in that part of the woods where a flock of young partridges live, watching his opportunity to pounce upon and kill them one after another, until

the last one is disposed of; when he will go on a hunt for another flock.

The "Boche" which I shot was sitting on the limb of a tree eating something which he was holding down on the limb with one foot. On going up to the tree to pick up my hawk I found on the ground, feathers, that I knew did not belong to him, and a few feet away, discovered a full grown partridge, recently killed, from the breast of which a piece of flesh had been torn out.

I suspect that our feeling of enmity toward the goshawk is not entirely due to sympathy for the defenseless partridge. Mixed motives may inspire us to acts of revenge. We, ourselves sometimes eat breast of partridge.

After my luncheon guests had gone, I took a drink of water at a spring near our lunch table and considered what should be my next move. Failing to meet Bige at the appointed place, I reasoned that, possibly he was on the trail of game which led in the opposite direction. In any case, I felt quite sure he would not, in returning, come back over the route I took going out; also that he would not feel safe in crossing my path; so he most likely would go back on the northern slope of the mountain. Accordingly, I turned southward, intending after about a mile on that tack to swing toward the east and work back to the camp; crossing Pigeon Brook below where we had crossed it in the morning. This course would take me half-way up Crescent Mountain and around the outside curve of that ridge. I estimated that I could make this course back to camp, traveling quietly as

a hunter should, in about five hours.

So, frequently consulting my compass, I proceeded down the mountain, over hillocks, across ravines, through swamps, often following the beaten path of a deer's runway; again, forcing a passage through a briar patch or tangled witch-hopple. Then, there were long stretches of smooth forest floor carpeted with a Persian rug of Autumn leaves of brilliant and somber hues, woven into the most gorgeous and fantastic patterns. A soft October breeze rustled the tree tops and partially drowned the noise of rasping dry leaves under foot. It was an ideal day for wandering alone in the woods, far from the call of the telephone bell or the rush and jostle of the crowded city street.

Presently, coming over the top of a knoll, I saw a few rods ahead, a deer with gracefully mounted antlers which had recently been polished by rubbing them against bushes and saplings. The deer was making most unusual motions. I have seen deer in the woods doing many queer and unexplained things, but this fellow seemed to be digging a hole in the ground as does a rabbit or a woodchuck. He was pawing the earth with both fore feet; was working hard and giving his entire attention to the job, while the leaves flew from his rapidly flying hoofs. His head was turned away from where I stood and he had not noted by approach, so I crept up behind a clump of bushes and watched the progress of what I believed to be a new game for deer to play. Presently he pushed his muzzle under a pile of leaves and lifted his head working his jaws vigorously. Then something fell from the tree

above, hit him on the head and bounded off in the leaves. He paid not the slightest attention to it, but continued to paw the ground and occasionally root his nose into it like a hog.

Then I gave my attention to the tree under which the deer was digging and saw that it was a beech and that beech nuts were being shaken down by the wind and sifted through the fallen leaves; while the deer was pawing the leaves away to get the nuts.

About this time a shifting breeze carried the human scent to the deer's nostrils and his head came up with a jerk. He blew a bugle blast of warning that could be heard a mile down the valley, and with head and tail erect he bounded away down the hillside as if the Devil was after him.

Just then, it occurred to me that I had a rifle in my right hand and that, for that day at least, it was my business to hunt deer. By this time, however, several trees were between the deer and myself and though I could occasionally see the flash of his white tail in the distance it would have been folly to waste a shot on him. An examination of his tracks showed that he was covering twenty feet at every jump.

After gathering a pocketful of beech nuts for my own consumption, I proceeded on my way eating nuts and musing on the good judgment of the deer in his choice of food.

About an hour later I heard in the distance ahead, a rumbling noise that seemed like the long continued roll of a snare drum or the purr of an eight cylinder gasoline engine. I felt quite certain that no motor car would be found in this roadless wilderness but

pressed forward to investigate. Proceeding in the direction from which the sounds came, which were now repeated at intervals, beginning slowly like a locomotive starting; I heard the bumps coming gradually faster and faster until they merged into a continuous rumble lasting for a half minute when the sounds died away as if the steam supply were exhausted.

I now recognized my old friend the ruffed grouse or drummer partridge on his drumming log. With tail feathers spread fanwise, neck feathers ruffed up and the points of wing feathers dragging, he would strut like a turkey gobbler up and down the log until arriving at the particular drumming spot, he stretched his neck, filled his lungs with air, lifted wings and pounded his breast-bump-bump-thump-bup-br-r-r-r-r-r-r-r-r-r.

The drummer partridge – the male of the species is very fussy and particular about his drumming log. It is carefully selected with reference to its sonorous quality. He always drums on the same log and at exactly the same spot on that log throughout the season. Indeed the same log is likely to be used for drumming purposes several years, but it would be difficult to prove that the same bird did the drumming in successive seasons. One can, however, be quite certain that no two drummers ever occupy the same log in any single season. The fittest would surely whip the weaker one and drive him away.

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