HAUNTS OF THE WILD GOOSE

Lynn R. Meekins in Baltimore Sun

Wild geese are not, properly speaking, citizens of Maryland. The entire North American continent is their range, from the tree limits in the North, where they breed, to the marches of the Gulf of Mexico. But every autumn, usually before October has passed, many thousands of these wanderers arrive over the waters of the Chesapeake Bay, flying in formation, as is their habit, and honking loudly as they approach their journey's end. For it is along the shores of the bay, particularly its upper reaches, that great numbers of wild geese make their winter home. Their arrival in Maryland is a warinng of approaching winter; their departure heralds the coming of spring; and, in the interval, they settle down to work for their living in the fields that border the bay.

It was with something of a start that the writer, walking down the streets of the Canadian capital, Ottawa, last April, saw on passing street cars the sign, "Wild Geese at Britannia Bay." It was like visualizing a host of Marylanders seven hundred miles from home in another country.

A few weeks previously in Baltimore E. Lee LeCompte, State Game Warden, had described to the writer the increasing number of water fowl in the Chesapeake, notably the larger flocks of wild geese. And now in Brittannia Bay were the same geese resting in their spectacular flight to their northern haunts.

SAME SPECIES

A letter to Mr. LeCompte brought the reply: "These are the same species of wild geese that visit the Chesapeake Bay country and the Atlantic coast south. They come to our Chesapeake Bay country as early as October and remain until about April 1 to 15 and a great many of them then rest on the waters of the head of the Chesapeake and feed daily in the wheat fields of Cecil and Harford counties.

"I have seen as many as a thousand of these birds on one field in Cecil county at one time and their daily pilgrimage from the bay waters to the wheat fields is quite a sight even to the oldest natives who have been accustomed to watching the movement of the birds season after season for the past thirty or thirty-five years. The majority of wild geese killed in the counties of Kent, Cecil and Harford are killed on the wheat fields and not on the waters. The method used is either digging a pit in the ground, covering it with brush on the outskirts, or using corn shocks for a blind and placing live geese decoys that call the birds in from the air."

THE BREEDING AREA

Mr. LeCompte said further, "the breeding area for the Canada goose is a line drawn from the Atlantic Ocean through the northern most part of the Northwest Territories, crossing the northern part of Yukon to the Pacific Coast. I judge these birds at Britannia Bay were attracted by the feed being placed for them."

The Maryland game warden added this welcome information: "It is very encouraging to state that the wild geese have shown an increase in Maryland waters for the past few years and during the past hunting season. Last year—from November 1, 1929, to January 31, 1930—they were more plentiful in our waters than have been for some time."

INCREASE NOTED

Canadian Government officials at Ottawa are remarkably well informed on Maryland's work in protecting birds and wild fowl. They said, in line with Maryland's experience, that there are more wild geese in the Dominion than there were a few years ago and that they now seem to be increasing from year to year. Thus both countries are beginning to reap rewards from their recent joint efforts in protective legislation.

No one who looks into the work and results of the game protection movement can fail to be impressed by the good that is being accomplished.

AT BRITANNIA BAY

Having seen the sign, "Wild Geese at Britannia Bay," there was nothing to do but take the car. It is a ride of about ten miles from Ottawa where the Ottawa river bellies into noble proportions that remind one of the view of the Patapsco, looking across from old River View. In Britannia Bay the geese stop and rest on the journey from the far north to the Chesapeake and on the return to their winter homes. They act in Canada pretty much as they do in Maryland. Early in the morning they disappear into the fields for their food and at dusk they return to the water for their night's sleep.

Usually they remain in Britannia Bay for about two weeks. Their stay in the Chesapeake is much longer, but the Chesapeake is one of their homes, while Britannia Bay is merely a stopping place.

A clergyman emerged from an attractive little church at Britannia Bay and stood with the writer looking over the water. He spoke with enthusiasm of the visits of the geese and told how each coming stirred the residents. The geese did not mind and kept well out of range. Some of the flocks go to the fields for their breakfasts, but not many.

The clergyman told of a man in another section of Canada who knew all about wild geese. This man lived in the woods and got to know its birds and animals. He had a place not far from Lake Erie and made it a regular visiting place for ducks and geese, including the various species from Maryland. He became a great partisan of the wild goose and declared it was one of the most intelligent and self-sacrificing creatures on earth.

ATTRACTED THOUSANDS

Thirty years ago two small flocks of wild geese were in the habit of alighting on the prairie about to take an interest in them and to attract them to his ten acre farm, on which he had a pond. The geese played around the place in the daytime, getting their food, and went to the lake to spend the night. Soon they numbered a thousand or more. The man—his name was Miner—studied them at close range and got to know them well.

A RELIGIOUS PLAN

Miner was deeply religious and he conceived the idea of employing the geese literally to spread the Gospel. To each goose which visited his farm he attached a band carrying a scriptural quotation. When the birds migrated to other lands they carried these bits of Scripture with them.

Several years ago at Kennedyville, Kent County, Maryland, Linden Archibald found a band on a goose which had been caught on his farm. It was one of Miner's geese and in addition to the address and postoffice it bore this inscription on the inside of the tag: "No good thing will be withheld from them that walk uprightly." Several other bands with different quotations have been found on geese caught on the Eastern Shore, and others have turned up from the frozen north to the Gulf of Mexico.

Some years ago, so the story goes, a religious revival was in progress in the Arctic regions and one of Miner's geese with its band and the scriptural quotation was captured. It was accepted as a message from above and the revival increased in intensity and results.

WEATHER FORECASTS

As the forerunner of winter or the harbinger of spring the Canada goose plays its part in the life and interest of North America. In autumn when the last great flight passes south we know frost has closed the northern waters and that winter is coming. Local weather prophets all come forward with their interpretations when the flying wedges sweep across the sky.

The sportsman looks forward even more eagerly than the prophet to the arrival of the Canada geese in Maryland waters. Mr. Le Compte tells of one party which bagged forty-two geese in two days, and a single hunter who last year bagged six in a day. Some of the finest hunting arears in the country are to be found along the shores of the Chesapeake.

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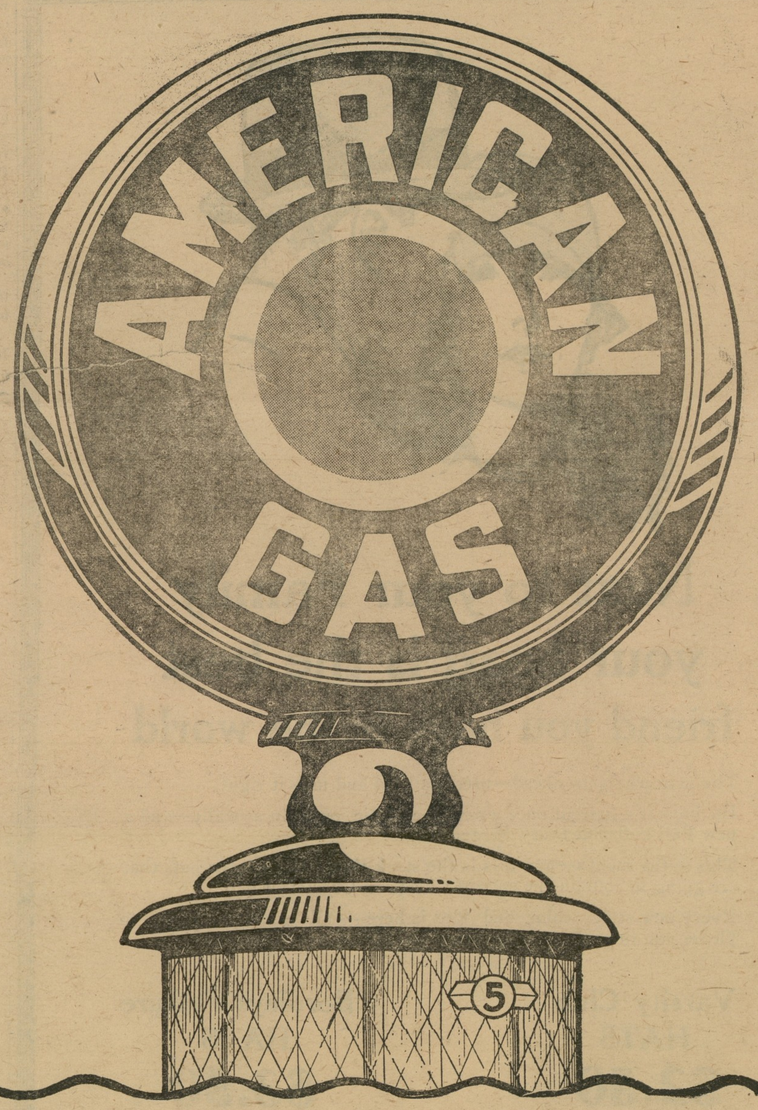
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