

RANCH LIFE AND GAME SHOOTING IN THE WEST.

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VI.

WATER FOWL AND PRAIRIE FOWL.



ORDINARY the Little Missouri is not navigable for

the lightest craft, but in the season of the floods it will bear an even large boat; and as these floods come at the times when there are apt to

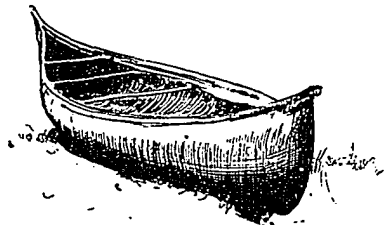
be many wild duck and a few geese on the river, I keep at the

ranch house a small light boat especially for use in shooting water fowl; my usual course being to send it up the river to a convenient point sometime when the wagon happens to be going empty toward the settlement, and then coming down stream in it when the water is high enough. The current is altogether too swift to make it possible to paddle against it; and it would be most slow and tedious work to pole up stream over such a bad bottom as that of the Little Missouri. Accordingly, whatever shooting I get, must be done while drifting down the river. The course of the latter is very winding, and in coming round the points one can often get close up to a flock of ducks or a couple of geese without being observed.

It is pretty good fun to go down the stream, even apart from the shooting. The

scenery in the Bad Lands having for me a great attraction from its strange, *bizarre* wildness; although I suppose it could hardly be called really beautiful. In many places the river has cut its way through lines of hills, making sheer bluffs, that rise straight out of the water, and whose faces show the lines of parallel strata, of which they are composed, with most abrupt clearness. These strata are composed of lignites, marls, chalks and clays, and exposure to the weather causes them to turn most extraordinary colors; and the face of the cliff is thus often marked by broad horizontal bands of black, red, purple, brown and yellow. Floating down stream one will thus first be passing between banks overgrown with tall cotton-wood trees, then going through a region of barren sage plains, then again winding and twisting through bluffs and hills that are as fantastic in color as they are in shape.

The shooting itself is never as good for water fowl, on the Little Missouri or elsewhere throughout the cattle country, as it is in the more fertile farm-land prairies to the eastward. Still, occasionally, we can make fair bags. The little teal are the commonest, and least shy of the water fowl. As they sit out on a sand bar, they often let a boat drift close up to them, and it is quite easy also to creep within gun shot from the bank. I have killed eleven of them with a single barrel. The mallard duck, shoveler duck, and broad bill are also common, and afford excellent sport.

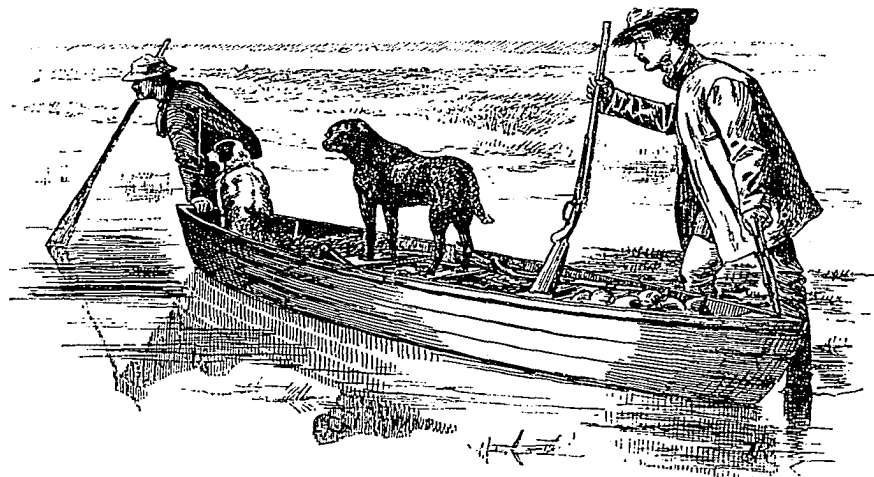


AN INDIAN CANOE.

¹ For the benefit of those who were not so fortunate as to see OUTING during the past half year, we may say that the first of Mr. Roosevelt's series commenced in March.—ED.

These, however, are shyer, and will rarely let a boat drift down upon them, unless one is able to take advantage of some cover, or come quickly round the point. Geese are more wary still. Quite a number of these breed with us; sometimes in the river, sometimes in the reedy slews or pools far up in the creeks, out in the Bad Lands, or on the prairie. When they are moulting, it is not difficult to get them if one cares to;

several days and get over in the farming country, whose western edge lies many miles to the eastward of the broad pastoral belt, whose easternmost border comes within the Dakota Territory. In this farm region there are many hills, lakes and ponds, with reed-grown borders branching out into large slews, and connected by winding, often sluggish streams. A man with a light boat can even by himself make a



THE START.

and on such occasions, although there cannot be said to be any sport to be obtained from them, yet I have shot the young birds for the table; for there can be no better eating than a fat, three-parts grown young goose. When their feathers are grown, however, the geese show themselves most amply fit for self-protection, and it needs then very careful stalking, indeed, before one can come up to them.

In addition to the water fowl proper, to be obtained while drifting or paddling down the river, there are also, at times, flocks of waders at which one can get a shot. Avocets, Stilts, Yelper, Marlin and Yellow Legs, are all occasionally found, although not plenty. They are not apt to be very shy, and if a shot is taken just as they rise or as they wheel, the expenditure of a single cartridge loaded with small shot, will often suffice to bring down a dozen birds, which may prove a pleasant change to the ranchman's somewhat monotonous diet.

To make any large bag of water fowl, however, it is necessary to take a trip of

really very large bag in localities such as these, and his bag will be greatly increased if he is able to take with him a good dog. Out in the West, of course, a sportsman cannot be by any means so particular in reference to the fine points of his animal as is the case in the East; and many a mongrel does duty as a duck retriever which an Eastern sportsman would scorn to look at, and I may mention, by the way, that these ill-looking beasts often do their work uncommonly well. The usual course for a sportsman to follow in such a locality, is to find out where the flight of ducks passes in the evening or morning. A reedy passage-way between two lakes, or the borders of a favorite feeding ground are especially good stations. The gunner has his boat in the lake, and paddles over its broad, shallow surface, or pushes it through the reeds until he finds a spot where there is plenty of cover, and where he will be in the line of the flight. There he remains until the flight begins; once the ducks have begun to come in, if the place is a good



ON THE LITTLE MISSOURI.

one, he may expect almost continuous shooting, as flock follows flock with really remarkable rapidity. A strong close shooting gun is a necessity for one who wishes to make a big bag. Personally, I have never done anything to speak of at duck shooting, my practice with the shot gun having been comparatively limited. Still I know a number of places where even an indifferent shot may get ten or fifteen couple of birds in an afternoon.

Besides water fowl, the devotee of the shot gun can also have some sport, in the

carnivorous animals, who are the chief foes of ground-living birds. For many years to come, the plains will afford fine sport to those fond of wing-shooting. Average ranchmen, whose favorite weapon is invariably the rifle, are not apt to go out much after prairie chickens. Still, I every now and then take a day after them, both for the sake of the sport, and also for the sake of the addition they make to our bill of fare. Of course, the best way of proceeding is to take a buckboard and a couple of good, far-ranging pointers, but



BEACHING THE BOAT.

usually we simply go out on horseback, or else take a stroll on foot through ground which we know contains one or more coveys. Last August, we were cutting hay on a great plateau, and noticed that every afternoon numbers of prairie fowl, in small coveys, each one probably consisting of an old hen and her nearly-grown brood of chicks, came up round the edges of the plateau. Toward eventide, accordingly, one afternoon, an hour before sunset, I took the number-ten chokebore and strolled off to the plateau, which the haymakers had left some days before. Walking around its edge, across the spurs and the heads of the little brush coulies, I came across plenty of grouse. Some were very shy, and would not let me get anywhere near them; others, again, would squat down in the brush or long grass at my approach, and permit themselves to be walked up to, offering easy marks as they flew off, sometimes the whole covey rising together, while on other occasions the birds rose one by one. Although the time was short, I yet had as many plump grouse as I could carry by the time the sun had sunk, and that, too, in spite of making many more

misses than should have been the case with such very easy shooting.

In the wild and more barren part of the plains country, we find another kind of grouse, the largest species inhabiting America. This is the great Sage Cock, a bird of fine appearance, and one which, contrary to the generally received opinion, affords excellent eating. Its food consists, at different times of the year, of sage leaves or of grasshoppers. Young birds, in August or September, that have been feeding mainly upon grasshoppers, are exceedingly tender and well flavored, quite as good as any other grouse. An old cock or hen that has been feeding exclusively upon sage, of course, would offer very poor eating. In shooting these large and fine birds, it is almost impossible to go on foot or with a dog, owing to the dryness and remoteness of the haunts which they mostly affect; and those that I have gotten have almost invariably been procured while riding on horseback through ground containing them, and, when I came across a covey, dismounting to do what execution I could, while my companion held the horses.