PHOTOGRAPHING SNOW GEESE IN THE DARE COUNTY REFUGE

The Story of Ben Dixon MacNeill's Adventures With Quicksands and Weather in Making Pictures of These Birds in Dare County

By Ben Dixon MacNeill in "The News and Observer."

Del Thomas continued in optimism. Five minutes before time for Toby Tillett to start his nine-thirty trip across Oregon Inlet, and likely the sun would stand stock still and wait for him if Toby Tillett omitted to start his trip on time—we were a good three Outer Banks miles from the ferry and these sort of miles are not done in three to the five minutes. Not often anyway.

To be sure the last mile and a half of it is across the flats and if there's no water on the flats, you can make sixty miles an hour. More than that—or less, if your vehicle has seen better than a hundred thousand miles and a good part of them along the Outer Banks. There was some basis for Del Thomas' optimism.

Except that we had not considered the direction of the wind. The wind was out of the northwest, and there were nine inches of very salty and very cold water on the flats. It looked like it might have been as deep as the ocean, but along the Outer Banks you just pitch in and see what happens. It was not so long in happening: barrels of water got up under the hood and the motor just quit.

Still Del Thomas continued in optimism. He said let her drain a minute and we've still got two minutes to make the ferry. The clouds would keep the sun from knowing if Toby waited for us and we'd make it. And Toby did wait for a full five minutes, there not being any other passengers on this side and it was too misty for seeing whether there was anybody waiting over there or not.

Here and there along the Outer Banks you strike quick-sand when the water covers the flats. Just small areas of it, not more than a dozen feet across, but nonetheless quicksand. This was a very limited area of it, not wide enough to accommodate both front and back wheels of the vehicle. We were settled down until the rear hubs were submerged in sand and there were ten inches of water above that. We were in the middle of about a hundred acre field of water. . . . . .

The comforting thing about Providence is that it never loses its sense of perspective: What we needed must at the moment was something to hoist the stern of the vehicle out of the sand and water, a pole about ten feet long, and a block upon which to rest it while we hoisted. Providence had arranged it very nicely some while ago when a ship was wrecked and cast ashore not more than a hundred yards from where we were foundeded, and so arranged the wreckage that some timbers of portable size were loosened.

And after all, extricating yourself from quick-sand in the middle of a hundred-acre lake itsn't any job to be writing a half column about. Besides, this is a piece about taking pictures of the most elusive bird in the world, the same being these fabulous Snow Geese which spend their summers in the north of Greenland and their winters on Pea Island or thereabouts feasting on sand spurs.

This was next to the last day that I proposed to fool with them. By now the better part of a month had been squandered in purposeless pursuit of these noisesome and fantastically vigilant creatures that never let you get nearer than one mile of them on the ground and that can out-fly any airplane from which photography is at all feasible. There had to be an end to it some time and Del Thomas had seen a crippled specimen on Pea Island the day before: we might run that one down and make it pose.

There is, literally, not a photograph of a Snow Goose in existence anywhere. Even the National Geographic Society, with all its resources and indefatigable determination, had recourse to a drawing when it issued Dr. Grosvenor's magnificent book on American birds. Often enough Drinkwater has comforted me after another failure with "You know derned well a thing that eats sandspurs is ashamed to let you take its picture. . . . Thing for you to do is get you a mess of sandspurs and eat 'em and then you'll know better how to go about it. . . . "

Del Thomas had been much more helpful. He comes from Pitt County, belongs to the CCC and is attached to one of the sections that is fashioning a stupendous refuge for the Biological Survey on Pea Island, impounding a great lake of fresh water that will grow all sorts of grass for all sorts of wild fowl. Last summer Dr. Bartsch had found 43 species of birds nesting thereabouts.

This lad has been so long on Pea Island that he knows the useages of all the things that inhabit it, even as winter tourists. All the old Canada geese know him and he can walk among them, and ducks and swan don't bother with him. Now and then he has been right close to some of the fabulous Snow Geese, and he thought that maybe if we took a Sunday off down there, we might get in range of them.

Watching them every day, he had a pretty good idea of how they operated. Like most wild fowl and all sensible aviators, they took off into the wind, and if there was not much wind, they had some little difficulty in gaining altitude. They take off into the wind, and if they are agitated, they turn and fly with it, adding the strength of the wind to the strength of their wings and not bothering about altitude until they had got up some speed.

Of course, there was never any knowing what they'd do once they got into the air. Like as not they would fly out to sea, or across Pamlico Sound, or, if they felt like it, climb rapidly and make like they were headed for Greenland or back Bay or somewhere. There is just never any telling what a flock of Snow Greese will do. . . . . I have timed them flying at 110 miles an hour—but that was on another campaign against them, and that morning they headed straight for Bermuda or somewhere beyond the 12-mile limit.

Anyhow, we'd just take the day below The Inlet and try to sneak up on them. If they went away, we'd hide and wait for them to come back—and maybe luck would change. . . . . And here we were two feet down in quicksand and the inexorable Toby gone with his ferry and two hours before he'd be going again, and that would make it the middle of the day and this northwest wind was bringing rain nearer. Already there were drifts of it before we got thought hoisting ourselves out of the bog of sand. . . . .

II

While we were waiting we'd as well go back up there to the lighthouse and take a crack at them. There were three or four hundred of them idling around there, and we might slip up on them. . . That seemed a fairly sensible disposition of the time. . . . The pictures we got there the other afternoon just before sundown, with Snow Geese against the lighthouse, they were pretty good, Del Thomas thought.

But not good enough. It had to be as good as, well as good as we could get anywhere we wanted it of Canada geese. They were everywhere, practically waiting beside the road for you to take their pictures and when they did fly, they circled around and their honking sounded like they were saying "Ain't you afraid you'll break your kodak?" And of course nobody ever bothered with taking pictures of them.

Yonder, Del Thomas stated, was something he had not seen before. There was a lone Snow Goose in with a flock of 300 Canadas. He looked, to me, a little sheepish, like he might have fallen for a dusky girl Canada goose. He made some motions of flight, thought better of it and settled uneasily while the Canada geese contemplated us solemnly. It looked like, anyhow, we might get something. We were only 50 yards away.

Without any further ado the Snow Goose loosed a scandalous honking and hoisted himself out of the grass..

The Canada geese hesitated a little, and decided that they'd as well go, too. So they all went over to the other side of the pond and settled down. The Snow Geese flew with twice the speed of his dark, distant relatives. . . . Undoubtedly, they are the swiftest waterfowl known to these regions.

They were not, or this one was not, absolutely white. The tips of their wings are black. And while probably equallying the Canada goose in weight, they are proportioned differently. Somewhat streamlined. Their take-off is swifter, and their flight mare acrobatic. They lack the stateliness of the Canada goose, and their massed flights are not done with the ordered precision of black geese. They fly on a narrower front, in long lines. . . . Viewed from above and at a distance all the snow geese in the world together look like a monstrous white snake writhing against the dark background of the marshes or the blue of the ocean. . . . . But that was the next day. . . . . .

III

Ahead of us, grazing in the shallow part of the pond that half-encircles Oregon Inlet light there were maybe 500 of them, all told. The road was 100 yards east of the pond, and from the nearest of the geese. Intervening there was tall grass, brown and limp in the thickening mist. Del Thomas said that if we could crawl through the grass and it wasn't too dark, we might get pretty close to them.

When the vehicle stopped there was some discussion among the grazing snow geese as to what it might portend. Some of them flapped their wings and others honked. Apparently they decided that the dilapidated vehicle, recently excavated from quicksand, was not much of a menace, and they'd not bother with it. They continued to graze. They were not eating sandspurs. . . . That night, in itself be a hopeful portent.

We reasoned that if Del Thomas stayed in the vehicle the geese might have to spend some of their time watching him, and maybe the camera could be advanced, like Napoleon's army, belly-wise, through the grass. This, plus the possibility that the thickening rain might leave them with no great inclination toward flying. Even so, it left the grass pretty clammy, and there being no convenient way to carry the camera on my back—well, I don't know what Napoleon would have thought of his army sliding forward through grass on its back, with cameras balanced across their bellies.

It should be set down to the credit of Del Thomas' self-restraint that the situation was not aggravated by any unseemly eruptive merriment. He did say, afterward and casually that he wished he had had a camera so he could have recorded my progress gooseward through the grass. But he was very serious about it. He had, by now, begun to take the photography of these geese entirely seriously.

Well, there they were, about 200 of them with a camera nearer them than any snow goose had ever allowed a camera to come before. Last year the nearest Eckenberg got, when he spent a week undertaking pictures for the Times, was one mile. And here they were within 50 feet of me. Not many of them, to be sure, but some. And the rain continued to drift down.

One preposterously solemn old gander, obviously the senior warden of this parish, eyed me with stolid malevolence. He emitted a honk. I'm sure that he dared me to come one inch nearer, or he'd fly. He stood still while the rest of the congregation walked calmly away from me, aiming to be well out of range of the camera at such time as the senior warden indicated that they should fly, and so lost in the mist that it would be no use wasting film on them. I stopped down the lens another stop to sharpen the focus. They were just planning to dribble out of the picture.

They continued to dribble while I proceeded with further inversion of Napoleonic tactics which served not at all to shorten the gap between me and the preposterous warden of the parish. Fifty yards back of me Del Thomas, sensing the situation, debouched from the vehicle and so alarmed them that they went, rather undramatically, into the air. And that was that. At any rate here was something. Not much to be sure, but a camera had, finally, been brought almost into contact with them.

Now they went over behind a dune and settled down to consider what further frustration they could contrive. When we followed them they dallied with us until we were fairly near them and then they went and sat down in Pamlico Sound about a mile off shore tucked their heads under their wings and began their Sunday nap. . . . Del Thomas said that what we needed, or rather what I needed since he never expected to put one foot into one of the things, was an airplane.

IV

Maybe yes, and probably no. That I had already tried. They are especially allergic to airplanes, and the minute they hear one start warming up on Roanoke Island they begin to plan their campaign. They fly in surging circles, proceeding somewhat like a hurricane, around a whirling center, shifting their altitude so rapidly that it is difficult to get any sort of focus on them. And unless you creep up on them, they are likely to outfly you.

No man living has seen more of their antics than Dave Driskill who flew the Fairchild Freighter for the National Park Service, rationing by air three work camps down the length of the Hatteras National Seashore. Driskill loads as much as two tons of perishable meat into the Fairchild and goes off down the banks, landing in some open flat where trucks come and unburden him of provisions. . . . Dave Driskill has to be a good flier to make that run, and he would know how to approach these maddening tourists from Greenland.

Sure, he'd be glad to take a crack at it. Go right after dinner. He'd been to Ocracoke that morning. Weather was clear, visibility unlimited. . . . Drinkwater came trundling down town in his Coast Guard-Weather Bureau truck, stopped beside the mast from which he from time to time displays weather signals. He ran up a forbidding collection of vari-hued flags that indicated that presently all sorts of weather would break hereabouts. Northwest storm warnings. They are bad. Small craft warnings. They are forbidding things. There was nowhere in the firmament any sign of a cloud and so we bantered Drinkwater.

"Ain't seen the weather report, but the orders says 'run 'em up' and they they are," Drinkwater said. "You'll see some weather in the next few hours."

We got a glimpse of it within half an hour after we had climbed to 4,500 feet. We were still climbing. We'd get high enough to throttle the motor down to where no goose could hear it and approach Pea Island with the sun to our backs. We'd be on them before they knew anything about it, and then where'd they be. Well, we hoped, etched on a piece of film.

But there was the weather that Drinkwater had been running up flags about. Far off, low on the southern horizon, well over 100 miles away—we could trace the white line of the surf for 90 miles and the cloud bank, glistening white like thunderheads, was beyond that. The bank was coming appreciably nearer.

By now we were at 9,000 feet, and the ship quit climbing so energetically. Northward the horizon was clear, and there was the smudge of Norfolk 90 miles away. Westward there was Williamston and Washington and swinging around the circle, Swan Quarter and Ocracoke. Eastward the Atlantic Ocean went its limitless way to darkness. Across the south was the glaring slash of the approaching storm, still hours and hours off. But it was sending out a scouting veil of haze; the Banks were not so clearly etched against the dark of the Atlantic.

And below, there was all of The Island, curiously patterned against the dark water of the four sounds that surround it. "Too bad about that haze coming up the beach," Driskill said. "If it wasn't for that you could get the whole of the National Seashore in one picture from here. And the island, too. Wait a minute, and I'll get you turned right . . . . . Now, how's that?"

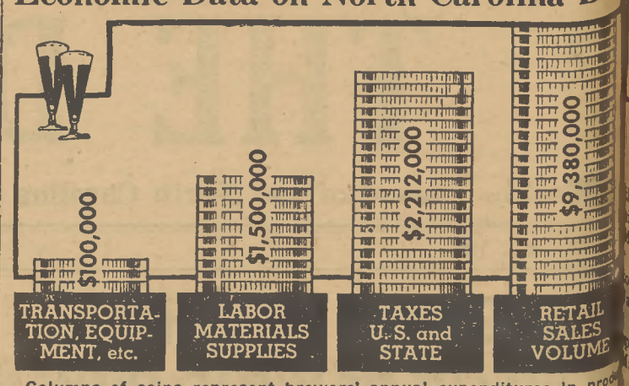
But what about the geese? Well, they were there this morning, but from here it's 25 miles, air line, to Pea Island . . . Well we can put her in a glide from here and we'll be down there on 'em without their hearing us, or seeing us either.

That's the way we figured it. The Snow Geese had some other notions about it, and by the time we were over them, they had abandoned the Island and were settled down on the Sound. Driskill said if that was the way they wanted to play, we'd play with 'em. He opened the throttle and the ship swooped. All the Snow Geese in the world rose as one goose and began maneuvering. First they split themselves into two equal companies and set out to spread confusion.

There was no out-maneuvering them, though Driskill ably circled them, herded them together and swooped. . . . The picture will have to tell the story. It seems to be about as good as anybody can do, without the assistance of two or three miracles. . . . Del Thomas came by a little while ago to see how the pictures turned out. He said, with kindly intent, that they were pretty good, but maybe we could do better. How would it be to . . . well, it would do. I'm through with Snow Geese, and tomorrow, or the next day, I may try walking on my head through the bog for their amusement.

Back on the Island, when we landed, the approaching storm was still not visible, and Drinkwater's bright flags snapped with the wind in bright sunshine. . . The storm broke six hours later.

Economic Data on North Carolina Bee



Columns of coins represent brewers' annual expenditures in proc tion of beer consumed in North Carolina, together with the re value of beer and ale sold in the state.

Beer Brings An Annual Business Of $9,380,000 to North Carolin

ANNUAL business volume estimated at $9,380,000 has been developed and maintained in North Carolina by the legalized beer business and most of this volume is reflected directly in the state by employment, payrolls and taxes, according to an analysis by the United Brewers Industrial Foundation, based on latest official statistics.

North Carolina consumed approximately 268,000 barrels of beer in 1938. Production of this quantity used 294,000 bushels of premium malting barley, 46,400 bushels of corn, 27,400 bushels of rice and 166,160 pounds of hops, based on national averages for farm materials necessary in brewing. An area of 13,530 acres was utilized to grow these materials with full-time employment for 464 farm workers.

Far greater employment was created through processing these materials and stimulation of activities in all fields servicing the brewing industry and retail outlets.

Federal and state treasuries were among the major beneficiaries from North Carolina's beer consump The state collected $872,598, ex sive of license fees, for the while the Federal government ceived approximately $1,340,00 $5 per barrel. Much of this mo was returned to the state thro Federal appropriations.

Brewers' expenditures for la materials, supplies, equipment fuel in the production of beer sumed in North Carolina tot $1,500,000. This compared wit national brewery payroll of $ 340,229 for 1937 and $201,90 expended for materials, etc.

While beer retailers were the mediate gainers, additional be ficiaries included real estate, labor, food purveyors, building maintenance and various ramif tions of local business. Retail gains were measured not only their beer volume but also by additional business stimula through sales of related items cheese and other farm produ crackers, relishes, salads, meats and various other foods.

On the planet, Jupiter, a has 10,000 days.

Our printing service is qui Phone 44, or send it to The T