

A DAY ON CURRITUCK SOUND.

BY THE LATE THEO. MOORE BARNES, JR.



It was a cold afternoon in January when our party left Virginia Beach for the long drive down the coast to the shooting-box on Currituck Sound, where we were to try to kill wild-fowl.

The wind was blowing briskly from

the north, and little flurries of snow whirled down occasionally, so that we did not need the driver's advice to wrap up well.

The level beach was as hard as a floor, and stretched away for miles, the only breaks in its flat surface being the tall masts of the numerous wrecks which lined the shore, or the flagstaff of a lonely life-saving station. The team easily drew the light wagon over the sand, and though the air was very cold the drive of twenty-five miles was not as monotonous as might be supposed. The sea was beginning to grow rather rough, and as we neared the end of our journey we could see the geese leaving the ocean and seeking quieter water on the flats or shallows of Currituck Sound.

Having arrived at the hotel, we were told that the birds were very plentiful, but that owing to bad weather and the number of gunners they were rather wild. Still every one agreed that now we should soon have some cold, snowy days, and that each of us would take home plenty of game.

It was decided that both J—— and myself should shoot over old "Uncle Billy's" live geese on Abe's Island Point. After this had been finally settled, we had a nightcap for good luck, and turned in.

The next morning we found the wind blowing hard from the east, and the whole sky covered with lowering gray clouds. This was very encouraging, and it was in a most cheerful frame of

mind that we set out for our points, though it promised to be rather chilly sitting still. That would be a matter of little consequence, however, if the birds flew well, for no one was ever known to be cold while he was getting good shooting.

As the guard poled us through a little cove up to our point, the birds, which had come in there to feed during the night, got up in thousands just ahead of the punt. There must have been an enormous quantity of game in that little bay, and the noise the birds made in rising, with the honking of the geese, the quacking of ducks, and the calling of swan, made a perfect pandemonium of sound. As fast as they rose they would circle around as though loath to leave, and finally would go swinging off in great Vs, or long lines, straight out to sea. By the time we arrived at our point we were thoroughly satisfied that there were birds enough around, if only they would come back again to feed, and, incidentally, to let us get a shot at them.

The guard now left us to go further on to assist "Uncle Billy" with his geese, which had to be brought from some distance. While he was away we fixed up the blind, and placed our guns and shells where they would be handy. It was now beginning to grow quite light, and as I was glancing around I saw a swan flying directly toward us. I quickly called to J——, and we made a jump to the blind for our guns. The swan saw us and swerved off so as to pass inshore of us, about seventy-five yards away. I took a hurried aim as best I could in the awkward position I was in—the bird was directly over my right shoulder—and was more than pleased to see the swan's neck fold up and his head fall back at the report, and to finally hear him strike the mud with a resounding thump.

Turning with a triumphant smile to my companion, I beheld him leisurely extracting an exploded shell from his gun, while his face bore a look of ineffable happiness. After a little preliminary conversation of a rather lively nature, we came to the conclusion that the two shots had been fired so closely

together that we had each heard but one report. This question having been amicably settled we went to pick up our bird, each having a sneaking idea that the other fellow had killed him, and that the other fellow thought so, too.

In a short time "Uncle Billy" came in sight, with his geese penned up in huge boxes, whence came plaintive honks every now and then, as if in remonstrance at being squeezed into such close quarters. Greetings were soon over, and the two men proceeded to

put out the decoys in the regular way, *i. e.*, in lines of four or five geese each, radiating from the blind like the spokes of a wheel, with about five yards of open water between the lines of birds where they were nearest to the shore. There were also a couple of live swan, and thirty or forty duck stool, so that altogether we had an array of decoys quite likely to attract the attention of even "trading" birds.

While we were waiting, "Uncle Billy" told us that he did not allow anyone to shoot the wild birds over his geese, unless they had first settled in the water. He said that his decoys would become frightened if a bird should fall in among them without warning, and he insisted that we wait until the wild geese lit and swam up to the stool, when we could shoot them either on the water, or as they rose.

Soon after his explanations were finished, we saw a line of about a dozen geese coming from the sea and headed

in our direction. The decoys soon caught sight of them and began to honk, while we crouched down in the blind, not daring to move. Soon we could hear the wild birds answering, until finally they were apparently directly over us, and stealing a cautious glance. I saw they were circling about as if undecided what to do.

All this time both decoys and wild geese were honking to each other at a lively rate, until it seemed as if every goose in the country was flying and

screaming over our heads. The wild geese could not resist the appeals our decoys made to them, and dropped lower and lower as they circled round, until, at last, they splashed into the water just outside our stool. We sat perfectly still and watched them through the blind, as they fed gradually nearer and nearer to the shore, seemingly not at all suspicious of our presence.

Just then I began to lose patience, and to feel that I could hold out no longer. The guard whispered "Now." J— and I rose up, he on his feet, I on my knees; and as the astonished birds rose slowly against the wind and swung off past us, I saw him knock down two with his first barrel just before I dropped mine, while with the second barrel we each got one more. This struck me as being pretty fair for a starter, but "Uncle Billy" was wroth, for he wanted us to shoot them on the water and "git the hull lot on 'em."



HOME AGAIN.

No birds came along for some time after this, and as it was cold we all began to move about to get warmed up. All the guns were lying side by side in the blind, the guard's and mine being left unloaded for some unknown reason. While we were fooling around, J— suddenly shouted "Look out!" and made a dash for the blind, and there, almost over the decoys, were a pair of geese. As there was no time to get my gun I sat down and watched. J— picked up my gun, took aim carefully and snapped both barrels; then he did the same with the guard's weapon.

By this time he was talking pretty nearly as fast as the geese were leaving, which is saying a good deal, but he grabbed his own gun and killed both birds dead as a stone, right and left. I don't think anyone, the shooter included, did any more than stare at the dead geese, with eyes and mouth wide open, for at least five minutes. After that—well, it was a cold day and our feet were wet.

The birds were now flying fairly well, but were rather wild, though enough of them "cut" to us to keep us warm. One duck fell dead about two hundred yards away; and when he was picked up, it was found that a single pellet had gone clean through him, raking him from breast to back through almost the entire length of his body. How he could have flown so far with that hole through him was a mystery to us. Another time a swan lit in the water about seventy yards off, and as he would come no nearer, we each fired twice at him. The bird rose heavily and was called right over the blind about fifty yards high. We each fired twice again, and after the discharge of each

barrel could see the blood show red on his white breast, yet he flew nearly a mile before he settled on the water. I chased him in the boat, but he rose as we were trying to get to windward of him and flew slowly down the sound, getting only a few feet above the water. He was finally killed by a party several miles below us, as we heard later. We had used "double B" shot, and the bird must have been struck at least six times, and hard too.

We were extremely sorry to lose him, as he was a particularly fine specimen, very large, old, and, of course, at that season in the perfect winter plumage. Well for him was it that his lower parts were thickly padded with snowy-feathers and fleecy down, for without such protection our leaden hail must surely have brought him. Had one of the big pellets chanced to have struck the long, outstretched neck, things would have been different.

The flight stopped wholly about noon and did not commence again until after four o'clock, when the birds began to come in to the shallows to feed during the night. From then on until dark the geese and ducks came in almost constantly, giving us some of the grandest shooting it has ever been my luck to enjoy. The decoys seemed to be able to call anything in sight right to us.

When at last the decoys were taken up and we poled homeward in the rapidly failing twilight, we had to our credit two swans, twenty-six geese, and fifteen ducks; and while I do not believe that on the size of the bag depends the pleasure of the day, I must confess that I prefer a well-filled game-bag to an empty one.



UNCLE BILLY'S LIVE DECOYS.